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A Multimodal Analysis of Personal Negativity

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This study examined how unhappiness and self-dissatisfaction are related to behavior, self-perception, social reputation, and the way one is treated by others. Varying in *personal negativity* (PN)—a composite of unhappiness, dissatisfaction with life, low self-esteem, and nonclinical depression—146 undergraduates (82 women and 64 men) engaged in 3 interactions. Participants' behavior and the behavior of their interaction partners was coded from videotapes. Personality ratings were obtained from participants and from 2 close acquaintances. PN was closely associated with maladaptive social interactions, negative behavioral responses by others, and a negative social reputation and self-image. Although women more clearly expressed PN behaviorally, men and women showed generally similar patterns of correlates. These results suggest that even subclinical levels of unhappiness and self-dissatisfaction may have important consequences.

Low self-esteem, feelings that life is not satisfying or fulfilling, and general unhappiness may all be a far cry from full-blown clinical depression or anything like it (Coyne, 1994), but they can have negative implications for an individual's quality of life. Moreover, such feelings are far more common than diagnosable clinical depression, a serious and debilitating disorder.

Traditionally, research on what has sometimes been called *depressive affect* (Lubin, Van Whitlock, Swearngin, & Seever, 1993; Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990), *depression* (Joiner & Metalsky, 1995; Nezlek, Imbrie, & Shean, 1994), or *dysphoria* (Rook, Pietromonaco, & Lewis, 1994; Tan & Stoppard, 1994) has been justified by arguments that unhappiness in the "normal," nonclinical range is located on the same conceptual continuum as bona fide depression. Therefore, it is claimed, the study of unhappy but nonclinically depressed college students can yield important insights into the mechanisms that underlie depression (Vredenburg, Flett, & Krames, 1993; Weary, Edwards, & Jacobson, 1995). Typically, researchers have administered self-report questionnaires such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelsohn, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) to a sample of college students and studied the differences between those who obtained relatively high and low scores, even when few, if any, respondents received scores above accepted benchmarks for severe depression.

Such research has been strongly and repeatedly attacked by writers who observe that clinical depression may be qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different from the kind of unhappiness found within samples of generally well-functioning college students (e.g., Coyne, 1994; Gotlib, 1984; Tennen, Hall, & Affleck, 1995a). One of the important considerations in this view is that although a robust 2:1 female-to-male difference is repeatedly found for clinical depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990), BDI scores among college students generally exhibit no sex difference at all (Coyne, 1994; Funabiki, Bologna, Pepping, & Fitzgerald, 1980; Hammen & Padesky, 1977; Oliver & Burkham, 1979). These criticisms imply that research on well-functioning college students—even those with relatively high BDI scores compared with their fellows—may tell us little, if anything, about clinical depression. Some writers have gone even further, claiming that distress among college students "is primarily mild and transient" (Coyne, 1994, p. 40), seeming to imply that it is therefore a relatively unimportant phenomenon.

Statements such as this are inarguably correct if based on a comparison with those unfortunate people who suffer debilitating clinical depression. Relative to this population, even very unhappy but functioning college students are at a desirable level of mental and emotional health. We suggest, however, that this fact should not be taken to imply that the unhappiness of people who fall short of long-term and complete debilitation is unimportant or unworthy of study. Even distress that is "mild and transient"—again, in comparison with that of clinical patients—may be a powerful negative influence on one's current and future quality of life. Therefore, in much that same way that psychology has recently turned well-deserved attention to the topic of happiness in the general population (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1996; Myers & Diener, 1995), so too should *unhappiness* in nonclinical samples—its manifestations, correlates, and consequences—be considered an important topic in its own right, regardless of whatever implications it may or (more likely) may not have for clinical depression.

The Present Study

The present study is an investigation of general unhappiness and self-dissatisfaction in a sample of nearly 150 college students, all of whom are reasonably well functioning and probably none of whom approach a diagnosis of clinical depression. The study will surround this negative psychological state with a wide

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variety of data to illustrate the dimensions along which such unhappiness is related to people's lives. We began by assembling a composite variable made of four widely used, differently labeled, but (as it turns out) almost interchangeable self-report measures of unhappiness and negative self-image, a variable we called *personal negativity.*

Next we examined this variable from several distinct angles. Participants interacted with a stranger of the opposite sex in three laboratory situations, and the behavior of each participant and his or her partner was videotaped and coded. This allowed us to explore how personally negative people act in an interpersonal context, and how others respond to them. Next we examined how these individuals were described by well-acquainted "informants" who had been their roommates at college or otherwise had a chance to come to know them well. Finally, we examined a rich portrait of the subjective life of these individuals by examining the ways in which they described themselves. The purpose of these analyses was to enhance our understanding of the network of relationships between unhappiness or personal negativity, behavior, how one is seen by others, and how one sees oneself.

Method

The present analyses are based on data gathered from a large sample of participants as part of the Riverside Accuracy Project (Funder, 1995). Previous articles have reported analyses of the bases of self-esteem (Blackman & Funder, 1996) and interjudge agreement about personality (Blackman & Funder, in press; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995). Results concerning the measure of personal negativity and its correlates have not previously been reported.

Participants

A total of 184 undergraduate participants were recruited by the Riverside Accuracy Project. There was an extensive variety of tasks across several sessions, and varying numbers of participants completed each of the experimental tasks, so the sample size varies depending on the particular data involved in a given analysis. These participants were all paid for their participation, as were the acquaintances whom they recruited to provide personality descriptions from a peer perspective. Parents of the participants were contacted by mail and requested to complete personality descriptions, and they received gift certificates to the campus bookstore.

Procedures and Measures

The data used in the present study come from several distinct sources (self-report, other-report, and behavioral observation) gathered over several sessions.

Personal negativity. Of specific interest for this study are four self-report inventories that assess constructs related to happiness and psychological well-being. These measures reflect both the positive and negative ends of psychological well-being and thus allow a comprehensive look at the participants' subjective sense of emotional distress.

