

# **Personality and Flourishing**

Differences in descriptions of a situation perceived as flourishing in relation to  
personality traits

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### **Abstract**

Research has found numerous benefits associated with living a flourishing life. According to positive psychology, the experience of flourishing can be described as the final aim of an individual to live a meaningful and fulfilled life. The goal of the current study is to gain further insights into the connection between personality and the construct of flourishing. Therefore, qualitative analyses focused on factors constituting a flourishing experience and how these factors are influenced by certain personality traits. The personality traits investigated in this study are extraversion, conscientiousness and neuroticism. To best capture the subjective flourishing experience, a qualitative approach in form of narratives was chosen. Based on test results on the HEXACO-60 a final convenience sample (n=27) was selected. This sample consist of the five lowest and five highest scoring participants for each of the three traits. All participants were asked to describe situations in which they perceive themselves to be flourishing. Answers could be categorized in the four domains positive social relationships, personal growth, satisfaction and comfort, as well as profound interest. Of these, positive social relationships proved to be of greatest importance for flourishing throughout the whole sample regardless of personality or demographics. Results suggested that for high extraverts, goal achievement, as part of the personal growth category, is significantly more important for flourishing than for participants low in extraversion. For low and high end conscientious as well as neurotic participants no significant differences in important factors to their flourishing were found. Further research should investigate the connection between factors constituting flourishing and personality by implementing a similar qualitative study design in a larger sample.

## Differences in descriptions of a situation perceived as flourishing in relation to personality traits

### Introduction

#### Mental Health and Mental Illness

There is growing consensus about the opinion of there being more to mental health than just the absence of mental illness. In line with the positive psychological perspective, the construct of mental well-being is equally important as the degree of psychopathology in the consideration process when it comes to establishing one's mental health. This perspective emphasizes the role of psychology not only as the repairer of the most wrong and dreadful aspects of life but as a science with the goal to encourage the positive qualities of one's life. In other words, to shift the focus from simple surviving to living a life which is worth living (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). So to get a full picture of a person's mental health, both dimensions, mental illness and mental well-being, should be taken into consideration. They should be seen as distinct but related to each other (Westerhof & Keyes, 2009). This means both concepts can be investigated distinctively.

#### Flourishing

This paper puts the focus on the exploration of the mental well-being dimension. Through factor analysis Keyes confirmed the two factor model of the two unipolar dimensions of mental well-being and mental illness. It has been established that mental well-being is best represented by the scales of emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being (Keyes, 2005). A widely accepted term that combines the elements of this three scales is flourishing. In relation to the just described positive psychological approach, the state of flourishing can be seen as a highly desirable state for individuals, as well as communities.

In order to understand the high desirability of flourishing, it is important to look at its advantages. Representing a life worth living, flourishing embodies the high end of the mental well-being dimension, being constituted of all kinds of positive life qualities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Prior research on these positive qualities that come with flourishing, demonstrated that flourishing is found to have various benefitting effects on the absence of mental disorders such as major depressive episodes, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder and alcohol dependence (Keyes, 2005). Significantly less depressive symptoms, as well as conduct problems were found for flourishing adolescents than for languishing (i.e. those who score low on the mental well-being dimension) ones (Keyes, 2006). Additionally, people who are flourishing are generally less likely to die from all-cause mortality than people who are not flourishing (Keyes & Simoes, 2012). Prevalence rates of flourishing were found to be

moderately low with 38% percent in an American adolescent sample. With a prevalence of 17.2% between the ages of 25-74 in a different study, a decline in flourishing as age increases is suggested (Keyes, 2006; Keyes, 2002).

Low prevalence rates reflect that a large percentage of society does not yet have access to the detected numerous benefits of flourishing. That opens up the question of how these benefits can be accessed. Consequentially, it is of interest what factors determine if a person flourishes or not.

