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Independent self-construal, self-reflection, and self-rumination: A path model for predicting happiness

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Abstract

A construal theory of happiness emphasises the mediating impact of cognitive and motivational processes on the individual's perceptions of their happiness. This study investigated a path model with the two cognitive variables, self-reflection and self-rumination as mediating factors between an independent self-construal and subjective happiness. One hundred and twenty three participants completed a questionnaire designed to measure subjective happiness, independent self-construal, self-reflection, and self-rumination. Individuals' propensity to self-reflect and self-ruminate was not found to be affected by an independent self-construal. A higher independent self-construal was associated with greater happiness. The results also indicated that self-reflection has the potential to both increase and decrease (when mediated by self-rumination) subjective happiness. This study suggests that although meaningful self-reflection may be beneficial for individuals who do not enjoy high levels of happiness, the perils of self-reflection are that it may trigger self-rumination which has detrimental consequences for happiness.

The pursuit of happiness is inherent to human existence. Recently, research on happiness has been revitalised by the emergence of positive psychology with its focus on the resilience of human nature (Sheldon & King, 2001). The general consensus is that although to some degree objective situational factors (such as income, health, age, and marital status) influence people's perceptions of their happiness, ultimately, happiness is a subjective phenomenon, with subjective feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and evaluations of the situation even more important than the situation itself (Argyle, 2001; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Myers, 2000).

A construal theory of happiness

The subjective perspective on happiness is reflected in one of the recent developments in research on happiness, a construal theory. According to a construal theory, happiness is determined by what people make of their experiences; that is, the way they construe and interpret the world around them

(Lyubomirsky, 2001). In this respect, a construal theory of happiness emphasises the role of hedonically relevant cognitive and motivational processes as mediating the effects of person and situation factors on the perception of happiness.

Hedonically relevant cognitive and motivational processes (e.g., social comparison, dissonance reduction, self-reflection, and self-rumination) are those which lead to hedonic consequences; that is, they have the potential to either promote or undermine a positive view of the self. For example, the positive association between self-rumination (dwelling on the negative in relation to the self) and depressed mood is a well-documented phenomenon (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). From the perspective of a construal theory, self-rumination may be detrimental to happiness as focusing on the negative in relation to the self may detract from a positive view of the self, which, in turn, may undermine the individual's perceptions of their happiness.

Similarly, happy individuals have been found to be less prone to engage in self-reflection, or to think about and analyse one's thoughts, feelings, and outcomes of their actions (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Moreover, in experimental studies involving individuals who display extremely high or extremely low levels of happiness, Lyubomirsky and Ross (1999) demonstrated that when happy people were induced to self-reflect, their behaviour matched the behaviour of unhappy individuals, whereas when unhappy individuals were prevented from engaging in self-reflection, their behaviour matched the behaviour of happy people. This suggests that similar to the hedonic consequences of self-rumination mentioned above, the hedonic consequences of self-reflection may be detrimental to the individual's perceptions of their happiness.

The question raised in this study is which personality characteristics may predispose people to self-reflect or self-ruminate. The answer to this question may reside in differences between individuals in terms of how they see themselves (independent from others or connected to others). These differences are referred to as the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Independent versus interdependent self-construals

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), those with an independent self-construal define themselves in terms of internal attributes such as traits, abilities, values, and preferences. In contrast, those with an interdependent self-construal define themselves in terms of their relationships with others. Markus and Kitayama argued that differences between independent and interdependent self-concepts lead to different consequences for a number of cognitive and motivational processes. Subsequent research not only supported this assumption (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Kurman, 2002; Poasa, Mallinckrodt, & Suzuki, 2000) but also indicated that these differences in cognitive and motivational processes may be related to subjective well-being (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Kwan & Bond, 1997).

This suggests that the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals can be a source of individual differences in cognitive and motivational processes, which, in turn, may influence individual differences in happiness. From the perspective of a construal theory, the mediating impact of cognitive and motivational processes on happiness is related to the hedonic consequences of these processes for the individual's self-esteem.

In this respect, the present study was designed to investigate the negative hedonic consequences associated with the two cognitive variables, self-reflection

and self-rumination as mediating factors between an independent self-construal and happiness. Another aim of this study was to assess the direct and indirect influences of self-reflection on subjective happiness. For these purposes a path model as presented in Figure 1 was constructed.