The BDI (Beck et al., 1961) is the most widely used self-report measure of depressive affect and has been used to assess depressive symptomatology in an extensive variety of settings and participant samples (Gotlib & Cane, 1989). It includes 21 items in which participants are asked to choose among 4 or 5 alternative statements that express varying degrees of depressive affect. For example, alternatives for the first item are "I do not feel sad" (scored 0), "I feel blue or sad" (scored 1), "I am blue or sad all the time and I can't snap out of it" (scored 2), "I am so sad or unhappy that it is very painful" (also scored 2), and "I am so sad or unhappy that I can't stand it" (scored 3).

The Fordyce Happiness Measure (HM; Fordyce, 1977) is a widely used, brief measure of happiness and provides information about the intensity and frequency of happiness–unhappiness. Respondents provide an indication of their "average level of happiness" (scale range: 1–11) and report the percentages of time that they are happy, unhappy, and neutral. There are several ways to use the HM scores (Fordyce, 1988), and often the scale is left uncombined, with each of the four items being used independently.

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was designed to measure life satisfaction, which has been conceptualized as a cognitive evaluation of one's global quality of life. The SWLS includes five items judged on a 7-point scale for level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Thus, items such as "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" reflect the respondent's judgment of quality of life based on his or her own standard of what is important and desirable.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SE; Rosenberg, 1965) is the most widely used inventory of global self-esteem. Its 10 items are rated on a 4-point scale for level of agreement (1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree*) and present statements directly concerning feelings toward and evaluations of the self. For example, the SE includes items such as "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself," "At times I think I am no good at all" (reversed), and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." The SE is scored so that high scores reflect positive views of the self.

As is described below, these four measures all intercorrelated very highly, and so we combined them into a single composite that reflects a decidedly negative outlook on oneself and one's life.

Other self-report measures. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) provides an indication of the respondent's standing on positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA), the two primary dimensions of mood. PA refers to the experience of pleasurable mood states and energetic activity, whereas NA reflects more aversive emotional experiences, such as fear, sadness, guilt, and anger (Watson & Clark, 1995). Both the PA and the NA scales consist of 10 items, each of which is a single term describing an emotional state, such as *excited, proud,* and *enthusiastic* (on the PA scale) or *scared, distressed,* and *hostile* (on the NA scale). The 20 items were rated on a 5-point scale representing the extent to which the respondent has felt the way described by the item within the past few weeks (1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely*).

Finally, the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI; Costa & McCrae, 1985) was completed by the participants. The NEO-PI is a measure of the "five factors" of personality. The form of the NEO-PI used in this study contains 180 items that present a variety of statements about the self and are rated on a 5-point scale for the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees. Of particular interest for relationships with subjective distress is the Neuroticism factor, a large part of which is the experience of NA and psychological distress. Anxiety, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability are the six facets of the Neuroticism factor.

Behavioral data. In an effort to begin to capture the ways in which unhappiness and normal-range psychological distress are manifested in social interactions, we recorded on videotape target participants' behavior in three interpersonal situations. Each situation was approximately 5 min long and entailed interacting with a stranger of the opposite sex. In the first, unstructured interaction, participants were simply seated on a couch and encouraged to talk about whatever they would like. In the second, cooperative interaction, they were seated together at a table and given 5 min to build a Tinker Toy that matched a model; each received

$1 if they succeeded. In the third, competitive interaction, they played the popular sound-repetition game Simon®. The winner of three games out of five was paid $1.

These three interactions were designed to create three relatively commonly experienced varieties of interpersonal situations—unstructured, cooperative, and competitive—allowing different aspects of the participants' personality and interpersonal style to emerge. Opposite-sex partners were assigned to make the interaction potentially more engaging for the participants. Although these three interactions are obviously limited in the extent to which they represent interpersonal interaction in general, they nonetheless provide a range of different situations in which participants can express themselves, and certainly a greater range than seen in most laboratory research. They thus may afford unique insight into some of the ways in which unhappy, distressed people express themselves behaviorally and into some of the ways in which others react to them. This kind of behavioral data is valuable but only too infrequently available to and used by personality and social psychologists.

We coded the videotaped behaviors using a 64-item behavioral Q sort (BQ), based on and revised from a 62-item Q sort used in previous research (Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 1998). The BQ was designed to provide information about behavior at a level of analysis that is psychologically meaningful. It is aimed at a mid-range of generality: between the molecular level of frequency counts of specific micro-level acts (e.g., eyebrow lifts) and more molar, impressionistic levels of description (e.g., is successful). For example, the BQ rates participants' behaviors such as "acts irritated" or "expresses warmth." These ratings were provided by trained research assistants who sorted the 64 BQ items into a 9-step, forced-choice, approximately normal distribution ranging from *not at all descriptive of the target participant's behavior* (1) to *highly descriptive* (9). In this way, each behavioral item received a rating from 1 to 9 from each coder.

We averaged the ratings for each session across codings from four research assistants, each of whom viewed only a single interaction for each participant (but who coded many different participants). This procedure ensures that the description is based only on the behavior that was displayed in the interaction being coded. The average alpha reliability estimates for the four 64-item BQ profile ratings of each participant in each session are .81, .80, and .80 for the unstructured, the cooperative, and the competitive interactions, respectively. The 64 alpha reliability estimates of ratings for the BQ items calculated across the four coders within the first (unstructured) session ranged from .80 to .09, with a median of .55. Forty of the BQ items had within-session alpha reliability estimates above .50[1] These estimates were similar across the three sessions.

To obtain a more general assessment of the participants' characteristic behaviors, we summed the composite behavioral scores for each item across the three experimental sessions described above. Calculated across the three sessions, the aggregates for each of the 64 items yielded alpha reliability estimates that ranged from .76 to 0, with a median of .36. Twenty-two of the across-session reliabilities were above .50. The results to be reported do not vary appreciably if examined separately by session.

Global descriptions of personality—Other-report. To assess how the participants are seen in their social environment, each target participant was asked to nominate the two individuals on campus who knew him or her best and would be available to come to our laboratory. Participants tended to nominate acquaintances of their own sex. Eighty percent of the peers nominated by female participants were female, and 77% of those nominated by male participants were male. On average, the peers had known the participants they described for 20.8 months. Most of these peers described themselves as either "close friends/nonromantic" (67%) or "casual friends" (23%) of the target participants, as measured by the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). These peers were contacted and asked to come to the laboratory, where they were paid $5.00 to provide a description of the target participant's personality.

