

Are Competitive And/or Contentious College Graduates More Satisfied With Life?

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Abstract

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and the Revised Competitiveness Index (RCI) (Houston, McIntire, & Francis, 2002) were administered to 166 women and 193 men (N = 359) who had graduated from a AACSB accredited college of business located at a medium size university in the United States of America. For the male participants, both contentiousness ($r = .11$) and competitiveness ($r = -.09$) had a nonsignificant correlation with life satisfaction. For the female participants, although contentiousness had a nonsignificant correlation with life satisfaction ($r = .11$), competitiveness correlated significantly with life satisfaction ($r = .24, p < .01$). In both samples, contentiousness correlated significantly with competitiveness.

Key Words: Competition, contentiousness, satisfaction with life, college graduates

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which being competitive and/or contentious affected the life satisfaction of college graduates. At present, little is known about how the life satisfaction of college graduates is influenced by personality dimensions other than the Big Five.

The theoretical framework of the study is stymied by the lack of prior research about the traits. Therefore, the research is inductive and exploratory in nature.

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent is life satisfaction affected by competitiveness and contentiousness among college graduates?
2. Are gender differences present in the aforementioned three variables and their relationships?

2. Review of the literature

2.1 Subjective well being

The construct subjective well being (SWB), which encompasses life satisfaction, has been described as "...people's evaluations of their lives..." (Diener & Chan, 2011, p. 1-2). SWB has been associated with a variety of positive criteria, such as longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011), physical and mental health, and stronger interpersonal relations. In summary, as noted by Busseri and Sadava (2011): "...a high level of SWB has been conceptualized as an indicator of optimal human functioning...and is considered an important personal and societal goal..." (p. 290).

In general, SWB has only weak correlations with demographic factors (Cotter & Fouad, 2011; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) but high correlations with personality factors of the five factors model such as emotional stability (Galinha, Oishi, Pereira, Wirtz, & Esteves, 2012; Steel et al., 2008) along with extraversion and conscientiousness (Albuquerque, de Lima, Matos, & Figueriedo, 2012; Zhai, Willis, O'Shea, Zhai, & Yang, 2012).

2.2 Satisfaction With Life

SWB is viewed as being composed of three dimensions: (1) habitual experiences of positive affect, (2) a relative lack of negative affect, and (3) satisfaction with life (SWL) (Busseri & Sadava, 2011; Zhang, Yang, & Wang, 2009). Of these, the third dimension has been defined as: "...life satisfaction....refers to the cognitive evaluation of one's happiness or subjective well-being and involves comparing the fulfillment of individual needs, goals, and aspirations to a meaningful standard" (Vemuri, Grove, Wilson, & Burch, 2011, p. 5). In effect, SWL is the cognitive aspect of SWB, while positive and negative affect compose the affective aspect (Fagley, 2012).

The SWL dimension has become a focus of the positive psychology research stream (Bhullar, Schutte, & Malouff, 2012). SWL has been found to be related to numerous criteria of interest to both social and organizational psychology. For social psychology, these criteria include relationships with others, income and health, while for organizational psychology criteria include job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, and job performance (Erdogan et al., 2011).

The personality of persons with higher SWL has been a research area with consistent results in terms of negative relationships with depression (Glaesmer, Grande, Braehler, & Roth, 2011), psychological distress (Bhullar et al., 2012), and neuroticism (Cotter & Fouad, 2011; Musek, 2007; Steel, Schmidt, & Schultz, 2008), but positive relationships with perceived social support (Glaesmer et al. 2011), agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion (Cotter & Fouad, 2011; Musek, 2007; Steel et al., 2008), positive affect (Oishi, Krochik, Roth, & Sherman, 2012), and appreciation (Fagley, 2012; Lai, Bond, & Hui, 2006).

2.3 Satisfaction with Life Scale

The study of SWL has been a burgeoning area of study since the publication of the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS was "...developed to assess satisfaction with one's life as a whole" (Wu & Yao, 2006, p. 1260). The popularity of this scale is due to factors such as its being domain free by assessing overall satisfaction with life, unidimensionality, and the SWLS has a brief format. The SWLS is the most commonly used measure of life satisfaction (Glaesmer, et al., 2011).

