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# Personality Factors as Determinants of Psychological Well-Being among University Students

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sense of well-being is one of the most important goals which individuals strive for. It affects our perceptions of the external world such that we are able to view it with greater positivity and deal with day to day problems effectively. With an increasingly competitive existence, the pressures and challenges confronting the individual are extremely high, therefore it is difficult to maintain this sense of well-being at all stages of life. Adolescence and early adulthood are particularly demanding, because conflicts relating to quest for identity, concerns for academic success, career and uncertainty about the future all magnify the problems manifold. This is a phase in which several mental health disorders of adulthood appear and affect adjustment in society. Intellectual capacities increase and emotions intensify. The major tasks during this phase include establishing independence, realizing one's identity and capabilities and preparing for adult self reliance. Psychological well-being has been defined as a dynamic state characterized by a reasonable amount of harmony between an individual's abilities, needs and expectations, and environmental demands and opportunities (Levi, 1987). It is connotative as a harmonious satisfaction of one's desires and goals (Chekola, 1975). Since personality is a core factor which determines our reactions and adjustments, psychological-well-being during such a stressed phase as adolescence should be studied within its perspective. It is important that researches which identify factors which contribute to psychological well-being should continue to be conducted in different contexts and with better methodologies. The present research aims to study the personality factors as determinants of psychological well-being amongst university students. Appropriate analysis will be conducted to explore the topic further.

**Keywords:** Psychological Well-Being, Personality, University Students.

Well-being is one of the most important goals which individuals strive for. Well-being has been a pervasive and extensively researched construct in psychology for the last 40 years. Throughout history, theorists have been curious about what contributes to well-being.

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Well-being is one of the most important goals which individuals strive for. Although the concept of well-being is important in all stages of life, it is most important in young adults, a category to which university students belong. University students face demands of academic challenges, financial pressures, the need for career decisions, which act as stressors that have the potential for creating significant psychological distress (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1979). In fact, the university population has been portrayed as a high risk group for the development of psychological difficulties. Epidemiological studies conducted on college campuses indicate that between 7-16% of students are handicapped by psychological adjustment problems (Reifler & Liptzin, 1969, Segal, 1966). Therefore, it is necessary to focus on psychological well-being of this sample.

University students are passing through a transitional stage of physical and mental development that occurs between childhood and adulthood in adolescence. This transition involves biological, social as well as psychological changes. Cognitive, emotional and attitudinal changes which are characteristic of adolescence often take place during this period and this can be a cause of conflict on the one hand and positive personality development on the other. In search for a unique social identity for themselves, adolescents are confused about what is right and what is wrong. Erikson has labeled this stage as the 'identity crisis' stage. G. Stanley Hall has denoted this period as one of "storm and stress" and according to him, conflict at this developmental stage is normal and not unusual. A myriad of physiological changes, the quest of self and identity, the uncertainties and razor edge competition associated with his future all combine to create immense problems for adolescents. Another major challenges faced by adolescents today is the extreme consciousness with physical appearance. A lot of adolescents are seen investing a lot of time and money into their physical appearance in order to look and portray a certain image as is promoted by media and society. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the psychological well-being of university students.

Psychological well-being is a term which has different meanings to different people. Well-being has been defined as a dynamic state characterized by a reasonable amount of harmony between an individual's abilities, needs and expectations, and environmental demands and opportunities (Levi, 1987). In their systematic review of the definitions, Pollard and Lee (2003) describe well-being as a "complex, multi faceted construct that has continued to elude the researchers' attempt to define and measure it." Broadly, well-being has been defined from two perspectives. The clinical perspective has generally operationalized well-being as the absence of negative conditions such as depression, distress or anxiety whereas the psychological perspective defines well-being as the prevalence of positive self attributes (Keyes, 1998; Ryff and Singer, 1996). It is a person's evaluative reactions to his or her life – either in terms of life satisfaction, 'cognitive evaluations' or affect 'ongoing emotional reactions' (Diener and Diener, 1995). In general terms, it can be defined as the subjective feeling of contentment, happiness, satisfaction with life's experiences and of one's role in the world of work, sense of achievement, utility, belongingness

and no distress, dissatisfaction or worry etc. It emphasizes positive characteristics of growth and development.

