

Openness to Experience and Subjective Well-Being among University Students in Macedonia

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Abstract

Openness to experiences is a global personality trait that is used to describe human personality in a Five Factor Model. People who score highly in openness to experiences are considered to be unconventional in their outlook and behavior, have a wider range of interests and tend to have more liberal political views. On the other hand, within the science of psychology, the interest in studying subjective well-being, happiness, quality of life and related phenomena has been gaining more attention in recent years. This research investigates the relationship between the personality factors of openness to experience and subjective well-being. More concretely, the research investigates the relationship between the six sub-factors of the openness to experience (fantasy, aesthetics, emotions, action, ideas and values) along with subjective well-being. The sample consisted of 209 first year university students from six faculties within the Sts. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje. The following instruments were used for this research: NEO-PI-R (The Revised NEO Personality Inventory) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. The results have shown that subjective well-being is positively related only with an openness to emotions. Also, the results have shown that subjective well-being is related to an openness to values, but this correlation is negative. That means that as openness to emotions increases happiness will also increase, and by contrast, as openness to values increases happiness will decrease.

Keywords: personality, personality factors, openness to experience, subjective well-being.

Introduction

According to a number of psychologists, one factor represents the best unit to describe a person. Some authors define it as: “a characteristic form of behavior, thinking and feelings” (Funder, 1997). Allport uses the term *trait*, which according to him represents “a neuropsychological structure whose feature is to make a lot of stimulations equally functional and to initiate and regulate consistent applicable and expressive behaviours” (Allport, 1937 according to Janakov, 2006). “The five-factor model became one of the most accepted models in contemporary psychology” (McCrae, 2001). The five factors of a person which distinguish individuals between each other are: neuroticism, extraversion, openness towards experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

The openness towards experience, as one of the five factors, is a bit less known and a less well researched factor by comparison with extraversion and neuroticism. This factor is defined as an inclination for accepting new and unconventional ways of thinking and behaving, which are manifested through creativity, imagination, curiosity and a fondness for the esthetic experience. People who have high score on this factor are keen on new, extraordinary experiences, are more open for accepting new ideas and unconventional values, but show a soft tendency to be ranked relatively high on the intelligence scale. Those with a low scale score on openness towards experience are more conventional, more pragmatic, and conservative and have a lack of curiosity. They support traditional values, lead a stable way of life and are less open towards taking new challenges and opportunities, in other words, they accept what is known more, and less what is new.

The sub-factors which make up this factor are: fantasy, esthetics, feelings, action, ideas and values.

Fantasy. The individuals who are more open to fantasy often undergo real imaginations and generally live an active life, fulfilled with fantasy. Those with low scores are more “down-to-earth” and directed towards their daily tasks and activities.

Esthetics. The individuals with high scores on this sub-factor possess a deep respect for art and beauty, and are more excited by poetry, music, and other arts. The individuals with low scores are insensitive and less interested in art.

Feelings. An openness towards feelings is the openness of the individual towards their own internal emotions and feelings, as well as valuing these as an important part of life. The individuals with low scores on this sub-factor do not believe that feelings and emotions are of any great importance in everyday life.

Action. The openness towards action includes the need to try out different activities which are new and unknown to the individual like: travelling to different places, or tasting different cuisine. Those with a low score on this sub-factor are less prone to changes and choose a life that is normal and more repetitive.

Ideas. This sub-factor is strongly connected to intellectual curiosity, as well as an openness towards new and unconventional ideas. The individuals with low scores are generally less curious and show an interest in a smaller number of topics and areas.

Values. The openness towards values means dexterity in reassessing social, political and religious values, and a readiness to oppose the authorities.

The interest for studying happiness, quality of life and similar phenomena dates back to ancient times. Even Aristotle had stated that in every one of us there exists a single spirit that leads us to do things that do us good, so as to gain happiness as a consequence of such a spirit. At the beginning of the twentieth century, some researchers appeared to be interested in certain positive aspects of human nature. In the 1960s, with the appearance of the “third force” in psychology, human psychology, interest was directed towards studying growth, development and positive human potential. Notwithstanding, human psychology had little influence on psychological science, primarily due to the lack of scientific methodology and empirical research.

Over the last thirty years in the psychological sciences, the topics of happiness and similar phenomena have become more popular. After satisfying the basic existential necessities and with increased living standards, the question about a better, happier and more fulfilled life is more frequently asked. What is new and different from the previous efforts to understand happiness is the application of empirical methodology so that the new findings could be integrated in the system of scientific knowledge. The study of happiness and similar phenomena will contribute to the completion of the image for a people, which is one of psychology's interests. In this framework, the term subjective well-being is used as a synonym for happiness.

This study is oriented towards the solving of this problem: Is there a connection between openness towards experience and subjective well-being among students? This research's interest is to check the connection between these phenomena in the realms of the Macedonian social and cultural context. It is supposed that: with the increase of the degree of openness towards experience, subjective well-being among students will increase as well. In this research, the connection of the sub-factors of openness towards experience and subjective well-being is explored.

Among research projects that are looking for a connection between subjective well-being and the five factors, there are some data that show relatedness between neuroticism and extraversion with subjective well-being (Wilson, 1967). There are very few findings that are looking for relatedness between openness to experience and subjective well-being. The need for this research emerged to cover the gap in psychological science and to offer more information about happiness and its relation to openness to experience and its sub-factors. Further on, these findings could be applicable in different areas of everyday life.

Method

209 participants took part in this research, all students in the first year. They came from six faculties of the University of “Sts. Cyril and Methodius” in Skopje: The Faculty of Natural Science and Mathematics (Institute for Information technology), The Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, The Faculty of Medicine, The Law Faculty (Political Studies students), The Faculty of Agricultural Science and Food, and the Faculty of Philosophy (Institute of Philosophy).

