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Personality and the happiness of others: a study among 13- to 15-year-old adolescents

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Abstract

This study was designed to assess the level of concern for the happiness of others among a sample of 13- to 15-year-old adolescents in England (N= 3,095) and to test the theory that concern for the happiness of others occupies a different psychological space (within Eysenck's three dimensional model of personality) from the space occupied by personal happiness. The data demonstrated a high level of concern for the happiness of others, with 84% of the adolescents saying that, 'It is important to me to make other people happy'. While high levels of personal happiness are generally shown to be associated with low neuroticism and high extraversion (stable extraversion), these data demonstrated high levels of concern for the happiness of others tend to be associated with high neuroticism, high extraversion, high social conformity, and low psychoticism.

Keywords: Eysenck, personality, happiness, altruism, youth

Introduction

This study is concerned with the concept of happiness within the broader field of wellbeing. It recognises that considerable advances have been made in the psychological conceptualisation and measurement of personal happiness through the Oxford Happiness Inventory, an instrument developed and described by Argyle, Martin and Crossland (1989) and now translated and tested within a number of linguistic and cultural contexts, including Arabic (Abdel-Khalek, 2005), Chinese (Lu & Shih, 1997; Lu, Shih, Lin, & Ju, 1997; Lu & Lin, 1998), Japanese (Furnham & Cheng, 1999), Hebrew (Francis & Katz, 2000), Persian (Liaghatdar, Jafari, Abedi, & Samiee, 2008; Bayani, 2008), Portugese (Neto, 2001), and German (Lewis, Francis, & Ziebertz, 2002).

While considerable investment has been made in clarifying and operationalising an index concerned with personal happiness, comparable investment has not been made in clarifying and operationalising the notion of concern for the happiness of others as a distinctive component within the broader field of altruism and empathy. The aim of the present study is to examine the viability of such a project by employing a single item measure of concern for the happiness of others and to locate this measure within the personality space defined by the Eysenckian dimensional model of personality. The Eysenckian model of personality has been chosen in preference to the Big Five Factor Model of personality in view of the established research tradition that has already focused on locating personal happiness, as defined by the Oxford Happiness Inventory, within the Eysenckian framework.

Eysenck's dimensional model of personality maintains that individual differences can be most efficiently and economically summarised in terms of three orthogonal higher order factors. The first factor is expressed on the continuum from introversion, through ambiversion, to extraversion. Those who score high on the extraversion scale can be characterised as sociable, lively, active, carefree, dominant and assertive. Those who score

low on the extraversion scale tend to be more solitary, reflective and self-contained in their approach to life. The second factor is expressed on the continuum from emotional stability, through emotional lability, to neurotic disorder. Those who score high on the neuroticism scale can be characterised as anxious, depressed, tense, emotional, irrational and often having low self-esteem. Those who score low on the neuroticism scale tend to be more stable, unperturbed, and self-confident. The third factor is expressed on the continuum from tendermindedness, through toughmindedness, to psychotic disorder. Those who score high on the psychoticism scale can be characterised as toughminded, cold, aggressive, antisocial and impersonal. Those who score low on the psychoticism scale tend to be more tenderminded, peacable, prosocial and personally engaged. In order to guard against dissimulation, the Eysenckian family of personality measures also generally includes what has been defined (somewhat unfortunately) as a lie scale. Those who score high on this scale can often be characterised as displaying high levels of social conformity rather than intentional or unintentional dissimulation.

All four measures proposed by Hans Eysenck and his associates have been operationalised in a series of self-completion instruments for application both among adults, including the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985), and among young people, including the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Corulla, 1990).

The association between personal happiness and Eysenck's dimensional model of personality has been so well established in the research literature that Eysenck (1983) confidently defined happiness in the following way.

Happiness is a thing called stable extraversion...the positive affect in happiness seemed to be related to easy sociability, with a natural, pleasant interaction with other

people...then it only makes sense that happiness can be associated with extraversion.

Similarly, if worries and anxieties make up negative affect in happiness, it can easily be seen that instability and neuroticism are also connected to unhappiness.