The peers completed personality descriptions using, among other instruments, the 100-item California Q-Sort (CQ; Block, 1978) and the NEO-PI, described above (a third-person form of the NEO-PI was used to obtain these other-reports of target's personality), two global measures of personality. The CQ, as adapted by Bem and Funder (1978), in its usual format is a set of 100 cards, each of which has printed on it a description of a characteristic of personality—for example, "is basically anxious," "is productive, gets things done." Respondents place these cards into a 9-step, symmetric, approximately normal, forced-choice distribution ranging from *not at all characteristic* (1) to *highly characteristic* (9) of the self. The CQ results in a set of 100 scores that yield a comprehensive summary of each rater's judgment of the target's personality.

In the aggregate, the CQ sorts and NEO-PI descriptions by peers reflect the way our participants are viewed by some of the important people in their social environment. The two raters' CQ sorts were averaged by item to obtain a composite peer CQ sort for each target participant for whom both ratings were actually obtained (70% of the sample). However, for targets for whom only one peer CQ sort rating was obtained, the CQ sort provided by that peer was used to indicate social reputation. A similar compositing procedure was used to obtain a "college acquaintance" NEO-PI composite description of the targets.

In addition to these personality descriptions given by participants' college acquaintances, NEO-PI descriptions of the targets were also provided by their parents on a mail-in basis. These ratings were combined in the same manner as the acquaintance NEO-PI composite to create parent NEO-PI composite descriptions of the targets. Both parents completed descriptions for 55% of the targets, and one parent provided personality descriptions for 19% of the participants.

Global descriptions of personality—self-report. In addition to examining the participants' level of unhappiness, their behavioral interactions, and their social reputations, we were also interested in their overall self-views. To provide comprehensive descriptions of the way in which they view themselves, target participants completed the CQ and the NEO-PI. As described above, the CQ results in 100 scores that capture a wide-ranging description of the target's personality, whereas the NEO-PI affords personality descriptions within the frame of the five-factor approach to personality.

Results

Data analyses examined personal negativity with respect to individuals' own social behavior, the social behavior of those with whom they interact, the way they are seen by others, and the way they view themselves. We examined each of these aspects of the inter- and intrapersonal manifestation of unhappiness with a separate series of analyses of the target participants' personal negativity scores. All analyses were initially performed separately for each sex, but in most cases the results were so similar for women and men that the sexes have been combined here for efficiency of presentation.[2] The patterns of behavioral correlates

[1] Items with low reliabilities (there were four with reliabilities below .30) generally referred to behaviors rarely exhibited in these situations (e.g., Item 39: "Expresses interest in fantasy or daydreams," reliability = .09). Some items tended to receive the same rating for all participants, severely restricting their range. Such items are retained in the BQ, however, to retain a flexibility of application across other situations in which different behaviors may be salient.

[2] Tables of results reported separately by sex are available on request.

were somewhat less similar across the sexes and so are reported below separately for women and men.

The means, standard deviations, ranges, and reliabilities of all inventories related to negative affect and psychological health or distress are presented in Table 1. These scores are similar to those obtained in other samples, and all reliabilities are at acceptable levels. The indicators from the Fordyce HM are single items; therefore no alpha reliabilities are reported for these measures.

Identifying Personal Negativity

The inventories specifically related to psychological distress were intercorrelated and investigated. We created a composite of three of the Fordyce HMs (description of average happiness, percentage of time happy, and percentage of time unhappy) and included it as one variable in the analysis (there was no sex difference on this HM composite). The NEO Neuroticism factor was not included because all of its subfacets were included, making the factor score itself somewhat redundant. These procedures resulted in the inclusion of 12 scales in this analysis—BDI, HM composite, SWLS, SE, PANAS-NA, PANAS-PA, NEO Anxiety, NEO Hostility, NEO Depression, NEO Self-Consciousness, NEO Impulsiveness, and NEO Vulnerability.

A visual inspection of the intercorrelation matrix of the 12 scales revealed that 4 measures were correlated with each other no less than $r = .61$: BDI, SWLS, HM composite, and SE (specifically, BDI–SWLS $r = -.63$, BDI–HM $r = -.70$, BDI–SE $r = -.71$, SWLS–HM $r = .67$, SWLS–SE $r = .63$, HM–SE $r = .61$). All other measures except NEO Impulsiveness were consistently correlated with these 4 scales and with each other, but none was able to match such a high level of intercorrelation.

To examine the intercorrelations further, we entered all 12 measures into a factor analysis. The positively directed measures (those for which high scores reflect happiness and positive emotionality) were reversed to facilitate comparison with the other variables. Measures were entered into a principal factor analysis using squared multiple correlations as communality estimates, resulting in two factors. We then used a varimax rotation to clarify the factor structures. The first factor comprised the HM composite, the SE, the BDI, the SWLS, and the PANAS-PA (in order of size of loading). The first four measures loaded on this factor above .72, but PA loaded substantially lower, at .50. Thus, this factor represents to a large extent depressive affect, unhappiness, low self-esteem, and dissatisfaction with life, and to a lesser extent it represents a generalized lack of positive affect. The second factor comprised all the NEO-PI Neuroticism facets and the PANAS-NA.

We retained the first factor as a composite variable for further analysis. The PA scale was omitted from this composite for two reasons. First, psychologically speaking, PA (reversed) is a broader construct than that which is reflected by the other scales on the factor. Positive affectivity is related to the experience of pleasurable and unpleasurable affect in general and begins to move away from the more self-focused unhappiness and dissatisfaction that is captured by the other scales and that is the primary focus of this article. Second, the lower loading of the scale, combined with the observations from the visual inspection of the correlation matrix, indicates that the PA scale is simply not as strongly related to the other four scales as they are to each other. Thus we unit-weighted the BDI, the HM composite, the SE, and the SWLS and formed a composite variable that we refer to as *personal negativity* (*PN*) to capture the dissatisfaction and negativity toward the self that it reflects. There was no sex difference on the PN composite, $t(144) = .65$, *ns*, and its alpha reliability was .88.

