Personality Traits and Social Desirability as Predictors of Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between personality traits, social desirability and subjective well-being. A total of 392 students (195 females and 197 males), aged 19 to 26 years (M=20.25, SD=1.46) completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale, PANAS, Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale and measures of the Big Five personality dimensions (IPIP50).

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed with personality traits and social desirability as predictors and subjective well-being components (satisfaction with life, positive and negative affects) as dependent variables. The results confirmed previous findings that personality, specifically extraversion, emotional stability and conscientiousness, represent strong predictors of subjective well-being. Unlike in other studies, Intellect significantly predicted positive affect and Agreeableness showed additional significant prediction of absence of negative affect. When entered independently into the analysis, social desirability was a significant predictor of all three subjective well-being components. In combination with personality traits, social desirability showed association only with absence of negative affect which can be explained by the links between social desirability and personality traits. These findings indicate that relationship between social desirability, personality traits and subjective well-being is more complex than previous studies suggest. Social desirability appears to be a variable that together with personality traits provides additional explanation of subjective well-being.

Keywords: subjective well-being, life satisfaction, positive and negative affects, the Big Five model of personality, social desirability

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Introduction

Human well-being is defined as optimal psychological functioning that refers to subjective evaluation of happiness, pleasant versus unpleasant experiences and it includes all judgments of good and bad elements of life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). According to Diener (1984), there are three basic characteristics of subjective well-being: it is subjective and depends on experience; it includes not only absence of negative affects but positive affects as well; and it refers to subjective evaluation of all aspects of an individual's life. Subjective well-being includes two components – cognitive evaluation of satisfaction with life and affective aspect made of the presence of positive affects and absence of negative affects independent of each other. For making realistic evaluations of subjective well-being, it is necessary to use both cognitive and affective measures (Kaliterna-Lipovčan & Prizmić-Larsen, 2006).

At the cognitive level, subjective well-being refers to life satisfaction, which is defined as the cognitive evaluation of life as a whole (Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandrik, 1991). When evaluating life satisfaction, the individual first explores different aspects of his life and compares them with what is desired or ideal, and afterwards makes overall evaluation of life satisfaction as a whole. The fact that individuals use their own personal criteria and a set of values when determining their overall life satisfaction should also be taken into account (Pavot & Diener, 2004). Affective component of subjective well-being refers to positive affects and negative affects, two independent dimensions of emotions that arise from different descriptors, timeframes, languages and cultures (Watson & Clark, 1991). Affective component represents current evaluations or current reactions to events. On affective level, high subjective well-being is linked to experience of pleasant emotions thanks to primarily positive evaluation of daily events (Myers & Diener, 1995).

Most explored correlates of subjective well-being were sociodemographic variables. Among them, gender has been found not related to subjective well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997; Pavot & Diener, 2004), related to subjective well-being in interaction with age (Brajša-Žganec & Kaliterna-Lipovčan, 2006; Kaliterna-Lipovčan & Prizmić-Larsen, 2006; Shmotkin, 1990) and/or related to subjective well-being in a given cultural context (Inglehart, 2002). However, the studies also showed that demographic factors do not explain variance of subjective well-being as successfully as expected (Argyle, 1999; Inglehart, 2002; Inglehart & Klingemann, 2000). According to Harring, Stock, & Okun (1984) in 146 studies gender accounted for only 1% of variance of subjective well-being. It seems that women are on average equally happy as men and at the same time experiencing more negative emotions (Piccinelli & Wilkinson, 2000). The explanation of nonsignificant gender differences in subjective well-being lies in the assumption that women are likely to experience and express emotions more

intensely and more frequently, which involves both positive and negative emotions (Rijavec, Miljković, & Brdar, 2008). On the other hand, personal predispositions are one of the most important factors that have a long-term effect on well-being. Personality traits account for one third of variance of subjective well-being (Chan & Joseph, 2000). Previous studies indicated that subjective well-being dimensions are in concordance with temperament more than with life or current circumstances (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener et al., 1997; Guttiérrez, Jiménez, Hernandez, & Puente, 2005; Lounsbury, Saudargas, Gibson, & Leong, 2005; Pavot & Diener, 2004). Personal reactions to life events are more important than events by themselves and reactions to events are affected by personality traits.