The choice of the stated faculties was made in order to ensure heterogeneity of the sample in terms of the scientific areas and the gender presence, too. In the sample, there is one faculty in every one of the six scientific fields, according to the Classification of scientific spheres, fields and areas (disciplines) of research (2001): the field of natural science and mathematics, technical and technological science, medical science, biotechnological science, social science and the humanities.

The instruments used for examining the connection between openness towards experience and subjective well-being are: NEO-PI-R (The Revised NEO Personality Inventory) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. The Revised NEO Personality Inventory is a personality inventory that assesses the Big Five personality traits (five factors): extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. It was developed by Costa and McCrae and consists of 240 items. In this research only one scale for measuring openness to experience is used. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire is an inventory that measures subjective well-being. It was developed by two psychologists, Michael Argyle and Peter Hills at Oxford University and consists of 29 items.

	Happiness	Open. (O)	Fant. (O1)	Esthet. (O2)	Feelings (O3)	Action (O4)	Ideas (O5)	Values (O6)
Happiness	1.00	0.07	-0.01	0.11	0.23**	0.01	0.09	0.20**
Openness (O)		1.00	0.66**	0.65**	0.63**	0.51**	0.74**	0.51**
Fantasy (O1)			1.00	0.25**	0.32**	0.20**	0.40**	0.25**
Esthetics (O2)				1.00	0.38**	0.16*	0.37**	0.26**
Feelings (O3)					1.00	0.08	0.42**	0.10
Action (O4)						1.00	0.37**	0.32**
Ideas (O5)							1.00	0.17*
Values (O6)								1.00

The research was conducted as group work on six different occasions. All the groups were tested in the same period of the year, during lessons and in relatively equal spacious working conditions, and it was also taken into consideration for the testing to be conducted before lessons so that the students could be in an optimal psycho-physiological condition for solving the tests. The testing lasted sixty minutes maximum, and all the respondents' instruments were given to them straight away. The method for the collected data of the testing was correlational: Pearson's coefficient for linear correlation.

Results

The results shown in the chart refer to the matrix of inter-correlations between subjective well-being, an openness towards experience factor and six sub-factors: fantasy, esthetics, feelings, action, ideas and values.

From the chart, we can see that there is no statistically meaningful connection between subjective well-being and the openness towards experience factor. The discovered correlation between these two variables ($r=0.07$) is not high enough to be taken as a statistical measure for the variables' connection.

Chart. The inter-correlation between experiencing happiness, openness towards experience and the sub-factors: fantasy, esthetics, feelings, action, ideas and values

**Meaningful correlation on level 0.01

*Meaningful correlation on level 0.05

Even though subjective well-being does not correlate meaningfully with an openness towards experience factor, there are meaningful correlations in this variable with sub-factor feelings ($r=0.23$), as well as the high negative correlation with subfactor values ($r=-0.20$). The meaningfulness of both correlations is on level 0.01.

Discussion

From the results gained for the connection between subjective well-being and an openness towards experience factor, it can be concluded that there is no statistical correlation between these two variables. These results do not confirm the hypothesis that by increasing the degree of openness towards experience the degree of experiencing happiness among students increases as well. The results are in accordance with those results gained from the research by DeNeve and Cooper (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) where the statistically meaningful correlation between happiness and openness towards experience has not been found either ($r=0.11$). The conclusion that may be drawn from the results would go in that direction meaning that the happiness of an individual is not significantly connected to their openness or curiosity for either the internal or the external world. Happiness is not connected to experiencing new, unusual experiences, openness for the acceptance of new ideas and unconventional values, as well as a fondness for accepting new and unconventional ways of thinking and behaving.

However, despite the fact that experiencing happiness does not meaningfully correlate to an openness towards experience factor, nor to the bigger number of the sub-factors of this factor (fantasy, esthetics, action and ideas), a correlation from $r=0.23$ is still found with the sub-factor openness towards feelings on a significant level of 0.01. The identical data with this sub-factor are also gained for the connection of satisfaction with the quality of life. Therefore, it comes out that by increasing an openness towards feelings and their acceptance as a meaningful part of life, the experience of happiness and satisfaction by the quality of life increases as well.

This conclusion cannot be drawn for the connection of happiness and openness towards fantasy, experiencing art and esthetics, experimenting with different activities, and ideas. There are no statistically meaningful correlations between

happiness and these sub-factors. Unlike the results gained for satisfaction with the quality of life, this research found a high correlation between experiencing happiness and a sub-factor openness towards values. The interesting data is that the correlation between these two variables is negative, meaning the less open the person is towards reconsidering social, political and religious values, the more s/he accepts the authorities and has a conservative behaviour and by this the experience of happiness is greater.

The results that have been gained are important and it is necessary to check other things as well in this context. Thus, it is necessary to carry out research on the educational system, starting from the earliest age of children, as well as in the programs included for growth and development among the young population. The relation between various sub-factors of openness towards experience and subjective well-being should be elaborated in the realms of psychological guidance and psychotherapy, and some concrete interventions would do no harm, but they could be used, too. As an important aspect of a person's life is his sense of well-being in the work place as well. So, such research should be spread evenly in the working aspects of an adult person.

What is still unknown to researchers and represents a challenge for future research in this area, are the dynamic processes that stand behind this connection between separate sub-factors of openness towards experience and subjective well-being. By studying these processes, it could be better understood what makes individuals with a high level of openness towards emotions feel happier, and those with a lower level of openness towards values less happy than the others.

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