Ryff,( 1989b, 1995) gave a multidimensional model of well-being which included six distinct components of positive psychological functioning. In combination these dimensions encompass a breadth of wellness that includes positive evaluations of oneself and one's past life despite the awareness of their limitations (Self-Acceptance), a sense of continued growth and development as a person (Personal Growth), the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful (Purpose in Life), the possession of quality relations with others (Positive Relations with others), the capacity to manage effectively one's life and surrounding world (Environmental Mastery), and a sense of self-determination (Autonomy). Each dimension of Ryff's psychological well-being model reflects different challenges that individuals face in their lives. The components conceptualized by Ryff are -

- 1. Autonomy: Autonomy is characterized by an individual's self determination and his independence in making his own decisions. It also refers to self evaluation by personal standards and regulating behaviour from within.
- 2. Environmental mastery: This places emphasis on creating a surrounding context that suits one's personal needs and capacities. It also involves managing the environment by controlling complex situations and making effective use of opportunities.
- 3. Personal growth: This dimension is characterized by a feeling of continued development of an individual's potential and viewing one's self as growing and open to new experiences. It is basically concerned with self realization of an individual.
- 4. Positive relations with others: This dimension emphasizes having warm and trusting relationships with others, having feelings of empathy, affection and intimacy towards others.
- 5. Purpose in life: Creating meaning and direction in life is central to this dimension. Having goals in one's life and a sense of directedness makes life more meaningful and gives it a purpose.
- 6. Self acceptance: It is a kind of self evaluation that involves awareness and acceptance of both personal strengths and weaknesses.

Psychological well-being may be defined as one's emotional and cognitive evaluations of his or her own life (Diener, Oishi& Lucas, 2003). These evaluations include one's moods, emotional reactions to events and judgements about life satisfaction. Psychological well-being is the outcome of experiences and interactions relating to various aspects of our being. It is influenced by life events, personality characteristics (Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003), personal goals, perceived social support, the type of attributions one makes, etc.

The personality of the individual is crucial in this regard. Personality refers to the enduring styles of thinking and behaving when interacting with the world. It relates to unique and relatively

stable qualities that characterize behaviour and thought. Since personality is a core factor which determines our reactions and adjustments, psychological-well-being during such a stressed phase as adolescence should be studied within its perspective.

The most distinctive feature of any individual is his personality. Personality refers to unique and relatively stable qualities that characterize an individual's behaviour across different situations over a period of time. It is an important aspect of human behaviour, so much so that the study of human behaviour is incomplete without the study of personality.

Allport (1937, 1963) defined it as "the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychological systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment." Guilford (1959) defined personality as a person's unique pattern of traits. Personality is the most adequate conceptualizations of a person's behaviour in all its detail (Mc Clelland, 1951). Eysenck (1952) further elaborated the definition given by Allport by explaining the 'psychological systems' and defining personality as "more or less a stable and enduring organization of the person's character, temperament, intellect, physique which determines his unique adjustment to the environment."

Personality determines our reactions to the environment. It has consistently been found to be a strong predictor of well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith, 1999). The Dynamic Equilibrium model (Headey and Wearing, 1992) asserts that individuals have a distinct average amount of well-being that is determined by his personality. According to them, people with extraverted personalities, for example, are more likely to experience certain events as compared to those who are most introverted. These events, in turn, affect one's baseline level of psychological wellbeing. While unusual events may shift an individual above or below his level, the Dynamic Equilibrium Model suggests that the individual will return to their baseline level as the circumstances normalize (Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003).

Diener and Seligman (2002) studied 222 college students; some identified as happy, others as unhappy. They found clear difference between the two groups. The happier students were more extraverted and agreeable, less neurotic, and more social than where unhappier students. The happy personalities reported having strong, positive relationships with friends and family. They were highly satisfied with their lives, recalled many more good events than bad ones, and experienced more positive emotions daily than negative ones.