Within the Big Five model of personality, extraversion and neuroticism have the strongest and the most consistent associations with subjective well-being. Studies showed that neuroticism, defined as the opposite of emotional stability, is the most important predictor of negative affects and life satisfaction, while extraversion is associated with positive affects and life satisfaction (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Costa and McCrae (1980) pointed out that individual difference in personality traits come prior to individual differences in happiness and life satisfaction. Authors concluded that personality traits strongly predict happiness over a period of ten years. Traits like agreeableness and conscientiousness stimulate positive experience during social interactions and in situations of achievement resulting in increased subjective well-being (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Fifth personality trait, intellect, has very weak links with subjective well-being. Ryan and Deci (2001) argue that agreeableness, conscientiousness and intellect are more affected by the influences from environment, which explains cultural differences present in the relationships between these traits and subjective well-being. On the contrary, extraversion and neuroticism are more influenced by genetic factors.

When evaluating subjective well-being, validity and interpretation of self-reports, have often been reasons for a certain amount of skepticism in research. Measures of subjective well-being can be influenced by current situational factors, individual's mood and particularly by social desirability response bias (Diener, 2000). Generally, individuals tend to increase the degree of their satisfaction and happiness through their self-reports resulting in response artifacts (Penezić & Ivanov, 1999). In order to control response bias, many researchers are interested in the construct of social desirability. Social desirability represents an individual's tendency to respond in a more socially desirable way in certain situations (Richman, Weisband, Kiesler, & Drasgow, 1999). According to Crowne and Marlowe (1960) socially desirable responses represent a single latent construct that reflects the tendency to respond in a manner that one believes will lead to approval from others or avoiding their disapproval. McCrae and Costa (1983) suggested that social desirability should be viewed as a personality trait because of its associations with real individual differences in personality. Studies show that social desirability is correlated with life satisfaction at individual level, which can be the result of

intensified lack of confidence (Steel & Ones, 2002). Pavot and Diener (1993) suggested that large amount of variance of life satisfaction derives from social desirability. McCrae (1986) noted that correlations between social desirability and subjective well-being imply the existence of same shared source of variance and that without further research it would be impossible to see the nature of that shared variance. According to Gallagher and Vella-Brodrick (2008), most researchers of subjective well-being do not include measures of social desirability, which are found to be of importance in explaining subjective well-being.

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between personality, social desirability and subjective well-being divided into three components, life satisfaction, the presence of positive affects and absence of negative affects; and to investigate possible gender differences in dimensions of subjective well-being. In other words, we examined how much variance the Big Five personality traits and social desirability account for, together and independently, on the measures of subjective well-being. By investigating gender differences our intention was to identify dissimilarities in the Croatian population, if any, in comparison to other countries. We expected personality traits to be the best predictor of subjective well-being, social desirability as well, and gender differences nonsignificant in predicting dimensions of subjective well-being.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

The sample included 392 students (195 females and 197 males) at the University of Zagreb, Croatia, aged 19 to 26 years (M=20.25, SD=1.46). All participating students completed a battery of questionnaires during group sessions in lecture halls. Participants were guaranteed anonymity.

Instruments

Satisfaction with Life Scale. As a measure of global life satisfaction, the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale was used (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Subjects had to rate how much they agree with a particular statement using a 7-point scale where 1 meant *'totally disagree'* and 7 meant *'totally agree'*. The score was calculated as the sum of items, ranging from 5 to 30. Higher scores mean better life satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale has been shown to have good psychometric properties (Pavot & Diener, 1993), which was confirmed in our study with Cronbach's alpha of .80.

Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule. Affective component of subjective well-being was measured by Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The scale consists of 10 adjectives reflecting positive affects (e.g. *excited, inspired*) and 10 adjectives demonstrating negative affects (e.g. *hostile, distressed*). Participants rated the extent to which they had experienced each mood state during past 30 days on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*'very, slightly or not at all'*) to 5 (*'very much'*). The Negative Affect scale items were re-coded so that higher scores represent the experience of less negative affects. Summed scores were created for each affect scale. The internal (Cronbach's alpha) reliability for Positive Affect scale was .86 and for Negative Affect scale .85.

International Personality Item Pool. Measures of the Big Five personality dimensions were assessed with a 50-item version of the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999). This inventory measures the five personality dimensions of Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Intellect, each by 10 items. Participants rated the degree to which each item described them on a scale ranging from 1 (*'extremely inaccurate'*) to 5 (*'extremely accurate'*). Ratings were coded in reverse when necessary, so that higher scores reflect higher standing on each dimension. Analysis of the Croatian version of IPIP inventory showed a clear five-factor structure both in self-report form and in peer reports (Mlacic & Goldberg, 2007). Cronbach's alpha coefficients obtained in this study were .86 for Extraversion, .90 for Emotional Stability, .81 for Conscientiousness, .79 for Agreeableness and .81 for Intellect.

Social Desirability Scale. In this study a shorter form of Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale developed by Reynolds (1982) was used. This scale measures socially desirable responses for which it is assumed that represent a single latent construct. Scale consists of 13 items, scored dichotomously, 8 keyed true and 5 keyed false. The items are either very socially desirable but untrue for most people, or very socially undesirable but represent very common behaviour. Higher score indicates higher social desirability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was .70.

Results

Gender Differences in Subjective Well-Being

To examine the gender differences in dimensions of subjective well-being, a t-test for independent samples was administered (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Scores for Men and Women on Each of the Measures of
Dimensions of Subjective Well-Being

Scale		Men	Women	t
Life satisfaction	M	23.37	23.31	0.11
	SD	5.50	5.74	
Positive affect	M	34.70	34.00	1.05
	SD	6.65	6.69	
Negative affect[1]	M	39.21	38.39	1.27
	SD	6.53	6.26	

[1] Variables are reverse coded so that higher score means absence
of negative affect

Results of t-tests revealed statistically nonsignificant gender differences in
dimensions of subjective well-being. This finding indicates that women and men
tend to be equally happy and satisfied with their lives.

Correlates of Subjective Well-Being

In further analysis, we were interested in relationships between personality
traits, social desirability and dimensions of subjective well-being (satisfaction with
life, positive affect and absence of negative affect). Results showed that higher
scores on measures of subjective well-being were associated with higher scores on
all five personality traits and on social desirability also (Table 2).

As expected, extraversion correlated moderately with life satisfaction and
absence of negative affect, while the association with positive affect was slightly
stronger. The highest correlations were obtained between emotional stability and
subjective well-being measures, indicating emotionally stable persons to have
higher life satisfaction, more positive affects and higher absence of negative affects.
These results are very similar to the research of Suh, Diener, and Fujita (1996) who
found that correlations between extraversion and positive affect was r=.41 and
emotional stability and absence of negative affect r=.69.

Higher level of conscientiousness was related to higher levels of subjective
well-being dimensions, especially to positive affect. Agreeableness and intellect
had weaker correlations with subjective well-being, except of moderate link
between intellect and positive affect as also confirmed by Guttiérrez et al. (2005).

Social desirability was significantly related to all dimensions of subjective
well-being with the highest correlation with the absence of negative affect.

