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Short Communication

The happy personality: Mediational role of trait emotional intelligence

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between the Big Five personality traits (Gosling et al., 2003), trait emotional intelligence (EI) (Petrides & Furnham, 2001) and happiness (Argyle et al., 1989) in a sample of 112 (61 female) student and non-student participants. Strong dispositional determinants of happiness were identified. In line with previous findings, four of the Big Five, namely stability, extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness, were positively correlated with both happiness and trait EI, which explained 18% of unique variance (over and above age and the Big Five) in happiness. Furthermore, a significant amount of shared variance between happiness and the Big Five was explained by trait EI, which partly mediated the paths from stability and conscientiousness to happiness, and fully mediated the link between agreeableness and happiness. Limitations and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Happiness; Trait emotional intelligence; Big Five; Personality

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0. Introduction

Although few goals are more valued in society than happiness, psychologists have traditionally focused on human "unhappiness" (e.g., depression, anxiety and emotional disorders) (Argyle, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, recent years have seen an upsurge in studies on happiness (e. g., Argyle, 2001; Diener, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which is defined in terms of the average level of satisfaction over a specific time period, the frequency and degree of positive affect manifestations, and the relative absence of negative affect (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989).

Although happiness depends on situational factors, reflected in within-individual variations of affect, the fact that some individuals are consistently happier than others suggests dispositional causes underlying the pursuit and experience of happiness. Indeed, personality traits are arguably the most robust predictors of happiness, if not the major determinant. Hence Eysenck's (1983) famous assertion that "happiness is a thing called stable extraversion" (p. 87).

The most compelling evidence for the strong associations between personality traits and happiness derived from DeNeve and Cooper's (1998) meta-analysis, which indicated that four of the so-called Big Five personality factors, namely emotional stability (ES), conscientiousness (C), extraversion (E), and agreeableness (A) – usually in that order – predispose individuals towards happiness. There is also wide consensus on the fact that ES and E, linked to temperamental differences in positive and negative affect, provide the biological basis of happiness, with A providing the social, and C the achievement, components of happiness (Carver & Scheier, 2004; Furnham & Cheng, 1997; Hayes & Joseph, 2003).

In recent years, dispositional explanations of happiness have also emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence (EI), which, among other things, refers to the ability to identify and manage one's and others' emotions (Palmer et al., 2002; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Unlike cognitive ability, EI is most reliably assessed via self-report inventories, rather than objective performance tests. Therefore the label "trait EI" has been put forward to reflect its taxonomic position within the realm of personality.

Given the conceptual and empirical overlap between trait EI and other personality dimensions, notably ES, E, and A (Petrides & Furnham, 2001) it is particularly important to test whether trait EI may explain variance in happiness *beyond* other personality traits. Accordingly, a recent study (Furnham & Petrides, 2003) found trait EI predicted happiness over and above the Big Five personality dimensions. Furthermore, the significant links between the Big Five and happiness were fully accounted for by trait EI. Thus the present study set out to explore the mediational role of trait EI in the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and happiness.

To our knowledge, no other studies have simultaneously examined the Big Five and Petrides' trait EI as predictors of happiness. However, a growing number of studies suggest that despite the considerable overlap between trait EI and the Big Five personality factors, trait EI explains additional and unique variance in a number of important outcomes. For instance, Saklofske, Austin, and Minski (2003) found that trait EI (assessed via Schutte et al., 1998 inventory) predicted life satisfaction and depression-proneness beyond the Big Five. Petrides and Furnham (2003) reported that, although trait EI was substantially related to extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, and autonomy, EI-facets predicted additional variance over and above the Big Five in competency to support. Petrides, Frederickson, and Furnham (2004) showed that

trait EI explained several educational outcomes (notably truancy and attendance) even when major personality factors – this time assessed via Eysenck's Giant Three (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) – were considered. Last, but not least, a recent paper (Petrides, Perez-Gonzalez, & Furnham, in press) showed that in two studies trait EI significantly predicted rumination, life satisfaction, depression, dysfunctional attitudes, and coping, even when controlling for Big Five variance. Thus one may expect trait EI to explain happiness even when major personality factors are taken into account.

In the present study, it was predicted that:

H1: Four of the Big Five personality traits, namely ES, E, C and A, would be significantly and positively correlated with both happiness and trait EI.
H2: Trait EI would be significantly and positively correlated with happiness.
H3: The relationship between the Big Five and happiness would be fully mediated (accounted for) by trait EI.