The SWLS itself has been extensively evaluated in diverse cultures and types of participants. Scores have been found to positively correlate with variables such as household income in both China and the USA (Zhang et al. 2009), self esteem (Lai et al. 2006), positive affect (Durak, Senoi-Durak, & Gencoz, 2010; Gouveia, Milfont, da Fonseca, de Miranda Coelho, & Jorge, 2009; Larson, Good, & Fair, 2010), job satisfaction (Erdogan, Bauer, Truxillo, & Mansfield, 2012), higher incomes (Vemuri, Grove, Wilson, & Burch, 2011), and grade point average and hardiness (Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Fazel, & Nephthys, 2011). Negative correlations of the SWLS include negative affect (Larson et. al, 2010; Zhang et al., 2009), psychological distress (Gouveia et al., 2009), and social cynicism and social complexity (Lai, Bond, & Hui, 2007). Gender differences are usually reported as nonsignificant (e.g. Glaesmer et al., 2011)

Across varied countries and types of participants, psychometric analyses have supported the single factorial structure and internal consistency of the SWLS (Abdel-Khalek, 2012; Gouveia et al., 2009; Durak et al., 2010). This structure has been found using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (Hultell & Gustavsson, 2008).

2.4 Competition

The study of competition as a psychological trait has been defined in this manner: "As an individual trait, competitiveness is defined as "the enjoyment of interpersonal competition and the desire to win and be better than others"...(Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008, p. 900). An alternative definition also noted the interpersonal emphasis: "Competition refers to social comparisons involving an unequal distribution of rewards or scarce resources deriving from the relative performance of the participants in an activity" (Mudrack et al 2012). The current study encompasses the interpersonal emphasis of both of these definitions.

The importance of research regarding dispositional competitiveness is the relation of the personality construct to variables such as affective organizational commitment and discretionary performance by salespeople (Lam, 2012). Although competitiveness has primarily been studied as a variable by itself rather than as part of a nomological network, the personality of employed adults who prefer competitive versus cooperative strategy has been found to be those with a high need for achievement, self-confidence and an internal locus of control, along with a negative correlation with belief in chance (Ward, 1995).

In contrast to the study of the Big Five factors in relation to SWB, the personality trait of competitiveness as a component of SWB has not been adequately studied, and what research that is available is conflicting. In a summary of previous research, "...competitive people appear to experience less happiness, subjective well-being, and satisfaction..." (de Vlier & Janssen, 2002, p. 321). However, relative to the current study, "Recent research suggests that goal strivings may be quite important to SWB..." (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998, p. 218). The goal striving approach can be described as "...acting dominant over people expresses a personality trait, whereas trying to dominate others expresses a goal striving..." (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998, p. 218).

Although little research regarding life satisfaction and having a predisposition to be competitive has been done, two studies were located. In a study that administered the SWLS as well as the Predisposition to Compete scale of Johnson and Norem-Hebeisen (1979) to 149 Chinese employees of whom 62% were college graduates, competitive predisposition was significantly correlated with life satisfaction, along with other constructs such as optimistic life orientation and commitment to performing good work. An offered explanation for the relationship of the SWLS scores and having a predisposition to compete was that being interpersonally competitive connects persons. In contrast, in a study of 174 male nurses, the SWLS had a negative correlation of $-.29$ with the "Success, Power, and Competition" subscale of Gender Role Conflict Scale (Rochlen et al., 2009).