Evidence for this view is supported, for example, by a series of studies employing the Eysenckian dimensional model of personality alongside the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). Argyle and Lu (1990) found a significant positive correlation between happiness and extraversion among 131 undergraduates. Furnham and Brewin (1990) found that happiness was correlated positively with extraversion, correlated negatively with neuroticism and uncorrelated with either psychoticism or the lie scale among 101 students. These findings regarding the relationship between happiness and extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism were confirmed by Lu and Argyle (1991) among 114 adults, by Brebner, Donaldson, Kirby and Ward (1995) among 95 student volunteers, by Francis, Brown, Lester, and Philipchalk (1998) in a cross-cultural study among 1,076 students in the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia, by Francis (1999) among 456 undergraduates in Wales, by Furnham and Cheng (1999) among 120 students in the United Kingdom, by Lu (1995) among 581 Chinese adults living in Taiwan, by Noor (1996) among 145 women from Oxford, by Furnham and Cheng (2000) among 233 English speaking young people mainly recruited from the final year at school, by Chan and Joseph (2000) among 107 students in England, by Cheng and Furnham (2001) among two samples of 83 and 121 students in the United Kingdom, by Hills and Argyle (2001) among 244 residents of Oxfordshire, and by Robbins, Francis, and Edwards (in press) among 131 undergraduate students in Wales. Cheng and Furnham (2003) reported on a study conducted among 234 participants, ranging in age from 15 to 35 years attending various schools and colleges, which found that happiness was correlated positively with extraversion, correlated negatively with neuroticism, correlated negatively with psychoticism and uncorrelated with the lie scale scores.

While research concerned with the association between the Eysenckian dimensional model of personality and personal happiness is well documented, there remains a dearth of research concerning the association between the Eysenckian model of personality and concern for the happiness of others. Concern for the happiness of others may emerge, however, as a matter of considerable concern for social psychology in general and personality psychology in particular in an age in which individualism (expressed, say, through the desire to maximise happiness for the self) may supplant collectivism (expressed, say, through the desire to maximise happiness for others). The point has been well made, for example, through the growing concern with the erosion of social capital, as documented through the now almost classic study of contemporary American society characterised by Putnam (2000) as *Bowling Alone*.

Concern for the happiness of others may be characterised as a component part of the broader psychological construct of empathy, as diversely defined by a range of measures, following the tradition set by the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) and the Hogan Empathy Scale (Hogan, 1969). For example, in the empathy scale included within the Manual of the Eysenck Personality Scales (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991), high empathy is associated with positive responses to statements like, 'Do you like watching people open presents?' and 'Would you find it very hard to break bad news to someone?' Clearly such items imply that empathy is concerned with promoting the happiness of others and with avoiding promoting the sadness of others. However, just as the richness and precision of the psychological construct concerning personal happiness may become submerged and lost within the broader notion of wellbeing, so the richness and precision of the psychological construct concerning the happiness of others may become submerged and lost within the broader notion of empathy.

Studies that have located empathy alongside the Eysenckian three-dimensional model of personality have generally found that high levels of empathy are associated with low psychoticism and high neuroticism (see, for example, Eysenck and Eysenck, 1978; Eysenck and McGurk, 1980; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1991). In other words, if concern for the happiness of others is properly conceptualised as a component part of empathy, then concern for the happiness of others seems to occupy a personality quadrant quite different from that occupied by personal happiness. If Eysenck's (1983) definition holds true that 'happiness is a thing called stable extraversion', it may be equally plausible to propose that 'concern for the happiness of others is a thing called unstable tendermindedness'

Research agenda

Against this background, it is the aim of the present paper to assess the level of concern for the happiness of others and to test the claim that concern for the happiness of others is related to unstable tendermindedness among a substantial sample of 13- to 15-year-old adolescents in England.

Method

Procedure

The Teenage Values Survey was completed by a random sample of 3,095 13- to 15-year-old pupils attending year- nine and year-ten classes in 11 secondary schools in England and Wales. Pupils were asked not to write their name on the booklet and to complete the inventory under examination-like conditions. Although pupils were given the choice not to participate, very few decided not to take part in the survey. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that their responses would not be read by anyone in the school, and that the questionnaires would be dispatched to the University of Wales for analysis.

Measures

Personality was assessed by the abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised (Francis, 1996). This instrument proposes four six-item indices of extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and a lie scale. Each item is rated on a two-point scale: 'yes' and 'no'.