As the sample comprised a similar number of female and male participants, as well as a wide range of age, possible effects of age and gender were also examined to ensure that any relationship between the central variables of the study was not a function of these demographic factors.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

One hundred and twelve (61 female) participants, aged 13 to 59 ($M = 25.1$, $SD = 9.4$) years, took part in this study. Approximately 50% of the sample was composed of undergraduate students (arts, media, psychology, and computer sciences) from the University of London, with the rest being drawn from the general population (mostly family members or friends of the participating students, as well as people approached in the city of London).

2. Measures

The *Oxford Happiness Inventory* (OHI; Argyle et al., 1989): This is a widely used, 29-item, happiness scale, where participants respond on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"). The OHI has been shown to have adequate test-retest reliability (7-week period = .78; 5-months period = .67) and moderate to high internal consistency (typical Cronbachα between .64 and .87) (see Argyle et al., 1989), and has been translated into several languages, including Chinese and Hebrew.

The *Ten Item Personality Inventory* (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003): This is a quick measure of the five factors of personality. The authors reported adequate levels of convergent and discriminant validity, as well as test-retest reliability. The inventory begins with the stem "I see myself as:" followed by ten pairs of two trait descriptors, which participants rate on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").

The *Trait Emotional-Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form* (TEIQue-SF; Petrides & Furnham, 2006): This scale is a 30-item instrument designed to assess individuals' emotional self-efficacy or ability to identify and manage their own and others' emotions. It is based on the theory of trait EI, which regards the construct as a personality disposition at the lower hierarchical level of the Big Five personality traits. The scale is based on the full, 153-item TEIQue, which covers the trait EI sampling domain in its entirety. Adequate internal consistencies and broad coverage of the sampling domain of the construct have been reported (Petrides & Furnham, 2006). Items are responded to according to a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

3. Procedure

Participants were tested individually. Order effects were controlled by randomly counterbalancing the order of administration. Battery completion time took approximately 12 minutes. All participants were fully de-briefed upon completion and provided with individual feedback if requested.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics (M and SD) and inter-correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) for all measures are reported in Table 1. As shown, happiness correlated positively with ES, E, C, and A, fully supporting H1. The high and positive correlation between trait EI and happiness yielded support for H2.

In the first regression, age and gender accounted for 11% of the variance in happiness scores for the overall sample, with age (but not gender) as a significant predictor in the model. When the big five where added as predictors in block 2, the percentage of variance accounted for significantly increased by 23%, and stability, conscientiousness and agreeableness (as well as age) were significant predictors. In block 3, trait EI was added as predictor and the overall variance explained

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations between the primary variables

	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
(1) Happiness	153.1	23.6	.80	–					
(2) Trait EI	145.2	18.7	.72	.70**	–				
(3) Stability	4.59	1.3	.68	.31**	.30**	–			
(4) Extraversion	4.95	1.0	.59	.21*	.25**	.00	–		
(5) Conscientiousness	4.82	1.3	.67	.44**	.37**	.10	.11	–	
(6) Agree	4.49	1.4	.67	.32**	.42**	.20*	−.01	.33**	–
(7) Openness	5.13	1.1	.56	.16	.15	.25**	.03	.19*	.03

Note: $N = 112$ (61 females).
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

significantly increased by 18%, which represents an increase of 78% (18/23*100). The most significant predictor of this model was trait EI, with conscientiousness, stability and age still significant predictors. Agreeableness however, was no longer significant suggesting that trait EI mediates the link between agreeableness and happiness. The same analysis was repeated for female and male participants, separately. For females, the percentage of variance explained by each model was nearly identical to that explained in the overall sample. However, there were some noticeable differences in regards to specific predictors, notably extraversion, which was a significant predictor of females' happiness scores in block 2, and agreeableness, which was not significant. When trait EI was added as predictor in block 3, only conscientiousness and trait EI were significant predictors, suggesting that, for female participants, the effects of age, stability, and extraversion on happiness are mediated by trait EI. When the analysis was repeated for males, the models accounted for slightly less variance in happiness than in the analyses for females and the overall dataset. Individual predictors showed some differences, too. Of the big five, only conscientiousness was a significant predictor (in block 2), though this effect disappeared when trait EI was added to the equation in block 3.