Gender differences in research about competitiveness primarily have reported males as being more competitive, but other research has reported conflicting results. In general, men have been found to prefer to be in a competitive situation more so than women (Croson & Gneezy, 2009; Muller & Schwieren, 2012). Using a measure of trait competitiveness, Fletcher, Major, and Nusbaum (2007) evaluated 916 IT workers and reported: "Consistent with previous research, men are more competitive than women as a group" (p. 8). In contrast, Ward (1995) analyzed data from employed adults and concluded a significantly higher mean for females on the factor of motivation to use competitive strategies rather than cooperative strategies. A purpose of the current study is to address these conflicting results as to gender differences in regard to competitiveness and the relationship of competitiveness with SWL.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The sampling frame was the list of all graduates of the preceding 10 years of an AACSB accredited college of business at a medium size university located in the Midwest of the United States of America. The analysis of college graduates was done due to the concern with the use of student samples as noted in the editorial policy of journals such as the Journal of International Business Studies, which notes "Empirical submissions utilizing undergraduate student samples are usually discouraged" (Bello, Leung, Radebaugh, Tung, & Witteloosuijn, 2009, p. 361). The prevalence of the use of undergraduates as participants in psychological research has been noted in a review of 1,719 articles published in 6 journals, which concluded the 68.31% of the research used only undergraduates, often first year undergraduates (Wintre, North, & Sugar, 2001). This prevalence is in part due to the unavailability of practitioners, therefore laboratory research, experimental designs, and psychometric research often uses university undergraduates as surrogates for employed adults as "...such samples being convenient and readily accessible" (Bello et al., 2009, p. 361). Student samples are also low cost, and students may be more willing to expend time providing research data in a laboratory or survey data collection method.

However, significant differences exist between student and non-student samples in areas as diverse as prejudice research (Henry, 2008), generalized anxiety disorder (Nuevo, Ruiz, Izal, Montorio, Losada, & Marquez-Gonzalez, 2008) engagement (Wefeld & Downey, 2009), consumer research (James & Sonner, 2001), proactivity (Ward, Eagle, & Asquith, 2010), preference for cooperative or competitive strategy (Ward, 1993), and whether univariate or multivariate relationships are analyzed (Basil, Brown, & Bocarnea, 2002). Potential external validity concerns include students being a self-selected group and the potential for ignoring the effects of maturation and life experiences. Therefore, due to the differences between student and adult examples, only college graduates were participants in the current study.

Using a simple random selection procedure, 600 graduates were contacted via mail with a request to complete the two surveys. The sample consisted of 166 women and 193 men ($N = 359$) who had graduated from an AACSB accredited college of business located at a medium size university in the United States of America. The mean age was 38.10 ($SD = 5.74$) with a range of 29 to 62. Of the subjects, 79 had a master's degree or higher.

3.2 Instruments

The measure of competition used in this study was the Revised Competitiveness Index of Houston et al. (2002), which was developed "...to assess the desire to win in interpersonal situations" (p. 31). Using a sample of 213 undergraduates, Houston et al. via a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation of the data discerned a two factor solution within the 14 item survey. Nine of the items comprised a measure of "...enjoyment of competition", while the remaining five items were defined as a factor "...measuring participants' contentiousness" (p. 32). Additional psychometric evidence for the construct validity of the measure included significant correlations with similar measures of competition as well as with a measure of need for achievement. The factor structure was replicated with a second study of 280 undergraduates (Harris & Houston, 2010a).

In a study of salespersons, a competitive occupation, the RCI in a field study of employed adults "...explained significant observed variance in average monthly sales" among 30 insurance agents (Valenti, 2006). RCI scores have also correlated with dimensions of aggressive driving among undergraduates (Harris & Houston, 2010) as well as over narcissism (Luchner, Houston, Walker, & Houston, 2011). In summary, the RCI results indicate psychometric adequacy and construct validity in measuring competitiveness and contentiousness.

To measure satisfaction with life, the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, et al., 1985) was used due to evidence of its psychometric adequacy and its being the most used measure of SWL (Glaesmer, et al., 2011). The items of the two scales were presented with the SWLS items randomly interspersed among the RCI items. The combined items were distributed with the heading "Alumni Survey" rather than the names of the surveys or constructs being evaluated.