In light of the large literature that uses the measure, it is worth noting that the BDI serves here merely as one of four

Table 1
Self-Report Inventories—Descriptive Statistics

Inventory	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Rel
BDI[a]	148	7.59	6.94	0.00	37.00	.87
SE[a]	149	32.26	5.24	15.00	40.00	.89
SWLS[a]	149	23.91	6.59	7.00	35.00	.87
Average happiness[a]	149	6.91	1.83	1.00	10.00	
% of time happy[a]	148	51.41	22.75	1.00	92.00	
% of time unhappy[a]	148	19.95	14.85	3.00	75.00	
NEO Anxiety[b]	171	16.08	5.17	1.00	28.00	.75
NEO Hostility	171	13.21	4.84	2.00	27.00	.70
NEO Depression[b]	171	14.83	6.10	0.00	31.00	.83
NEO Self-Consciousness	171	16.47	4.48	4.00	28.00	.65
NEO Impulsiveness[b]	171	17.43	4.51	3.00	27.00	.68
NEO Vulnerability[b]	171	12.69	4.80	0.00	31.00	.79
NEO Neuroticism[b]	171	90.72	21.69	26.00	153.00	.91
PANAS negative affect	149	21.68	7.39	10.54	49.00	.86
PANAS positive affect	149	33.60	6.43	14.00	50.00	.85

Note. Min = minimum; Max = maximum; Rel = reliability; BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; SE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale; NEO = NEO Personality Inventory; PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.

[a] These measures were included in the personal negativity composite.

[b] Mean scores on these scales differed significantly by sex; women scored higher on all five scales.

essentially redundant indicators of personal negativity. It does not appear to be capturing anything particularly unique or distinct from the general subjective distress and dissatisfaction measured by the measures of low self-esteem, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction with life. This finding supports arguments made by researchers such as Coyne (1994) and Gotlib (1984), who question the extent to which BDI scores among college students measure anything analogous to clinical or severe depression.

To further explore the cohesiveness of the four PN measures, we correlated them with the targets' self-ratings on the NEO-PI. Table 2 presents these correlations and suggests that all four measures tap very similar constructs. All four measures and the composite are strongly related to Neuroticism and to Extraversion, with more distressed scores being associated with high Neuroticism and low Extraversion. Specifically, all measures were correlated at $r > .30$ (all $ps < .01$) with Neuroticism and all of its facets except Impulsiveness. Similarly, all of the measures were negatively correlated with Extraversion and its facets (most notably Positive Emotions, and excluding Activity). It is important to note that the PN measure is related to both Neuroticism and Extraversion much more strongly than the correlation between these two factors themselves ($r = -.19$; $p < .05$; $n = 143$), indicating that PN is largely a blend of high Neuroticism and low Extraversion, and not "merely" Neuroticism nor Introversion. Additionally, the PN measures were associated with low Conscientiousness and low Agreeableness but were unrelated to Openness to Experience.

For all subsequent analyses, only participants who had completed all four PN measures were included, yielding an N of 146 participants (82 women and 64 men; 79% of the total sample). Some participants did not complete other measures, so there are minor variations in specific sample sizes.

Vector Correlations

To uncover and quantify the consistency across gender in manifestations of Personal Negativity, we computed vector correlations at each stage of the analysis. Most analyses take the form of two sets of correlations between CQ or BQ items and the PN composite variable—one set for female targets, and one for male targets. Moving one step beyond this analysis, a correlation can then be obtained between these two sets of correlations, indicating the extent to which the pattern of PN relationships is similar for the two sexes. For example, there are 100 items on the target's self CQ, all of which will be correlated with PN for female participants ($n = 82$). This set (or vector) of 100 correlations will have a certain pattern—some items will be more highly correlated than others. The similar set (i.e., vector) of 100 CQ–PN correlations will be computed for male participants ($n = 64$) and will have its own pattern of relationships. To quantify the overall similarity of the patterns for men and women, a correlation can be computed between the two vectors of correlates ($n = 100$). This "correlation between two sets of correlations" thus provides a holistic

Table 2
Self–NEO-PI Correlates of Personal Negativity Composite Variables

NEO factor/facet	PN	BDI	SWLS	SE	HM
Anxiety	.43**	.42**	−.33**	−.41**	−.32**
Hostility	.42**	.38**	−.31**	−.31**	−.47**
Depression	.61**	.50**	−.52**	−.63**	−.46**
Self-Consciousness	.47**	.43**	−.40**	−.43**	−.35**
Impulsiveness	.12	.18*	−.03	−.13	−.08
Vulnerability	.60**	.55**	−.47**	−.59**	−.45**
Neuroticism	**.62****	**.57****	**−.48****	**−.59****	**−.50****
Warmth	−.29**	−.21*	.25**	.21*	.33**
Gregariousness	−.36**	−.28**	.31**	.32**	.33**
Assertiveness	−.33**	−.22**	.35**	.36**	.22**
Activity	−.12	−.05	.08	.19*	.09
Excitement-Seeking	−.24**	−.15	.22**	.25**	.21*
Positive Emotions	−.48**	−.33**	.41**	.41**	.51**
Extraversion	**−.47****	**−.32****	**.42****	**.45****	**.44****
Fantasy	−.11	.00	.20*	.08	.09
Aesthetics	−.01	.03	.03	.05	−.02
Feeling	−.20*	−.15	.13	.24**	.17*
Action	−.05	−.01	.08	.05	.01
Ideas	−.14	−.17*	.05	.22*	.04
Values	−.12	−.19*	.04	.12	.07
Openness	**−.15**	**−.12**	**.13**	**.19***	**.09**
Conscientiousness	**−.32****	**−.26****	**.28****	**.32****	**.26****
Agreeableness	**−.31****	**−.29****	**.24****	**.20***	**.35****

Note. $N = 143$. NEO-PI = NEO Personality Inventory; PN = personal negativity composite; BDI = Beck Depression Inventory; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale; SE = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; HM = Fordyce Happiness Measure composite. Factors appear in boldface.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

indication of the extent to which PN is similarly related to the self-concept of men and women.