### **Flourishing and Personality**

Determinants of flourishing have been examined especially on the demographic dimension. While higher education is replicative found to be associated with flourishing, there is contradicting evidence whether male or female gender is associated with flourishing. There is also no consensus about the determination of flourishing by age (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016; Keyes & Simoes, 2012). So it seems to need more in order to flourish, than just the possession of particular, predisposed demographics. The Self-Determination theory takes a different position on how flourishing is determined. Combining psychological and philosophical views, Ryan, Deci and Curren (2013) proposed that there are three universal human needs, being autonomy, competence and relatedness, whose satisfaction is essential for human flourishing. Special importance is ascribed to the need for autonomy, since it takes an instrumental role. It stands at the bottom of various other basic, personal needs which can only be satisfied if the individual is able to behave autonomously. Only that allows congruent and wholehearted action taking towards one's own needs and desires (Ryan et al., 2013). So, it seems to be the case that autonomy manifests itself through striving towards satisfaction of the own, individual needs. That is why autonomy can be seen as the bridge between universal needs and individual needs. Everybody needs to be autonomous in order to follow satisfaction of the personal needs. For SDT this means a personal layer must be added to the universally formulated needs because the actual enactment of autonomy enfolds itself differently for every individual.

Transferring SDT's emphasis of autonomy on the concept of flourishing, it seems to be the case that flourishing is to some extent determined by personal needs and desires. A study by Costa and McCrae (1988) demonstrates that there are differences in how these desires look like based on a person's personality. Findings of this study suggest that highly neurotic people worry about being liked by others and have a desire for care and sympathy. Highly conscientious people value accomplishment as well as organization. People high in extraversion are found to have needs for social contact and attention (Costa & McCrae, 1988). When

accepting that personality influences personal desires, and that satisfaction of these desires results in flourishing, it can be concluded that personality influences flourishing. This influence could manifest itself in two ways.

Firstly, by determining personal desires, personality influences how a person flourishes i.e. what is needed in order to experience flourishing. A lack of literature exists on the connection between personality and the way a person flourishes. So far, only by investigating the relation between personality and desires, as the just described study by Costa & McCrae (1988) did, it is possible to infer knowledge on that unexplored topic.

Secondly, personality influences if a person flourishes or not. On this topic, there exists only few literature. Personality traits have been shown to be the strongest of the studied predictors for a flourishing person. In particular low neuroticism, high extraversion and high conscientiousness are of significance here. Research confirms the levels on these three personality traits as typical for flourishers (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2015).

Most other studies have focused their research more on the relation between personality and flourishing-related constructs. When relating the French version of the Flourishing scale to the concept of the Big-Five personality traits, researchers found significant variation in correlations between high scores on the Flourishing scale and the different personality traits. Important to notice here is that the external validity of this scale was doubted by a different study which claims that the FS rather measures psychological well-being (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2016). The Big-Five, also referred to as five factor model of personality, is widely accepted and validated and offers to categorize a personality into the five dimensions of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience (Goldberg, 1990; Srivastava & John, 1999). Positive correlations between the measured construct and conscientiousness were the highest. Extraversion, agreeableness and openness also correlated positively with psychological well-being, with openness showing the lowest correlation. Neuroticism was found to be negatively associated with PSW (Villieux, Sovet, Jung, & Guilbert, 2016). Exploring the relationship of positive mental health and the Big-Five, strong associations of extraversion and agreeableness with positive mental health are in line with these findings (Lamers, Westerhof, Kovacs & Bohlmeijer, 2012).

Weiss, Bates and Luciano (2008) examined the relation between the five factor model of personality and subjective well-being. The study emphasized a high influence of the genetic component on the levels of SWB and claimed that all of SWB's genetic variances can be accounted for by personality (Weiss, Bates & Luciano, 2008). Interestingly, Keyes et.al (2014) later explored the construct of SWB too, analyzing a more complete picture of well-being. In

their study, this picture covers all three relevant dimensions (emotional, psychological and social well-being) of mental well-being. They questioned the one-way relationship from the aforementioned study that personality influences SWB and instead found evidence for a possible reciprocal relationship between mental well-being and personality (Keyes, Kendler, Myers, & Martin, 2014)