3.3 Statistical analysis

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 are similar to results from previous studies. In regard to reliability, for the SWLS the coefficient alpha measure of internal consistency across all subjects was .85. For the male participants, coefficient alpha = .81. For the female participants, coefficient alpha = .85. The competitiveness items of the RCI resulted in a coefficient alpha of .81 for women and .79 for men. For contentiousness, the scale items resulted in a coefficient alpha of .80 for men and women.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Lifesatisfaction	26.1836	5.296	365
Competition	47.8122	10.115	362
Contentious	20.5608	6.005	362

Factor Analyses: The SWLS scale exploratory factor analysis resulted in the expected one factor. This replicates the results of Gouveia et al. (2009), in which the single factor accounted for 52% to 68% of the total variance across five groups, as well as the single factor results across three groups of Durak et al. (2010). The results of the exploratory factor analysis of the RCI items using oblimin rotation explained 65.85 percent of the variance. Due to the correlation of the factors ($r = .33$), the pattern matrix was analyzed. As expected from prior exploratory factor analysis of Houston et al. (2002), the result was a two factor solution of nine items loading on an "Enjoyment of Competition" factor with the remaining five items loading on a "Conscientiousness" factor.

Correlations: As detailed in Table 2, for the male participants, both contentiousness ($r = .11$) and competitiveness ($r = -.09$) had a nonsignificant correlation with life satisfaction. However, contentiousness correlated significantly with competitiveness ($r = .35, p < .01$). For the female participants, although contentiousness had a nonsignificant correlation with life satisfaction ($r = .11$), competitiveness correlated significantly with life satisfaction ($r = .24, p < .01$). Contentiousness correlated significantly with competitiveness ($r = .43, p < .01$).

Table 2

Correlations				
		Lifesatis	Competition	Contentious
Lifesatis	Pearson Correlation	1	.140**	-.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008	.761
	N	365	362	362
Competition	Pearson Correlation	.140**	1	.404**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008		.000
	N	362	362	359
Contentious	Pearson Correlation	-.016	.404**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.761	.000	
	N	362	359	362

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Using gender as the explanatory variable, an ANOVA analysis of the SWLS revealed as expected no significant difference ($F(1, 358) = .751, p = .387$). For the dimensions of the RCI, contentiousness indicated a significant difference with a male mean of 21.36 versus the female mean of 19.68 ($F = 7.19, p = .008$) as did competition ($F = 57.61, p = .000$) with a male mean of 51.22 and a female mean of 43.64.

4.0 Discussion

The most important finding in this study is the indication that gender differences exist in the relationship of competitiveness with life satisfaction. As this inductive study is exploratory and descriptive, a theoretical basis for the finding is not available. However, a logical explanation is that since all of the participants had graduated from a college of business, competitiveness was seen as a favorable aspect of one's personality. What is difficult to discern is why both genders were not affected in a similar manner. Unfortunately, due to the cross sectional data collection, it is not known if the differences existed prior to entering a college of business, or if the educational experiences affected the constructs.

An argument can be made that preference to win in interpersonal situations as measured by the RCI is an external aspiration as the term is used in self-determination theory. If that argument is accepted, the results contradict the tenet of self-determination theory which views external aspirations as being detrimental to psychological health (Romero, Gomez-Fraguela, & Villar, 2012).

4. Limitations and future research

As with other survey based research, this cross-sectional research does not track longitudinal changes. Future research is needed to determine if competitiveness preferences change across ages of the participants in a nonlinear manner as was found by Mayr, Wozniak, Davidson, Kuhns, & Harbaugh (2012).

The study needs to be replicated with college graduates from other than a business program, given that business students have different personalities and values than students in areas of study such as psychology (Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2012) or education (Vansteenkiste, Duriez, Simons, & Soenens, 2006). Another area for future research would be to discern if being hypercompetitive or having a personal development attitude toward competition would have differing results (Mudrack, Bloodgood, & Turnley, 2012). As life satisfaction has been found to be moderated by the human development index of a country (Li and Bond, 2010), it is noted that all of the participants were residents of the USA. It is also relevant to note that research has concluded that participants from the USA have significantly higher scores on the RCI than do participants from Bali (Houston, Edge, Anderson, Lesmana, & Suryani, 2012), therefore the current sample may have limited generalizability.

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