In most cases, as are cited below; these vector correlations are quite high, suggesting that personal negativity has manifestations and correlates that are consistent across gender. Such a high level of correlation also provides a split-sample replication of the findings—results obtained in one part of the sample are to a high degree also obtained in another, totally separate part. Because most vector correlations were so high, and for efficiency of presentation, we present and discuss most findings based on the whole sample.

PN and Interpersonal Behavior

Do people with the feelings of low self-worth and unhappiness characterized by PN behave in a distinct manner? To investigate this question, we correlated PN scores with each of the 64 items of the behavioral Q sort that described the target's behavior. Recall that for each participant behavioral codings were averaged across coders and sessions for each of the 64 items of the BQ. The aggregate scores for each item were then correlated with participants' PN scores. The vector correlation between the men's and women's correlates was .16, which, though positive, was low enough to suggest that the sexes should be presented and discussed separately. Splitting the sample by sex for these analyses results in a substantial increase in the effect size that is necessary to obtain a $p < .05$ significance level. Therefore, in an effort to maintain a more consistent minimum effect size across Table 3 and subsequent tables, the behavioral correlations at $p < .10$ and below are reported.

As Table 3 shows, women with high PN scores tend to appear insecure, self-pitying, irritated, and fearful and show a general social discomfort, an inability to communicate well, and an overall lack of social skill. Thus, women high in personal negativity exhibit a socially awkward, rather negatively self-focused behavioral style.

The behavior of male participants with high PN scores, by contrast, was less distinctive. There were only eight significant ($p < .10$) correlations and, although they seem to begin to reveal a distancing, detached behavioral tendency, one may be inclined to consider these few correlates more a function of chance than of a reliable, robust interpersonal style.

Table 3
Behavioral Correlates of PN Score

Behavioral Q sort item	Correlation
Women (n = 81)	
22 Expresses insecurity	.38**
48 Self pity or feelings of victimization	.35**
32 Acts irritated	.31**
51 Gives up when faced with obstacles	.31**
20 Expresses criticism	.30**
37 Behaves in a fearful or timid manner	.29**
40 Expresses guilt (about anything)	.27*
45 Says negative things about self	.27*
15 Compares self to other(s)	.26*
47 Blames others (for anything)	.24*
23 Shows physical signs of tension or anxiety	.24*
14 Exhibits an awkward interpersonal style	.21†
54 Speaks fluently and expresses ideas well	−.43**
7 Appears to be relaxed and comfortable	−.35**
8 Exhibits social skills	−.29**
60 Engages in constant eye contact	−.23*
17 Shows a wide range of interests	−.21†
53 Offers advice	−.21†
57 Speaks in a loud voice	−.21†
6 Dominates the interaction	−.20†
43 Seems to enjoy the interaction	−.19†
50 Behaves in a cheerful manner	−.19†
Men (n = 63)	
41 Keeps partner(s) at a distance	.27*
64 Partner(s) seeks advice from subject	.25*
9 Is reserved and unexpressive	.23†
59 Makes or approaches physical contact	−.35**
63 Acts playful	−.30*
26 Initiates humor	−.25*
44 Says or does interesting things	−.24†
48 Self pity or feelings of victimization	−.22†

Note. Item content is abbreviated. PN = personal negativity.
† $p < .10$ (marginally significant). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

PN and the Behavior of Others

How do individuals who interact with distressed and unhappy people respond to them? To investigate behavioral responses associated with elevated levels of personal negativity, we looked at correlations between the targets' PN scores and the BQ ratings of the behavior of their interaction partners. The male–female vector correlation (r = .42) was considerably higher than the one characterizing the targets' own behavior. This indicates that the partners' responses are similar for both male and female targets with high PN scores, and it serves as a split-sample replication of the findings. However, for ease of comparison with the previous analysis, Table 4 presents the behavioral correlates separately for the sexes.

As the table shows, negative consequences for personal negativity are already apparent after only about 15 min of interaction. The male partners of the female targets with high PN scores behaved in a manner that is stereotypically masculine, condescending, and controlling. In addition, they acted unhappy (i.e., the opposite of "behaves in a cheerful manner"), and they did not seem to like or be interested in the female targets. The female partners of the male targets manifested fewer significant behavioral correlates, which follows from the finding that the male targets did not reveal elevated personal negativity as clearly as female targets. However, as suggested by the male targets' behavior, the partners' response indicates a pattern of distancing, detachment, and lack of enjoyment. Considering the high male–female vector correlation and the relative number of correlates for women and men, it appears that partners may have similar kinds of responses to men and women with elevated personal negativity (high vector correlation) but differ in the degree or strength of these reactions (differing numbers of significant correlations).

Other-Reports of Personality

To examine the association between personal negativity and the social environment, we next examined the correlations be-

Table 4
Correlations Between PN Score and Partner's Behavior

BQ item	Partner's behavior	Correlation
Women (n = 79)		
52	Behaves stereotypically masculine/feminine	.35**
18	Talks at rather than with partner(s)	.31**
28	Exhibits condescending behavior	.30**
32	Acts irritated	.28*
5	Tries to control the interaction	.27*
6	Dominates the interaction	.25*
61	Seems detached from the interaction	.20†
50	Behaves in a cheerful manner	−.29**
13	Seems to like partner(s)	−.28*
26	Initiates humor	−.25*
4	Seems interested in what partner(s) says	−.23*
63	Acts playful	−.20†
10	Laughs frequently	−.20†
43	Seems to enjoy the interaction	−.20†
Men (n = 62)		
41	Keeps partner(s) at a distance	.25†
53	Offers advice	.23†
61	Seems detached from the interaction	.21†
31	Appears to regard self as attractive	.21†
58	Speaks sarcastically	−.33**
26	Initiates humor	−.28*
63	Acts playful	−.28*
57	Speaks in a loud voice	−.27*
43	Seems to enjoy the interaction	−.23†
10	Laughs frequently	−.22†
38	Is expressive in face, voice or gestures	−.21†

