CHAPTER 13

SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AND PERSONALITY

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Introducing

La Rochefoucauld argued that personality is an important cause of happiness and unhappiness. Modern researchers find, however, that he was incorrect in underestimating the size of this influence. It appears that happiness, the experience of unpleasant emotions, and life satisfaction often depend more on temperament than on one's life circumstances. Indeed, it is now reasonable to hypothesize that personality is a major determinant of long-term, subjective well-being. Walter Mischel (1968) argued in a well-known book, *Personality and Assessment*, that dispositions are weak determinants of behavior, and that situations are much stronger predictors of overt responses. In the realm of subjective well-being, Mischel's argument is turned on its head—it appears that situations are weak predictors, and personality is a strong correlate, of long-term subjective well-being.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is the psychological term for what in popular parlance is referred to as “happiness.” *Subjective well-being* is preferred to *happiness* because the latter term has many different meanings. Subjective well-being refers to people's evaluations

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of their lives—including cognitive judgments, such as life satisfaction; and affective evaluations (moods and emotions), such as positive and negative emotional feelings. When a person reports that her life is satisfying, that she is frequently experiencing pleasant affect and infrequently experiencing unpleasant affect, that person is said to have high subjective well-being. Both her cognitive and affective systems react favorably to what is happening in her life. She likes the life she is leading—it is desirable from her point of view.

In the past two decades, as psychology moved beyond the bounds of radical behaviorism, scientists have shown increasing interest in SWB. Their interest is not surprising because happiness and life satisfaction are major goals of most people. It seems desirable, therefore, that psychologists study this ubiquitous concern. Furthermore, as the nations of the world move into an era of postmaterialism in which sheer physical survival is no longer the major care, SWB is likely to become a central goal of societies throughout the world. Thus, policymakers will become increasingly interested in the factors that increase subjective well-being. In studying SWB, scientists hope to further our understanding of the age-old questions of what composes the “good life” and the “good society.”

Subjective well-being has several major divisions, including global life satisfaction; contentment with particular life domains, such as one’s marriage and work; the presence of frequent positive affect (pleasant moods and emotions); and a relative absence of negative affect (unpleasant moods and emotions). Although there is some tendency for these components to occur within the same individuals to form a broad factor of SWB, they sometimes diverge. Therefore, it is necessary to separately study each of them. A researcher, for example, can examine people’s hedonic balance (positive emotions minus negative emotions), but can gain a complete picture of affective well-being only if he or she separately measures positive and negative affect. In fact, a major finding in this field is that pleasant and unpleasant emotions form separable factors that have different correlates. There are individuals who are high on positive and negative affect, and there are also people who are low on both of them. Therefore, it does not make sense to think of people who experience lots of pleasant affect as opposites of people who experience frequent unpleasant affect. Figure 13.1 shows the relation between positive and negative affect, which are relatively independent—people’s scores on one tell us little about their scores on the other. Figure 13.1 uses names derived from the ancient Greeks for the four personality types that result from combinations of positive and negative affect: melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic and sanguine. A complete understanding of SWB can be obtained only if we understand both emotional dimensions. If we oversimplify and conceive of “happiness” (high positive affect) and “unhappiness” (high negative affect) as exact opposites, we ignore the phlegmatic and choleric types of persons. Although the sanguine and melancholic persons represent individuals in whom positive and negative affect do appear to be opposite, the phlegmatic is a person who has relatively little of each, and the choleric person is one who experiences a good deal of both types of emotion.

The major components of SWB can be broken down into even more specific elements. For example, positive affect can be divided into joy, contentment, affection, and pride; negative affect can be separated into anger, sadness, guilt, shame, anxiety, and so forth. These emotions can in turn be parsed even more finely. The level at which a researcher studies SWB will depend on the particular questions asked. Although some researchers advocate studying only the narrower units, one can further understanding by examining broader units as well, because some factors simultaneously influence many of the specific feelings. For