Over three or four decades of research, extensive analysis of the adjectives used to describe personality and then factor analyzing hundreds of personality measures had been done to find the basic, underlying factors of personality by different researchers. The findings resulted in five traits. These Big Five traits are also referred to as the 'Five Factor Model' (Costa and Mc Crae,

1992) and as the Global Factors of personality (Russell and Karol, 1994). The Big Five Factors are Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (OCEAN).

- 1. Openness: is a general appreciation for art, adventure, unusual ideas, and imagination. People who are open to experience are intellectually curious, appreciative of art, witty and sensitive to beauty. People with low scores on openness tend to have more conventional, traditional interests.
- 2. Conscientiousness: is a tendency to show self discipline, act dutifully and aim for achievement. It includes the factor known as Need for Achievement. People high on this trait are generally achievement oriented, organised, responsible and dependable. On the negative side, they can be perfectionists or workaholic.
- 3. Extraversion: is characterized by positive emotions and the tendency to seek the company of others. Extroverts enjoy being with people and are energetic, dominant, assertive, outgoing, talking, fun-loving. Introverts, on the other hand, are quiet, less involved in external world and prefer to be alone.
- 4. Agreeableness: is a tendency to be compassionate and cooperative. Individuals high on this trait are considerate, friendly, generous, helpful, trustworthy, caring, warm and willing to compromise their interests with others. They hold an optimistic view of human nature. People who score low are suspicious, unfriendly, and uncooperative and place self interest above getting along with others.
- 5. Neuroticism: is the tendency to experience negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, fear etc. Those who score high on neuroticism are vulnerable to stress, more likely to interpret ordinary situations as threatening, emotionally unstable, anxious, worried, distressed, irritable and hypertensive. On the other hand, individuals who score low are emotionally stable, calm and free from persistent negative feelings.

This model is an important development in personality. It has been found useful in understanding the profile across cultures. Cross cultural research further confirms the utility of five dimensions in populations of old and young, educated and uneducated (Mc Crae and John, 1992).

Thus, it is of vital importance to study which personality factor contributes to the experience of well-being among university students. On the basis of the foregoing discussion, the following hypotheses have been propounded:

- 1. Personality factors (viz. Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) do not predict the experience of psychological well-being among university students.
- 2. Psychological well-being amongst females is not predicted by different factors as compared to psychological well-being amongst males.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The major objective is to study how personality factors predict the experience of psychological well-being amongst university students.

## Design

For prediction of well-being, correlational design was used by the researcher.

### Sample

The sample comprised of 312 university students taken from the different departments of Aligarh Muslim University. 154 were undergraduates and 158 were post graduates. The age group of the students was 18 - 25.

Subjects		Those belonging to joint family	Those belonging to nuclear family	Total
Males (N = 157)	Undergraduates	29	46	75
	Post graduates	43	39	82
Females(N = 155)	Undergraduates 22		57	79
	Postgraduates	17	59	76
Total (N = 312)	Undergraduates	51	103	312
	Postgraduates	60	98	312

Although strict random sampling is almost impossible in social science research because often individuals who should be in the sample do not consent to participate or withdraw in the midst of the research, an attempt was made to draw out the sample through random procedures. Many subjects did not consent or were not available therefore they had to be excluded. All precautions to ensure that sample was drawn objectively and systematically were taken.

## Tools of the Study

The following measures were used for collecting information regarding the subject's experience of psychological well-being and their personality factors.

1. Psychological Well-Being Scale constructed by Carol Ryff (1989a) has been used to assess the experience of psychological well-being. Six dimensions of psychological well-being have been conceptualised by Ryff. She suggested a multidimensional model of psychological well-being that comprised six distinct dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life and self acceptance (Ryff, 1989a; Ryff, 1989b). The scale has 84 items with 12 items in each dimension. The response categories for each item are on a six point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. All the responses are added to get the score on psychological well-being. Responses to negatively scored items are reversed in the scoring procedure. High scores indicate high self ratings on psychological well-being and the dimension assessed.