Note. Item content is abbreviated. PN = personal negativity; BQ = behavioral Q sort.
† $p < .10$ (marginally significant). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

tween the targets' PN scores and the acquaintances' CQ descriptions of the target. The male–female vector correlation was extremely high (r = .69), again suggesting that the pattern of findings was similar across sex and providing a split-sample replication of the overall findings. The significant correlations (based on analysis of the sexes combined) appear in Table 5. Personal negativity appears to have a powerful association with the way people are perceived by their acquaintances. Forty-three of the 100 CQ correlations were significant at the $p < .05$ level. Even more remarkable than the sheer number of correlates is that every one of these correlations indicates that personal negativity has a profoundly negative relation with the way these individuals are viewed by others. Participants with high PN scores tended to be seen as more self-pitying, fearful, hostile, self-defeating, distrustful, lacking meaning in life, and critical. They tended not to be seen as cheerful, socially skilled, dependable, ambitious, or productive, and the list goes on. These clearly negative descriptions are especially poignant when one considers that the informants providing these descriptions were nominated by the targets as people who knew them well.

Furthermore, their own parents had a similar opinion of them. Table 6 compares NEO-PI ratings provided by the college acquaintances (the same acquaintances who completed the CQ descriptions) with those provided by the target persons' parents. Parents as well as acquaintances tended to see individuals high in PN as anxious, depressed, self-conscious, vulnerable, unsociable, unassertive, and disagreeable. Illustrating the degree of similarity between parents and college acquaintances even further along with the stability of the correlations across independent samples of raters, the correlation between these two sets of correlations is extremely high (r = .89). Thus the negative evaluation of individuals with high PN is not peculiar to their acquaintances—their parents see them much the same way.

PN From the Self Perspective

To investigate the association between personal negativity and self-image, we correlated the 100-item self-report CQ with PN. Once again, the male–female vector correlation was very high (r = .76), thus serving as a split-sample replication of the findings and suggesting it is appropriate to combine the female and male subsamples for analysis. The significant correlates are shown in Table 7.

Both the number and size of correlates are impressive. Forty-eight of the 100 Q-sort items correlated significantly with PN scores. In one sense, it is unsurprising that these correlates should be so powerful and numerous. The PN is a composite of self-report instruments and so would be expected to generate strong correlates with other self-reports, even if rendered in a format so different as a Q sort. However, the implications of the correlations in Table 7 go far beyond their sheer number. The table provides a richly detailed—and disturbing—portrait of the self-image of individuals with elevated PN scores, even from a relatively "normal" sample. Higher levels of PN are associated with viewing the self as feeling cheated and victimized by life; as lacking personal meaning; as basically anxious, brittle, inadequate, distrustful, and irritable. By contrast, lower levels of PN are correlated with seeing oneself as internally consistent, self-satisfied, intelligent, candid, attractive, cheerful, ambitious, and so forth. The range of scores captured by the PN composite in this sample is clearly associated with variations in something that, at one end, looks a lot like unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the self, and at the other end provides a reasonable definition of good psychological adjustment. Overall, the self-image of those scoring high on the PN composite appears to be unfavorable and damaged in comparison with those scoring lower.

Discussion

The present study demonstrated the powerful relationships between unhappiness and dissatisfaction with one's self and one's life and a variety of important intra- and interpersonal experiences.

First, a construct of personal negativity was identified as a combination of the highly intercorrelated variables of BDI-measured depression, low self-esteem, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction with life. Of particular interest to those concerned with using self-reported "depression" with nonclinical samples as an analogue for clinical or severe depression is that the BDI was extremely highly correlated with the three other measures that were combined in the PN composite—it was notably indistinct from low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with life, and unhappiness.

Table 5
Correlations Between PN Scores and Peer Descriptions of Personality

California Q-Sort item		Correlation
22	Feels a lack of personal meaning in life	.38**
78	Feels cheated and victimized by life; self-pitying	.38**
55	Is self-defeating	.35**
38	Has hostility towards others	.34**
40	Is vulnerable to real or fancied threat, generally fearful	.33**
49	Is basically distrustful of people in general; questions their motivations	.31**
42	Reluctant to commit self to any definite course of action; tends to delay or avoid action	.29**
1	Is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed	.27**
30	Gives up and withdraws where possible in the face of frustration and adversity	.27**
23	Extrapunitive; tends to transfer or project blame	.25**
69	Is sensitive to anything that can be construed as a demand	.25**
36	Is subtly negativistic; tends to undermine and obstruct or sabotage	.24**
48	Keeps people at a distance; avoids close interpersonal relationships	.24**
45	Has brittle ego-defense system; has a small reserve of integration; would be disorganized and maladaptive when under stress or trauma	.24**
82	Has fluctuating moods	.21*
12	Tends to be self-destructive	.21*
68	Is basically anxious	.20*
50	Is unpredictable and changeable	.20*
34	Over-reactive to minor frustrations; irritable	.20*
10	Anxiety and tension find outlet in bodily symptoms	.18*
37	Is guileful and deceitful; manipulative, opportunistic	.18*
89	Compares self to others. Is alert to real or fancied differences between self and other people	.18*
84	Is cheerful	−.40**
71	Has high aspiration level for self	−.33**
74	Is subjectively unaware of self-concern; feels satisfied with self	−.31**
2	Is a genuinely dependable and responsible person	−.30**
15	Is skilled in social techniques of imaginative play, pretending and humor	−.29**
56	Responds to humor	−.26**
92	Has social poise and presence; appears socially at ease	−.26**
58	Enjoys sensuous experiences (including touch, taste, smell, physical contact)	−.24**
54	Emphasizes being with others; gregarious	−.24**
11	Is protective of those close to him or her	−.23**
26	Is productive, gets things done	−.21*
57	Is an interesting, arresting person	−.20*
3	Has a wide range of interests	−.20*
35	Has warmth; has the capacity for close relationships; compassionate	−.20*
60	Has insight into own motives and behavior	−.19*
98	Is verbally fluent; can express ideas well	−.18*
31	Regards self as physically attractive	−.18*
29	Is turned to for advice and reassurance	−.18*
24	Prides self on being "objective," rational	−.18*
77	Appears straightforward, forthright, candid in dealing with others	−.17*
7	Favors conservative values in a variety of areas	−.17*

