

Psych Labs Survey Project

Background Information on Personality and Gratitude as Predictors of Happiness

Why are some people happier than others? This Psych Labs Survey Project investigates whether happiness is related to specific personality traits and/or to a grateful attitude.

This document contains some background information about the project. To learn more about the “Big Five” personality traits, some predictors of happiness, and gratitude’s relationship to happiness, please read this excerpt:

- Bolt (2004) pages 117-137 about happiness, personality, and gratitude research

You may also wish to browse through these two sources:

- Weiss, Bates, and Luciano (2008) about genetic influences on personality and well-being
- “Big Five personality traits” (2012) containing Wikipedia’s background on the Big Five

One goal of this survey project is to help you visualize your own personality profile and to compare it to the average profile of a large number of college students. You can see that information in the “Star Graph” on your data sheet. A second goal is to test some hypotheses about the relationships among personality, happiness, and gratitude.

It appears that about 50 percent of the difference among people’s happiness ratings can be attributed to genetic factors. Weiss, Bates, & Luciano (2008) found that certain Big Five personality traits (which have a genetic basis) can predict happiness. They tested over 950 twins and found that happiness was related to high openness, high conscientiousness, high extraversion, high agreeableness, and low neuroticism (high emotional stability). Other research suggests that having a grateful attitude predicts happiness. According to Bolt (2004), American teens and adults reported that being grateful helped make them feel happy.

The two specific hypotheses that we tested in this survey project were

- H1: All of the Big Five personality traits are positively related to happiness (especially emotional stability, extraversion, and conscientiousness)
- H2: Gratitude is positively related to happiness

Why are these hypotheses reasonable? When you read the other background materials (especially Bolt, 2004, pp. 133-134) be sure to look specifically for the rationale behind these predictions.

Some Methodological Details

Our survey used standard measures of the Big Five, happiness (life satisfaction), and gratitude. We assessed the **Big Five personality traits** with Donahue & Kentle’s (1991) scale. Below are 4 of the 11 items for each trait. High scores reflect high extraversion, high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, high emotional stability (low neuroticism), and high openness.

Big Five Traits and Some Representative Survey Items

Note: R = Reverse-Scored Item because trait is stated negatively

Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Emotional Stability (Neuroticism)	Openness
Is talkative	Tends to find fault with others R	Does a thorough job	Is depressed, blue R	Has a wide range of interests
Seeks adventure and excitement	Can be cold and aloof R	Does things efficiently	Can be moody R	Values artistic, aesthetic experiences
Has an assertive personality	Is considerate and kind to everyone	Makes plans and follows through	Remains calm in tense situations	Has an active imagination
Is outgoing, sociable	Likes to cooperate with others	Is easily distracted R	Gets nervous easily R	Is inventive

We measured **happiness** with Diener’s 5-item Satisfaction with Life scale (see Bolt, 2004, p. 118), containing items such as such as *I am satisfied with my life* (high numbers mean agreement). Finally, we measured degree of **gratitude** with six items (see Bolt, 2004, p. 133) such as *I have so much to be thankful for*.

A Tricky Issue: Correlation and Causation

Remember that a significant correlation can be explained in three possible ways:

- Variable A is the cause and Variable B is the effect
- Variable B is the cause and Variable A is the effect
- Neither Variable A nor Variable B influences the other. Rather, both are causally controlled by *some other variable* or set of variables.

For example, we know that the monthly rate of violent crimes is positively correlated with ice cream sales. Does ice cream make a person violent? Does committing a violent crime make one desire ice cream? It is more likely that both are influenced by temperature. People eat more ice cream and commit more violent crimes on hot summer days than on frigid winter days. With this in mind, be careful about drawing causal conclusions from this project. If you do draw them, recognize that you are *suggesting the possibility of a cause-effect relationship* rather than *claiming that causality has been clearly established* by the research procedures.

References

- Big Five personality traits. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits
- Bolt, M. (2004). *Pursuing human strengths: A positive psychology guide*. New York: Worth Publishers.
- Donahue, J. & Kentle, R. (1991). *The “Big Five” inventory—Versions 4 and 54 (Tech. Report)*. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Personality Assessment and Research.
- Weiss, A., Bates, T. C., & Luciano, M. (2008). Happiness is a personal(ity) thing: The genetics of personality and well-being in a representative sample. *Psychological Science, 19*, 205-210.

Acknowledgment: We wish to thank Dr. Mary Inman, Hope College, who authored the original draft of this document.