Concern for the happiness of others was assessed by the single item, 'It is important to me to make other people happy', rated on a five-point Likert-type scale: agree strongly (5), agree (4), not certain (3), disagree (2), disagree strongly (1).

Sample

The 3,095 participants comprised 1,540 males, 1,547 females, and 8 of undisclosed sex; 1,658 year-nine pupils (aged 13 to 14 years) and 1,437 year-ten pupils (aged 14 to 15 years). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the pupils (94%) described themselves as white, with small groups of Asian (1%), Black (1%), or mixed backgrounds (3%). Just under two-thirds (64%) were part of intact families. In terms of religious affiliation, 56% self-identified as Christian, 2% as affiliated with another major world faith (Buddhist, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Sikh), and 42% as non-affiliates. Among the self-identified Christians, the two largest denominational groups were Anglicans (28%) and Catholics (14%).

Analyses

The data was analysed by the SPSS statistical package using the frequencies, reliability, Pearson correlation, and regression routines.

Results

The abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised performed within the range suggested by the test constructor (Francis, 1996), generating the following alpha coefficients (Cronbach, 1951): neuroticism, .72; extraversion, .64; psychoticism, .62; lie scale, .56. In terms of the key question, 'It is important to me to make

other people happy', 32% of the young people agreed strongly and 51% agreed, leaving just 2% who disagreed strongly, 2% who disagreed, and 14% who checked the uncertain category.

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for the Eysenckian scales, sex, and concern for the happiness of others. The key findings from these data are that concern for the happiness of others is associated with being female, with higher neuroticism scores, with lower psychoticism scores, with higher lie scale scores, and with higher extraversion scores. Given the observation that there are significant sex differences with all four Eysenckian measures, partial correlations were calculated controlling for sex. The key associations between personality and concern for the happiness of others were reduced slightly, but the pattern of associations remained stable. In each case, however, the proportion of variance in concern for the happiness of others accounted for by the individual personality scales is small. Since the lie scale is being interpreted as an index of social conformity no attempt was made to control for this variable.

- insert table 1 about here -

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was designed to assess the level of concern for the happiness of others among a substantial sample of 13- to 15-year-old adolescents in England and Wales and to test the claim that concern for the happiness of others can be placed within the Eysenckian three dimensional model of personality in a different location from the one occupied by personal happiness. The following conclusions can be drawn from the data.

The first conclusion from these data is that a concern for the happiness of others is a high priority within the worldview of young people, with 84% saying that it is important for them to make people happy. In this sense, there is little evidence to support the view that individualism has suppressed collectivism, that the quest for personal happiness has

supplanted concern for the promotion of the happiness of others, or that hedonism has swallowed altruism.

The second conclusion from the data is that individual differences in the levels of concern for the happiness of others are associated with being female, with higher neuroticism scores, with lower psychoticism scores, with higher lie scale (or social conformity) scores, and with higher extraversion scores. While the Eysenckian research tradition has claimed that ‘happiness is a thing called stable extraversion’ (Eysenck, 1983; Francis, 1999), it seems in the light of the present data equally plausible to advance the claim that concern for the happiness of others is associated with extraversion, neuroticism, tendermindedness, and social conformity.

The main weakness of the present study concerns the way in which the central variable ‘concern for the happiness of others’ has been operationalised by a single item and by the way in which scores on this item were far from being normally distributed. The study was, however, undertaken with this single-item measure specifically to scope the value of exploring this construct of concern for the happiness of others. Given the intriguing nature of the findings and given the importance of this construct for the wider current concern with ‘social well-being’ (Keyes, 1998) and with the ‘eudaimonic aspects of well being’ (Joshani & Ghaedi, 2009), there is now good reason for attempting to build on the precedent established by instruments like the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2001) in order to develop a properly conceptualised and adequately operationalised measure of ‘Concern for the Happiness of Others’.

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Table 1*Correlation Matrix*

	Sex	L	P	N	E
Concern	.14***	.13***	-.15**	.16***	0.08**
Extraversion (E)	.12***	-.15***	.06***	-.17***	
Neuroticism (N)	.28***	.03*	-.10***		
Psychoticism (P)	-.29***	-.37***			
Lie Scale (L)	.08***				

Note *= $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$