Note. Items in column 1 are from *The Q-sort method in personality assessment and psychiatric research* (pp. 132–136), by J. Block, 1961, Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. Copyright 1961 by J. Block. Reprinted with permission. N = 138. PN = personal negativity.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Behaviors of and Responses to Personally Negative Individuals

Analysis of the behavioral correlates of PN showed that the personal insecurity and negativity of high-PN women was revealed clearly in their social behavior. In addition, they expressed guilt, irritation, and criticism and a basically uncomfortable, submissive interpersonal style. It is not difficult to imagine that others would find these interpersonal tendencies to be somewhat aversive. In fact, correlations between women's PN scores and the behavior of their male interaction partners revealed that these partners became domineering and condescending, did not seem to enjoy the interaction, and were relatively detached from it. Men with elevated PN were less clear in the behavioral expression of their personal negativity, but vector correlations revealed that their female partners tended to respond much the

Table 6
Correlations Between PN Scores and Parent and Peer NEO-PI Descriptions of Personality

NEO factor/facet	Parent rating (n = 108)	College peer rating (n = 129)
Anxiety	.32**	.24**
Hostility	.24*	.17
Depression	.26**	.31**
Self-Consciousness	.33**	.26**
Impulsiveness	.15	.11
Vulnerability	.34**	.27**
Neuroticism	**.37****	**.30****
Warmth	−.17	−.29**
Gregariousness	−.22*	−.27**
Assertiveness	−.30**	−.21*
Activity	−.06	−.10
Excitement Seeking	.03	−.14
Positive Emotions	−.29**	−.29**
Extraversion	**−.23***	**−.31****
Fantasy	−.05	.07
Aesthetics	.06	−.03
Feeling	−.09	−.18*
Action	−.25**	.06
Ideas	−.12	−.08
Values	−.04	.00
Openness	**−.12**	**−.05**
Conscientiousness	**−.13**	**−.20****
Agreeableness	**−.20***	**−.25****

Note. PN = personal negativity; NEO-PI = NEO Personality Inventory. Factors appear in boldface.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

same way—though to a lesser degree—as the male partners of women high in PN.

It is important to keep in mind that all of the behavioral manifestations and interpersonal reactions to personal negativity were detected over a total period of only about 15 min of social interaction. Some years ago, Abelson (1985) noted that for a major league baseball player, in a single at-bat, only about one third of 1% of the variance in the probability of getting a hit is explained by his batting ability (as measured by batting average). The reason a .350 hitter is paid millions more than a .250 hitter is that over the course of a season a player gets many at-bats, and the effect of ability accumulates. We propose that the current findings are analogous. Fifteen minutes of interaction with a stranger of the opposite sex could be considered a single social at-bat, of which one presumably gets many in life. If the relationship between personal negativity and performance in a single at-bat is as strong as our data suggest, then the consequences over a social lifetime would seem likely to be strong indeed.

Anyone familiar with the literature on personality and social psychology knows that direct observations of social behavior are relatively rarely included in research. The inclusion of three different situations, along with measurements of the behavior of both the participant and his or her interaction partner, as in the present study, is even more rare. However, the unstructured, cooperative, and competitive settings in the present study do not exhaust the possible range of interpersonal settings in real life. For example, all of our situations involved an interaction with a member of the opposite sex, an undoubtedly important but perhaps distinctive aspect. But our data also show that although opposite-sex interaction partners seemed to react negatively to individuals high in PN, same-sex informants also described them in negative terms—a convergence that suggests that a negative reaction to individuals high in personal negativity is common to those with whom they come into contact, of either sex.

The Social Environment of the Personally Negative

The acquaintances' CQ descriptions can be conceptualized as representative of the way in which the targets are perceived by others, particularly those who know them well. These perceptions, in turn, form an important part of the individual's social environment—few things are more important in life than one's social reputation. Results indicated that both men and women with elevated PN were described in more negative ways by their acquaintances than were individuals lower on PN. The acquaintances detected not only their dissatisfaction with themselves but also more interpersonally aversive characteristics such as hostility, distrust, deceitfulness, criticality, avoidance of blame, and defensiveness. Furthermore, the acquaintances described the high-PN participants as lacking social skills and ambition and as uninteresting and undependable.

Even if these reputations were not accurate, a world in which an individual is seen as self-pitying, hostile, and socially awkward cannot be easy or enjoyable to negotiate. Moreover, these descriptions were probably not due to a tendency for the peers to be particularly hypercritical—very similar descriptions were found when the raters were the participants' own parents. To the extent that the impressions reported by these informants are representative of those held by others in the targets' social world, personally negative individuals seem likely to suffer from less social support and possibly greater rejection, thus increasing the probability that they will remain troubled or even begin to suffer from more distress. Such interpersonal influences have been discussed extensively with respect to depression (Coyne, 1976), but it is possible that they would operate to some extent with lower-level distress such as personal negativity.

Personal Negativity, Happiness, and Depression

In recent years, psychologists have turned renewed attention to the positive constructs of happiness and subjective well-being (Lu & Shih, 1997; Suh, Diener, & Fujita, 1996), and indeed we could have inverted the PN variable and the tables and presented this study as an investigation of that topic. However, we believe that the present data paint a picture that is more clearly framed as a study about self-dissatisfaction and *un*happiness and its network of relationships with other variables. We believe that the PN composite captures a negative view of oneself and one's life that is somewhat more specific than simple "unhappiness."