Table 2. Correlations between Dimensions of Subjective Well-Being, Personality and Social Desirability

		Personality traits				Social desirability	Subjective well-being		
		A	C	ES	I		Life satisfaction	Positive affect	Negative affect[1]
Personality traits	Extraversion	.35**	.17**	.26**	.26**	.11*	.24**	.37**	.27**
	Agreeableness		.21**	.03	.18**	.26**	.12*	.15**	.13**
	Conscientiousness			.28**	.18**	.35**	.22**	.39**	.30**
	Emotional stability				.17**	.31**	.36**	.41**	.69**
	Intellect					.05	.15**	.39**	.11**
	Social desirability						.13*	.23**	.36**
SWB	Life satisfaction							.36**	.45**
	Positive affect								.30**

*p < .05; **p < .01
A – Agreeableness; C – Conscientiousness; ES – Emotional stability; I – Intellect;
SWB – Subjective well-being
[1] Higher score means absence of negative affect

Personality, Social Desirability and Subjective Well-Being

In order to examine how much variance the Big Five personality traits and social desirability account for, together and independently, on the measures of subjective well-being, six hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted. In the first hierarchical regression analysis, personality traits were entered in the first step and social desirability in the second in order to see amount of variance explained independently by traits and together with social desirability.

As shown in Table 3, personality traits together accounted for 17% of the variance on life satisfaction, 37% of positive affect and 52% of negative affect, whereas the inclusion of social desirability into analysis increased prediction for additional 1% of variance on absence of negative affect only. Therefore, social desirability does not enhance the predictive capacity over life satisfaction and positive affect, but together with personality traits, it accounts for 52% of variance on absence of negative affect.

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses of Personality and Social Desirability for Subjective Well-Being

Regression	Predictors	Life satisfaction	Positive affect	Negative affect
First	**1st step**	β	β	β
	Extraversion	.13[*]	.21[**]	.08
	Agreeableness	.03	-.03	.07
	Conscientiousness	.10[*]	.24[**]	.10[**]
	Emotional stability	.30[**]	.25[**]	.65[**]
	Intellect	.05	.26[**]	-.05
	R^2	**.17[**]**	**.37[**]**	**.51[**]**
	2nd step			
	Social desirability	-.03	.05	.13[**]
	ΔR^2	**.00**	**.00**	**.01[**]**
Second	**1st step**			
	Social desirability	.13[**]	.23[**]	.36[**]
	R^2	**.02[**]**	**.05[**]**	**.13[**]**
	2nd step			
	Extraversion	.13[*]	.21[**]	.08[*]
	Agreeableness	.04	-.04	.04
	Conscientiousness	.11[*]	.23[**]	.07
	Emotional stability	.30[**]	.24[**]	.62[**]
	Intellect	.04	.26[**]	-.04
	ΔR^2	**.15[**]**	**.32[**]**	**.39[**]**
Total	R^2	**.17**	**.37**	**.52**
	$F_{6,385}$	13.24[**]	38.26[**]	69.96[**]

[*]p < .05; [**]p < .01

However, in the second hierarchical regression analysis when two sets of variables were entered in reverse order as means to examine amount of variance explained independently by social desirability without effects of personality traits, and together with traits, social desirability was found to be significant independent predictor of all three dimensions of subjective well-being accounting for 2% of variance on life satisfaction, 5% of positive affect and 13% of absence of negative affect (see Table 3). In the second step of this analysis, after including personality traits in a regression, the equation resulted with decreased values of beta coefficients on social desirability below the level of significance except for the variance on absence of negative affect where social desirability showed significant prediction as found in the first hierarchical analysis. Personality traits accounted for additional 15% to 39%, and together with social desirability 17% to 52% of subjective well-being variance.

When entering personality traits to predict scores on each of subjective well-being measures, we found that scores on life satisfaction were predicted by greater

emotional stability, conscientiousness and extraversion, but not by agreeableness and intellect. Higher scores on positive affect were predicted with greater emotional stability, intellect, conscientiousness and extraversion but not with agreeableness. On the other hand, emotional stability and conscientiousness played a role in the prediction of absence of negative affect, but not extraversion and intellect and agreeableness.