Ryff Psychological Well-being Scale was originally validated on a sample of 321 well educated, socially-connected, financially-comfortable and physically healthy men and women (Ryff, 1989b). In this study, a 20 item scale was used for each of the six constructs, with approximately equal numbers of positively and negatively worded items. The internal consistency coefficients were quite high (between 0.86 and 0.93) and test-retest reliability coefficients for a subsample of the participants over a six week period were also high (0.81 -0.88).

2. Personality Inventory (NEO - FFI) by Paul T. Costa and Robert Mc Crae (1992) was used to assess personality factors. The NEO – FFI is a short form of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory. This personality inventory assesses five dimensions of personality namely Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. This inventory is based on the five factor model of personality. The Inventory consists of 60 items with 12 items assessing each personality factor. The items are rated on a five point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Responses are added on each dimension to get the total score on each personality factor. Costa and Mc Crae (1992) report that the NEO FFI scales are highly reliable and strongly correlated with the corresponding domain scales of the full NEO PI - R (convergent reliability ranged from 0.77 to 0.94 across various samples).

#### Procedure

Each subject was approached personally. After due establishment of rapport, subjects who were willing to participate were given the questionnaire. They were assured that their responses will be only used for research purposes. Subjects were instructed by the researcher to give honest responses. Subjects were instructed to read each item carefully and tick mark the response that best represented their opinion about themselves and their life. Data was analyzed using SPSS software.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was tabulated group wise and subjected to Regression analysis. The result of the Regression has been reported in Table (1).

Table (1) Regression Analysis in the total sample (N = 312) (Criterion variable-psychological well-being)

Serial number	Predictors	R	R square	Beta	t	Sig.
1	Neuroticism			312	-6.223	.000
2	Extraversion			.121	2.297	.022
3	Openness	0.552	0.294	.152	3.170	.002
4	Agreeableness			.089	1.848	.066
5	Conscientiousness			.234	4.349	.000

p<0.01\*\*, p<0.05\*

It can be observed from the above table (1) that R Square value is 0.294. Thus, the personality dimensions (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness) account for 29.4% of the total variance in psychological well-being. The correlation of the criterion variables with the predictor variables taken together is 0.552 which is significant (F (5/306) = 26.86, p<0.05\*). Four out of five personality variables was found to influence total well-being. They were Neuroticism which predicted psychological well-being in a negative direction ( $\beta$ = 0.312, p<0.01), Extraversion ( $\beta$ = 0.121, p<0.05), Openness ( $\beta$ = 0.152, p<0.01) and Conscientiousness ( $\beta$ = 0.234, p<0.01) both of which predicted psychological well-being in the positive direction. *Thus, hypothesis 1 has partly been rejected.* 

Neuroticism emerged as the most significant predictor of psychological well-being, having negative predictive relationship with well-being i.e. as the level of neuroticism increased in the students, their sense of well-being decreased. The same result was found in a number of studies carried out by different researchers who found role of neuroticism important in the well-being of an individual. Diener and Seligman (2002), Libran and Howard (2006) and Singh (2009)]. All these studies were conducted on student populations.

Another personality factor which emerged as a significant predictor of psychological well-being was conscientiousness. Our results support evidence obtained from studies conducted by Halama (2005), Ruiz (2005) and Singh (2009) Conscientiousness refers to being achievement oriented, organized, and self disciplined and dependable. Amongst students, these are qualities which are important for behaviours which contribute towards successful performance of their tasks and duties on time, resulting in less pressure on them, thus enhancing their well-being. These characteristics represent qualities absolutely essential for effective handling of their concerns and aspirations. The university environment is to a great extent free from extra-academic considerations, therefore, conscientiousness is predictive of success and consequently of psychological well-being.