Path model and hypotheses

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that although independent and interdependent self-construals are predominant in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively, individuals within a given society can be less or more independent or interdependent. (The distinction between individualistic and collectivistic societies refers to the extent to which the value of the individual takes precedence over, or is sacrificed to the needs of others.) Moreover, Hackman, Ellis, Johnson, and Staley (1999) demonstrated that independent and interdependent self-construal orientations are two separate constructs and suggested that the predictive capacities of these two variables should be investigated separately.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that for those with an independent self-construal knowledge about the self is more important and elaborated than knowledge about the other; one's internal abilities, feelings, and thoughts are therefore highly accessible in memory. Moreover, for those with an independent self-construal, in comparison to those with an interdependent self-construal, self-esteem is based on internal attributes, which facilitates motivation to obtain more self-knowledge. This suggests that individuals with a highly developed independent self-construal may be more prone to focus on themselves when reflecting on their life. For example, in Batson, Fultz, Schoenrade, and Paduano's (1987) study, the shift in perception of pro-social behaviour as less altruistic as a result of self-reflection was greater for individuals who emphasised the importance of self-knowledge over relationships with others. Therefore, a higher level of an independent self-construal as an individual variable may lead to greater self-reflection.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) point out that although people with both self-construals are

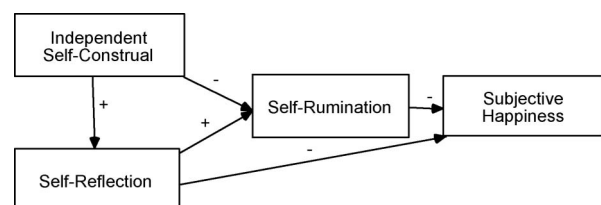


Figure 1. Path model predicting subjective happiness

motivated to maintain a positive view of the self, they employ different strategies to do so. For those with an independent construal a positive view of the self involves seeking information that enhances internal attributes as their self-esteem is based on an ability to express inner qualities. In contrast, having self-attributes that are more positive should be less central to the interdependent self, as the self-esteem of those with the interdependent self is based on the ability to fit in and to maintain harmony in relationships with others. This suggests that individuals with a highly developed independent self-construal will be motivated to avoid dwelling on the negative in relation to the self. Therefore, a higher level of an independent self-construal as an individual variable may lead to less self-rumination.

The role of the self-attentive process (the propensity to attend to one's thoughts and feelings) in psychological well-being appears to be controversial in research literature (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). On the one hand, studies indicate that the self-attentive process promotes greater self-awareness and more accurate self-knowledge (Hixon & Swann, 1993), which is considered essential for psychological growth. On the other hand, the self-attentive process has been found to be associated with greater levels of depression, anxiety, and neuroticism (Joireman, 2004). Trapnell and Campbell (1999) labelled these contradictory findings as the "self-absorption paradox" (p. 286). According to Trapnell and Campbell, the self-absorption paradox can be resolved by attributing negative and positive outcomes of the self-attentive process to two independent factors within the self-attentive process, rumination and reflection, respectively.

Attributing clear-cut positive outcomes to self-reflection, however, contradicts the findings of experimental studies on happiness mentioned above. In addition, Batson et al. (1987) demonstrated that self-reflection can undermine altruistic behaviour. Moreover, the clear-cut independence of reflective and ruminative processes appears to be questionable considering that in a number of experimental studies connecting rumination and psychological well-being, self-rumination was induced through generic self-reflection (e.g., Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993). In a similar vein, a study reported by Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (1997) suggests a possible causal link between self-reflection, self-rumination, and psychological well-being, with self-reflection leading to self-rumination over time and as a result to greater depressed mood. Therefore, greater self-reflection may be associated with greater self-rumination.

Thus, based on the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals and previous research associating self-reflection and self-rumination with subjective happiness and well-being,

it was hypothesised that: (a) a higher independent self-construal would be associated with greater self-reflection and less self-rumination, (b) greater self-reflection would be associated with greater self-rumination and less happiness, and (c) greater self-rumination would lead to less happiness.

Method

Participants

Participants were 123 residents of Rockhampton in Central Queensland (female, $n = 87$; male, $n = 34$; missing, $n = 2$). Participants ranged in age from 18–82 years ($M = 38.50$, $SD = 15.31$). Table I presents the age group, education level attained, marital status, and income level of the participants.

Materials

The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) assesses the extent to which individuals consider themselves happy and consists of four items with 7-point Likert type response formats.

Table I. Demographic data of participants

Demographic variable	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Age</i>		
18–24 years	24.4	30
25–44 years	35.0	43
45–64 years	35.8	44
65 years and over	3.3	4
Missing	1.6	2
<i>Gender</i>		
Males	27.7	34
Females	70.7	87
Missing	1.6	2
<i>Education</i>		
Primary school	2.4	3
1–2 years secondary school	5.7	7
3–4 years secondary school	22.8	28
5–6 years secondary school	19.5	24
Technical/trade	13.0	16
Tertiary	34.1	42
Missing	2.4	3
<i>Marital status</i>		
Single	32.5	40
Married	39.0	48
De facto	8.1	10
Separated	4.9	6
Divorced	13.8	17
Widowed	1.6	2
<i>Income(per year)</i>		
Less than \$10,000	22.0	27
\$10,001–\$20,000	19.5	24
\$20,001–\$30,000	15.4	19
\$30,001–\$40,000	15.4	19
\$40,001–\$50,000	4.1	5
\$50,001–\$60,000	4.9	6
More than \$60,000	17.9	22
Missing	0.8	1

themselves, and also to ask their associates to participate in the study. The overall return rate for the 200 questionnaires distributed was 65%, with 123 questionnaires (94.62%) out of the total 130 questionnaires returned being employed in the analysis. (The data of seven respondents were not included in the analysis due to a large number of missing values.)