Discussion

One of the aims of the present study was to investigate gender differences at the level of subjective well-being, which was assessed by measuring the cognitive and affective components – satisfaction with life, positive affect and absence of negative affect. Consistent with some previous findings, the results showed no gender differences in subjective well-being dimensions (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2000; Diener et al., 1997; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Pavot & Diener, 2004). In the light of the latest research on culturally affected relations between gender and subjective well-being (Tech-Romer, Motel-Klingebiel, & Tomasik, 2008), Croatia seems to be among the countries where gender inequalities are not pronounced, and consequently, do not produce different levels of subjective well-being in men and women. Previous studies of subjective well-being in the Croatian population samples reported such nonsignificant differences between men and women in overall life satisfaction (Brajković, 2010; Penezić, 2006; Penezić & Ivanov, 1999).

Another aim of this study was to examine relationships between subjective well-being dimensions, personality traits and social desirability. Results support previous findings that personality is an important correlate of subjective well-being (Chan & Joseph, 2000; Costa & McCrae, 1980; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Gutiérrez et al., 2005; Hayes & Joseph, 2003; McCrae, 2002; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Shultz, Schmidt, & Steel, 2006; Suh et al., 1996). Among different personality traits, emotional stability proved to be the best predictor of all three investigated dimensions of subjective well-being. Vitterso (2001) reported emotional stability to be the cardinal well-being trait even beyond today's dominance of extraversion. In our study emotional stability was the best predictor of absence of negative affect, while extraversion was found to predict positive affect and life satisfaction, but not negative affect. Diener et al. (1997) suggest that extraverts experience more positive affects, but not negative affects, and that neurotics have higher levels of negative affects, but less predictive level of positive ones. Shultz et al. (2006) explained the association of emotional stability (in terms of neuroticism) with subjective well-being by neurotic's behavior (feeling anxious, moody, depressed, upset) that results with dissatisfaction. According to this, neurotics position themselves into life situations that stimulate negative affects and consequently experience more negative affects in life. In contrast, the authors

explained relationship between extraversion and subjective well-being with more frequent social activities and their enjoyment in those activities which results with extraverts experiencing greater level of positive affects. Our results confirmed the previous research conducted in Croatia (Bratko & Sabol, 2006) where personality and basic psychological needs as the predictors of life satisfaction showed that extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness are significant predictors of life satisfaction.

In this study, conscientiousness was also found to be a relatively good predictor of all dimensions of subjective well-being, especially of positive affect. Furthermore, conscientiousness was a better predictor of subjective well-being than extraversion, which is in line with the findings of Hayes and Joseph (2003). DeNeve and Cooper (1998) concluded that the importance of extraversion as a predictor of subjective well-being had been overstated. Within this set of predictors, agreeableness revealed no significant predictive validity for subjective well-being. Diener et al. (1997) suggested that explanation of links between conscientiousness, agreeableness and subjective well-being lies in environmental rewards. According to these authors, agreeable and conscientious people are more likely to receive reinforcements from others and consequently may experience higher levels of subjective well-being. In that case, these personality traits can influence subjective well-being in indirect way through rewards or achievements. The fifth Big-Five trait, intellect, was found to be a significant predictor of positive affect only, as also confirmed by Gutiérrez et al. (2005). It is possible that people high on intellect, resolve problems in a more creative and original way and therefore receive positive feedback from their environment. Consequently, they may experience greater positive affects, compared to people low on intellect.

Regression analyses in this study revealed that personality (the Big Five dimensions) accounts for between 17% and 52% of subjective well-being variance which is larger than the results from other studies (30% - Chan & Joseph, 2000; 18% to 22% - Gutiérrez et al., 2005; 15% to 33% - Schmutte & Ryff, 1997). When social desirability is taken into account as an independent predictor (entered as first step into regression), it explains from 2% to 13% of subjective well-being variance. On the other hand, social desirability in combination with personality traits showed weaker prediction of subjective well-being except for additional 1% of variance on its affective component, absence of negative affect. In other words, social desirability alone is stronger predictor of subjective well-being than when taken together with personality traits, when fosters prediction of only absence of negative affect with just additional 1% of explained variance. These results show the complexity of associations between subjective well-being, personality traits and social desirability and indicate the possibility that social desirability is linked to subjective well-being through personality traits. Because of interrelationships between personality and need for approval, individuals will attribute only absence of negative affect as their own socially desirable characteristic. Sandvik, Diener and