5. Discussion

In all, results suggest strong dispositional influences on happiness. Although established personality traits (notably ES, A, and C) explained a considerable amount of variance in happiness, some of these paths (partly in the case of ES and C, and fully in the case of A) were explained by trait EI, which was a much stronger predictor than the Big Five (and age) of happiness.

One possible explanation for the higher predictive validity of trait EI compared to the Big Five is that the former was assessed via a 30-item questionnaire, compared to a very short, 10-item measure of the Big Five (which leaves only 2-items per factor). Thus the comparative measurement fidelity may have over-estimated the impact of trait EI and under-estimated that of the Big Five. However, this short personality scale has shown more than adequate reliability and validity in the past (Gosling et al., 2003), and in the present study, its correlations with both happiness and trait EI were consistent with the previous literature (Argyle et al., 1989; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Needless to say, there are obvious practical advantages of employing such an economical measure of the Big Five as opposed to, say, the full 240-items of the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992). There is growing interest in short measures of personality and recent research has shown that even single item measures of the Big Five have adequate reliability and validity (Woods & Hampson, 2005).

Leaving aside the psychometric issue of bandwidth fidelity, a more theoretical interpretation of results would indicate that the well-established dimensions of ES and A, which have been traditionally associated with happiness (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), may largely be related to happiness because they are associated with individual differences in trait EI. Why C effects happiness, however, can only partly be explained by trait EI. Thus individuals high in C would not only be more able to identify and regulate their and others' emotions more effectively, but also work harder to accomplish their life goals, which in turn would lead to higher achievement levels.

Although the present findings point in the direction of strong dispositional influences on happiness, the criterion variable was itself operationalized in terms of aggregated or trait levels, and

assessed via a self-report inventory. This design limitation arguably inflated the association between happiness and the trait predictors examined, undermining the effects of situational variables. There is also the issue of the relatively small and unrepresentative sample size; whilst the present study examined not only students, 50% of the sample did consist of university undergraduates and the overall sample was predominantly British. Future research should attempt to include both dispositional and situational factors and examine larger and more representative samples to overcome these limitations and further explore and assess the comparative importance of different predictors of happiness.

Table 2
Hierarchical regressions of happiness onto age, gender, Big Five, and trait EI

	Overall $N = 112$		Females $N = 61$		Males $N = 51$	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
1						
Age	.36	3.99**	.35	2.91**	.37	2.85**
Gender	.05	.58	–	–	–	–
F	*(2, 109) = 7.96***		*(1, 59) = 8.41***		*(1, 49) = 8.17***	
Adj. R^2	*.11*		*.11*		*.12*	
2						
Age	.27	3.37**	.28	2.69**	.26	2.03*
Gender	.07	.91	–	–	–	–
Stability	.23	2.87**	.28	2.56**	.14	1.12
Extraversion	.12	1.54	.21	1.94*	.01	.10
Conscientiousness	.29	3.40**	.29	2.44*	.37	2.79**
Agreeableness	.16	1.97*	.09	.79	.12	.97
Openness	.03	.44	−.01	−.09	.08	.65
F	*(7, 104) = 9.15***		*(6, 54) = 6.75***		*(6, 44) = 4.07***	
Sig. F change	8.53**		5.72**		2.93**	
Adj. R^2	*.34*		*.36*		*.27*	
3						
Age	.14	2.09*	.14	1.59	.17	1.55
Gender	.00	.00	–	–	–	–
Stability	.12	1.66*	.11	1.14	.10	.93
Extraversion	.03	.47	.11	1.22	.09	.85
Conscientiousness	.19	2.63**	.22	2.17*	.18	1.50
Agreeableness	−.00	.11	−.04	−.38	.07	.59
Openness	.00	.11	.01	.11	.02	.26
Trait EI	.54	6.40**	.53	4.58**	.58	4.30**
F	*(8, 103) = 16.21***		*(7, 53) = 10.92***		*(7, 43) = 7.52***	
Sig. F change	40.97**		20.98**		18.54**	
Adj. R^2	*.52*		*.54*		*.48*	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

Despite the methodological limitations of this brief report, the present results (particularly those reported in Table 2) provide useful information for a prospective hierarchical integration of the different dispositional determinants of happiness, and emphasize the independent contribution of the rather young construct of trait EI in the prediction of happiness. Although further replication, adjusting for bandwidth fidelity and including situational variables, is needed to further examine the incremental validity of trait EI over personality and other individual difference factors, trait EI appears to be an important determinant of happiness.

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