Furthermore, we believe that scoring the construct in the more distressed direction provides a clearer reflection of the present data. The distribution of scores on the PN composite and all of its subcomponents was skewed, with the majority of individuals

Table 7
Correlations Between PN Scores and Self-Descriptions of Personality

California Q-Sort item	Correlation
22 Feels a lack of personal meaning in life	.53**
78 Feels cheated and victimized by life; self-pitying	.52**
72 Concerned with own adequacy as a person, either at conscious or unconscious level	.43**
45 Has brittle ego-defense system; has a small reserve of integration; would be disorganized and maladaptive when under stress or trauma	.36**
68 Is basically anxious	.34**
55 Is self-defeating	.30**
79 Tends to ruminate and have persistent, preoccupying thoughts	.29**
87 Interprets basically simple and clear-cut situations in complicated and particularizing ways	.29**
12 Tends to be self-defensive	.29**
36 Is subtly negativistic; tends to undermine and obstruct or sabotage	.29**
42 Reluctant to commit self to any definite course of action; tends to delay or avoid action	.28**
9 Is uncomfortable with uncertainty and complexities	.27**
49 Is basically distrustful of people in general; questions their motivations	.27**
23 Extrapunitive; tends to transfer or project blame	.25**
47 Has a readiness to feel guilt	.25**
86 Handles anxiety and conflicts by, in effect, refusing to recognize their presence; repressive or dissociative tendencies	.25**
25 Tends toward over-control of needs and impulses, binds tensions excessively; delays gratification unnecessarily	.23**
34 Over-reactive to minor frustrations; irritable	.22**
13 Is thin skinned; sensitive to anything that can be construed as criticism or an interpersonal slight	.22*
30 Gives up and withdraws where possible in the face of frustration and adversity	.19*
48 Keeps people at a distance; avoids close interpersonal relationships	.18*
37 Is guileful and deceitful, manipulative, opportunistic	.17*
1 Is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed	.17*
74 Is subjectively unaware of self-concern; feels satisfied with self	−.52**
71 Has high aspiration level for self	−.45**
84 Is cheerful	−.42**
81 Is physically attractive, good-looking	−.36**
31 Regards self as physically attractive	−.34**
8 Appears to have a high degree of intellectual capacity	−.33**
98 Is verbally fluent; can express ideas well	−.31**
75 Has a clear-cut, internally consistent personality	−.31**
77 Appears straightforward, forthright, candid in dealing with others	−.31**
88 Is personally charming	−.29**
57 Is an interesting, arresting person	−.28**
5 Behaves in giving way toward others	−.25**
26 Is productive, gets things done	−.24**
15 Is skilled in social techniques of imaginative play, pretending and humor	−.24**
33 Is calm, relaxed in manner	−.22**
35 Has warmth; has the capacity for close relationships; compassionate	−.21*
28 Tends to arouse liking and acceptance in people	−.20*
52 Behaves in an assertive fashion	−.20*
60 Has insight into own motives and behavior	−.19*
4 Is a talkative individual	−.18*
2 Is a genuinely dependable and responsible person	−.17*
92 Has social poise and presence; appears socially at ease	−.17*
3 Has a wide range of interests	−.17*
20 Has a rapid personal tempo; behaves and acts quickly	−.17*
18 Initiates humor	−.17*

Note. Items in column 1 are from *The Q-sort method in personality assessment and psychiatric research* (pp. 132–136), by J. Block, 1961, Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. Copyright 1961 by J. Block. Reprinted wtih permission. $N = 146$. PN = personal negativity.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

scoring in the less distressed direction, leaving most of the variance at the more distressed end. Speaking of "personally negative" people really reflects people who range between the mean and the extreme low end of the continuum of self-satisfaction. The correlations are thus being driven primarily by the people from this side of the continuum, and so they are perhaps better characterized as reflecting variance in distress rather than subjective well-being.

The present data suggest that studies that use self-reported depression in "normal" populations (specifically, college samples) as an analogue for clinical or severe depression may be limiting or misdirecting their focus. Although the merits of studying depression by observing college samples have been debated back and forth (Coyne, 1994; Kendall & Flannery-Schroeder, 1995; Tennen, Hall, & Affleck, 1995a, 1995b; Vredenburg et al., 1993; Weary et al., 1995), it appears that this kind of depression is empirically inseparable from other psychological dispositions such as low self-esteem, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction with life. Although these variables may describe some of the milder aspects of clinical depression, this sample, and most others from similar populations, successfully meets challenges and functions effectively—which cannot be said of individuals diagnosed with clinical depression. In addition, the well-documented finding that females are more likely than males to be clinically depressed contrasts with the lack of a sex difference in BDI in this or other college samples. The lack of a clear sex difference in subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) further supports the idea that what is examined in most "depressed" college samples is more closely akin to low subjective well-being than to clinical depression. It might be profitable to orient studies of "nonclinical depression" toward the literatures on subjective well-being, happiness, and self-esteem rather than or in addition to the literature on depression. Similarly, it might be useful for researchers interested in happiness and subjective well-being to refer to the extensive body of research focused on depression, especially research that has been done with college samples.

Importance of Personal Negativity

Although it is highly probable that none of the individuals in this study would approach a state of clinical depression, that does not imply that the psychological and social troubles these people are experiencing are unimportant. The findings reported here show that these people tend to encounter problems at several different levels, each of which has important implications. Individuals with elevated personal negativity not only have a wide-ranging negative view of themselves, but they also are viewed by others in a much more negative light than are those lower on personal negativity. To the extent that this negative reputation is widely held, as suggested by the responses of their laboratory partners and the convergent evaluations by parents and college acquaintances, social support may decrease and thus exacerbate their distress (Stokes & McKirnan, 1989). Although such distress may be "mild and transient" in comparison to clinical depression (Coyne, 1994), it may not be as transient as some have suspected, and it must certainly be seriously troubling to the individual experiencing such distress. Not only does the individual experience immediate psychological and social problems, but he or she also faces the possibility of continued and exacerbated distress (Kandel & Davies, 1986).

The current study presents a clear picture of the social and psychological world of individuals varying in normal-range unhappiness and self-dissatisfaction. Such personal negativity is not simply negative affect or neuroticism, it is a particular pattern of negative views about the self and one's life. It is surrounded by a rich network of relationships with behavior of self and others, social reputation, how one is seen by peers and parents, and self-image. Personal negativity is an important aspect of one's quality of life, or lack thereof. It therefore deserves research attention in its own right.

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