### **Added Value of the Current Study**

Although, different approaches were used, all studies agree that personality is somehow related to flourishing-related constructs such as subjective well-being and psychological well-being. Some studies even found association between personality and the level of flourishing. So existing literature clearly speaks in favor of a connection between personality and flourishing. Yet, still little is known about how people flourish and how flourishing is related to personality (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). To get more insights, an extension of literature should therefore find new ways to explore this part of the relationship between flourishing and personality. Since it has been established that personality seems to influence how a person flourishes, it is of interest how this influence looks like. One way of exploring this, is to consider personality when asking what conditions need to be fulfilled in order to flourish. In other words, it is of interest what factors constitute a flourishing experience. The established influence of personality on flourishing leads to the expectation that people with different personalities also possess different factors that constitute a flourishing experience for them. That is why, it should be examined how factors that constitute a flourishing experience differ for people with different personalities. With that, this paper puts the focus on the especially little researched aspect of how a person flourishes, which is described earlier as the first manifestation of the influence of personality on flourishing.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

The aim of the present study is to examine what people describe as a situation perceived as flourishing and how those descriptions differ in relation to their levels on three personality traits, being extraversion, conscientiousness and neuroticism. To best capture these subjective factors, a qualitative approach is chosen. Qualitative data collection leaves more room for the participant to express the subjectivity, than a quantitative questionnaire could do (Choy, 2014). The following hypotheses are based on the earlier paraphrased, researched connection between personality and personal desires (Costa & McCrae, 1988). Assuming that satisfaction of personal desires and needs results in flourishing, it is expected that, compared to participants with low levels on trait extraversion, participants with high levels on trait extraversion write more often about social contact and social attention in their narratives, when they describe a

situation as flourishing (h1). In addition, it is expected that, compared to participants with low levels on trait conscientiousness, participants with high levels on trait conscientiousness write more often about accomplishment and organization in their narratives, when they describe a situation as flourishing (h2). Lastly, it is expected that, compared to participants with low levels on trait neuroticism, participants with high levels on trait neuroticism write more often about positive relationships, in which they feel liked and cared for in their narratives, when they describe a situation as flourishing (h3).

## **Methods**

### **Design**

Since it is of best interest for the study to influence the participant as less as possible, a qualitative study design on the base of an openly formulated question is chosen. All participants were confronted with the same open question. The data gathering was conducted between the 15th and the 26th of April 2019.

### **Participants**

The sample for the current study was comprised of a participant pool of 112 persons who all took part in a personality test. Of this pool those with significantly high or low levels on one or more of the traits extraversion, conscientiousness and neuroticism were selected. These personality characteristics were measured with German version of the 60-item HEXACO-PI-R at baseline. This questionnaire has shown satisfactory psychometric for the application in different languages (De Vries, Lee & Ashton, 2008; Tatar, 2018; Romero, Villar & Lopez-Romero, 2015). The HEXACO-60 shows sufficient internal consistency reliability, as well as low intercorrelations between the Big Five factors and high self-observer agreement (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Satisfactory psychometric properties, including good test-retest reliability were also found for the German version of this questionnaire (Moshagen, Hilbig, & Zettler, 2014). Next to that, high concurrent validity has been shown for the HEXACO-60 (Burtaverde, 2015).

For each personality subscale, a mean score (0-5) was calculated. For each of the three traits the five highest scoring and the five lowest scoring participants were selected. Three participants fulfilled this criterion for more than one subscale. Three other participants who initially fulfilled the inclusion criterion only completed the HEXACO-60 without writing a narrative. These participants were therefore excluded from further analysis and the participant with the next higher/lower score were selected. The final sample consisted of 27 participants, of which the low extraversion group (scores ranged from 1.50-1.70) was compared with the

high extraversion group (3.50-4.60), the low conscientiousness group (1.20-1.50) was compared with the high conscientiousness group (3.50-4.60) and the low neuroticism group (1.30-1.70) was compared with the high neuroticism group (3.80-4.40). In each personality group 40% were females and 60% males with a mean age of 28.3 for the whole sample (Table 1). The youngest participant was 19 and the oldest 67 years old. The research was approved by the University of Twente ethics committee and all participants signed written informed consent prior to participation in accordance with the guidelines from the ethics committee.