Seidlitz (1993) suggested that tendency of socially desirable responding is linked to powerful social norms in evaluation of happiness. The statement that somebody is happy carries out the meaning of success in society, but when individual admits his unhappiness and unrealized and unaccomplished goals and dreams, this confession is usually linked to unsuccessful life. Hence, it is not surprising that social desirability is expected in situations of distress and unhappiness or negative affects. Diener, Sandvick, Pavot, and Gallager (1991) suggested that social desirability represents a certain personality characteristic, which enhances subjective well-being, rather than response artifact and source of error variance. If we look at social desirability from a personality characteristic perspective, then it could be concluded that social desirability does not block or obstruct understanding of association between personality and subjective well-being but lightens it more clearly.

The nature of this research does not enable conclusions on causal relations between examined variables. Correlation analyses and self-report measures also have inherent limitations. A possible limitation of this study might be a lack of generalization due to inclusion of students as participants in this study. However, we considered that the choice of the sample is unlikely to affect the outcome of the study. Until we unpack what lies behind some of the responses in relationship between personality traits, social desirability and subjective well-being by examining answer to more specific questions, the substantive meaning of results in this exploratory paper must remain conjectural. The biggest challenge however is not that of data or even measurement but of generating a theoretical framework that explains why and how personality and social desirability affect subjective well-being by organizing studies longitudinal in nature in order to get more realistic image of individual's subjective well-being in everyday life. Furthermore, the research highlights the need for further methodologically more elaborate studies. In that respect, this study can be perceived as a starting point for further research that should include a more heterogeneous sample of participants and enhanced methodology.

In conclusion, the present results support the view that personality is very important in exploring and predicting subjective well-being. Among the various personality traits, emotional stability proved to be the most important predictor of both, cognitive and affective measures of subjective well-being. In addition, social desirability appears to be a variable that together with personality traits provides additional explanation of subjective well-being.

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Osobine ličnost i socijalna poželjnost kao prediktori subjektivne dobrobiti

Sažetak

Cilj je ovoga istraživanja bio ispitati odnos između osobina ličnosti, socijalne poželjnosti i subjektivne dobrobiti. Ukupno je 392 studenta (195 žena i 197 muškaraca) u dobi od 19 do 26 godina (M=20.25, SD=1.46) ispunilo Skalu zadovoljstva životom, PANAS, Skalu socijalne poželjnosti Marlowe–Crowne i mjere dimenzija ličnosti Big Five (IPIP50). Provedene su hijerarhijske regresijske analize na osobinama ličnosti i socijalnoj poželjnosti kao prediktorima i komponentama subjektivne dobrobiti (zadovoljstvo životom, pozitivan i negativan afekt) kao kriterijskim varijablama.

Rezultati su potvrdili ranije nalaze da osobine ličnosti, posebno ekstraverzija, emocionalna stabilnost i savjesnost, predstavljaju čvrste prediktore subjektivne dobrobiti. Za razliku od drugih studija, intelekt značajno predviđa pozitivan afekt, a ugodnost značajno dodatno predviđa izostanak negativnoga afekta. Kada se socijalna poželjnost u analizu uvodi neovisno, značajan je prediktor svih triju komponenata subjektivne dobrobiti. U kombinaciji s osobinama ličnosti socijalna poželjnost pokazuje povezanost samo s izostankom negativnoga afekta, što se može objasniti vezom između socijalne poželjnosti i osobina ličnosti. Ovi rezultati pokazuju da je povezanost socijalne poželjnosti, osobina ličnosti i subjektivne dobrobiti složenija nego što sugeriraju prethodne studije. Može se zaključiti da je socijalna poželjnost varijabla koja zajedno s osobinama ličnosti dodatno objašnjava subjektivnu dobrobit.

Ključne riječi: subjektivna dobrobit, zadovoljstvo životom, pozitivan i negativan afekt, model ličnosti Big Five, socijalna poželjnost