Results

Preliminary analyses

Means and standard deviations of the four research variables are presented in Table II. The mean of subjective happiness ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.99$) in this sample is lower than the mean reported by Lyubomirsky and Ross (1999) in a US high school sample ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 0.78$) for individuals who were classified as extremely happy individuals. Participants' gender, level of income, marital status, educational level, and age group had no significant effect on subjective happiness. The results of the reliability analyses indicated that all four measures had acceptable levels of internal consistency (See Materials subsection for Cronbach's alphas).

Intercorrelations among the four research variables were analysed to safeguard the validity of regression analysis in case of multicollinearity, that is, highly correlated independent variables. The results from the correlational analyses are presented in Table III. In terms of the three independent variables, the results showed only one significant low bivariate correlation: self-reflection/self-rumination = .31, indicating that these variables may be somewhat interrelated but still represent distinct constructs. In addition, significant low correlations were found among subjective happiness/independent self-construal = .23 and subjective happiness/self-rumination = $-.31$.

Path analysis

As preliminary analyses indicated a significant correlation between independent self-construal and subjective happiness, a path connecting independent self-construal and subjective happiness was added to the hypothesised model presented in Figure 1. In order to investigate whether independent self-construal correlates with subjective happiness because of the influence of the cognitive variables self-reflection and self-rumination, or whether independent self-construal, self-reflection, and self-rumination have an independent influence on subjective happiness, a path analysis was conducted. Path analysis is a method in which a causal theory and the statistical technique of multiple regression

combine to assess direct and indirect influences between the variables of interest (Ho, 2006). To estimate the direction and magnitude of the paths in the model presented in Figure 1 and to test the three research hypotheses, a series of three regression analyses were carried out. Figure 2 presents the path model with the estimated regression coefficients (Beta values) associated with the hypothesised paths.

The results showed that independent self-construal had only a direct effect on subjective happiness ($\beta = .21$). Self-reflection had a direct effect on subjective happiness ($\beta = .25$) and an indirect effect through self-rumination (path = $.31 \times -.38$). To estimate whether the indirect effect was significant, an online application of the Sobel test developed by Preacher and Leonardelli (2001) was used. The results indicated the significant mediating role of self-rumination in the relation between self-reflection and subjective happiness (Sobel test statistic = -2.75 , $p < .01$). The three predictor variables accounted for 19.80% of the variance in subjective happiness ($p < .05$), with self-rumination being the strongest predictor of subjective happiness accounting for 9.60% of the total variance ($p < .001$). Self-reflection was a significant predictor of self-rumination accounting for 9.40% of the variance ($p < .01$).

Table II. Means and standard deviations of research variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Subjective happiness	4.90	0.99
Independent self-construal	4.97	0.55
Self-reflection	4.25	0.75
Self-rumination	3.48	1.04

Table III. Intercorrelations between research variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Independent self-construal	–			
2. Subjective happiness	.23*	–		
3. Self-reflection	.00	.14	–	
4. Self-rumination	-.06	-.31***	.31**	–

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

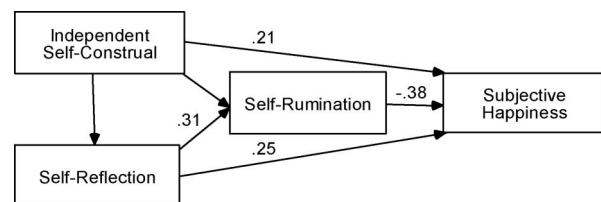


Figure 2. Standardised regression coefficients for the path model predicting subjective happiness

Thus, future research should explore the possibility of mediating factors operating between self-reflection and self-rumination.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical support for a construal theory of happiness in that individual differences in hedonically relevant cognitive processes of self-reflection and self-rumination exert a significant influence on the individual's perception of subjective happiness. The individual's propensity to self-reflect or self-ruminate, however, was not found to be affected by an independent self-construal as had been predicted based on the independent versus interdependent self-construal theoretical framework.

The results of this study suggest that meaningful self-reflection may be beneficial for people who do not enjoy high levels of happiness. Although self-reflection has the potential to increase happiness, this study highlights the perils of self-reflection in that it may trigger self-rumination with its detrimental consequences for happiness. Finally, the discovery of the direct influence of an independent self-construal on subjective happiness provides fuel for future researchers and innovators in search of more comprehensive structural models for predicting happiness.

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