Openness also emerged as a significant predictor of psychological well-being in our study. Our results are similar to those obtained in studies conducted by Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff (2002) and Gutierrez et al. (2005). Those high on openness are curious people who are open to new experiences, appreciate new ideas and are more adaptive in new situations. Since new challenges and situations are constantly occurring, individuals possessing openness are more likely to experience psychological well-being.

Extraversion also emerged as a significant factor. Extraversion came out to be a significant predictor in a large number of studies conducted on both student and non-student populations Hussain and Kumari, 1995; Ruiz, 2005; and Lynn and Steel, 2006. Individuals high on extraversion are sociable, outgoing, fun-loving and seek the company of others. This trait is important to build relations with others. Young adults at this stage interact with their friends and

have strong and close relationships with their friends and family thus affecting their psychological well-being.

To observe whether gender had an influence on the prediction of well-being in terms of the factors under study, regression analysis was conducted on the sample of boys and girls separately Table 2(a) and Table 2 (b) gives a picture of the above comparison

Table 2 (a) Regression analysis in male sample (N = 158) (Criterion variable – psychological well-being)

Serial number	Predictors	R	R square	Beta	t	Sig.
1	Neuroticism			418	-6.211	.000
2	Extraversion			.140	1.960	.052
3	Openness	0.604	0.344	.039	.590	.556
4	Agreeableness			.007	.112	.911
5	Conscientiousness			.260	3.612	.000

It can be observed from the above table 2 (a) that R Square value is 0.344. Thus, the personality dimensions (neuroticism and conscientiousness) account for 34.4% of the total variance in psychological well-being. The correlation of the criterion variables with the predictor variables taken together is 0.604 which is significant (F (5/151) = 17.345, p<0.01\*). Two personality variables were found to influence well-being in the male sample. They were Neuroticism which predicted psychological well-being in a negative direction ( $\beta$ = -0.418, p<0.01), and Conscientiousness ( $\beta$ = 0.260, p<0.01) which predicted psychological well-being in the positive direction.

Table 2(b) Regression analysis in female sample (N = 154) (Criterion variable – Psychological well-being)

Serial number	Predictors	R	R square	Beta	t	Sig.
1	Neuroticism			291	-4.003	.000
2	Extraversion			.142	1.899	.060
3	Openness	0.571	0.303	.246	3.635	.000
4	Agreeableness			.069	.998	.320
5	Conscientiousness			.201	2.592	.011

It can be observed from the above table 2 (b) that R Square value is 0.571. Thus, the personality dimensions (neuroticism, openness, and conscientiousness) account for 30.3% of the total variance in psychological well-being. The correlation of the criterion variables with the predictor variables taken together is 0.571 which is significant (F (5/149) = 14.38, p<0.01\*). Three personality variables were found to influence well-being in the female sample. They were Neuroticism which predicted psychological well-being in a negative direction ( $\beta$ = -0.291,

p<0.01), Openness ( $\beta = 0.246$ , p<0.01) and Conscientiousness ( $\beta = 0.201$ , p<0.05) which predicted psychological well-being in the positive direction.

From the above results, it can be seen that psychological well-being among males and females is predicted by different factors. Thus hypothesis 2 has been rejected.

Neuroticism and conscientiousness emerged as a common predictor of well-being in both males and females [Table 2 (a) and Table 2 (b)] i.e. as neuroticism increased, sense of well-being decreased in both males and females. Openness emerged as predictor of psychological wellbeing in females but not in males. Openness signifies individuals who are open to new ideas and adapt easily to new environments. In our society, females are expected to adjust in different environments. Their whole upbringing encourages flexibility, tolerance, and assimilation of diverse viewpoints. Thus, 'openness' is an important factor which is responsible for behaviours which contribute to well-being amongst females.

Amongst the factors brought out as significant predictors of well-being, neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness and extraversion are foremost. In other words, individuals who are not high on neuroticism, but are high on conscientiousness, openness and extraversion are likely to experience psychological well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

We may say the present research has brought out important information with regard to an important dimension of behaviour, namely, psychological well-being. This information if translated into intervention may prove useful in helping individuals to achieve the goal of wellbeing, so vital for positive mental health.

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