Table 1

*Demographics of the participants per personality group.*

	Extraversion N = 10	Conscientiousness N = 10	Neuroticism N = 10
<b>Age</b>			
Age Range	19-67	20-57	20-55
Age, M (SD)	34.50 (17.23)	25 (11.28)	25.20 (10.66)
<b>Gender, n (%)</b>			
Female	4 (40)	4 (40)	4 (40)
Male	6 (60)	6 (60)	6 (60)
<b>Education</b>			
High School Degree	6	8	5
Higher Education (University Degree, Diploma etc.)	4	0	1
Job Apprenticeship	0	2	2
Lower Education	0	0	2

### **Procedure**

The participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Each of the 14 researchers recruited between 10 and 20 participants. Via Email, they were provided with information about the study. The baseline survey measured demographic characteristics and personality. One week later, the participants were confronted with the following instruction: Please describe one or more situations wherein you flourish: What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think? When you describe such situations, try to think about how you function as a person, how you function as a person in relation to others and /or how you function as a person in relation

to society. Again they were asked to answer as honest and detailed as possible and to type 150-600 words.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

To analyze the narratives, a coding scheme was developed based on several rounds of reading selected narratives and finding common topics to adjust codes. It should cover all topics mentioned by the participants when answering the previously named open question.

To develop this coding scheme many rounds of coding and adjusting were conducted. This process involved a first round of reading through a few of the 30 used narratives to get an overall impression and define broad code categories. It was decided that due to the diversity of answers it is best to code every sentence individually. Most of the time participants structured their narratives around different topics which they associate with flourishing. Sentences or paragraphs belonging to the same topic are coded together. When an aspect was mentioned which related to the topic but represents a new insight or point of focus it was assigned a code separately, even if it belongs to the same code as the sentence before.

The further developmental process of the coding scheme consisted of reading the narratives and logically defining topics that can be grouped in relation to the research question. After the first round, a very high number of codes and sub-codes was established. But due to the limited number of participants such a high number would result in insignificant differences in results. So it was decided to keep the codes as general as possible but still as specific as needed. The four codes now built the main ground of analysis and divide all mentioned aspects in very broad categories (Table 2). The previously formulated sub-codes will be regarded as topics during the later qualitative interpretation of the results.

The final version consists of the four codes Positive Social Experiences, Personal Growth, Satisfaction and comfort and Profound interest. A sufficient Cohens Kappa of 0.724 was calculated by testing interrater reliability using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.

Table 2

*Coding scheme of factors constituting flourishing with example quotations and frequencies per code*

Code	Definition	Example Code	Frequency
Positive Experiences	Social Experiences of social nature which are perceived in some way as positive and pleasant by the individual. Conditions which are associated with improved general social well-being of the individual also fall in this category.	“Also in my occupational environment I experience those moments of happiness in the contact with my customers [...] or just having an interesting and stimulating conversation.” (3078)	42%
Personal Growth	All internal and/or external conditions that let the individual experience personal development towards one’s full potential or make the person aware of that process.	“I have the feeling to experience flourishing when I reach the goals I set for myself [...]” (3114)	25%
Satisfaction and Comfort	Experiencing a state of inner satisfaction or comfort triggered by the absence and/or presence of internal and/or external conditions. It is often characterized by the feeling of security, stability or peace.	“I am able to flourish when I don’t have to worry.” (3158)	20%
Profound Interest	Engaging in activity mentally, physically or verbally that is regarded with deep interest and characterized by a favorable attitude towards it. Often a sense of meaning and inner fulfilment is derived from it. Sometimes it can be described as passion.	“I flourish for example in situations in which I follow my passion, film making.” (3002)	13%

## Results

In total, 170 fragments were coded. These fragments constituted data from 27 participants and 30 narratives. The inequality of participants and data can be explained by the fact that three participants fulfilled the inclusion criteria for two of the six groups. Hence, their narratives were analyzed twice and serve as data for both groups the specific participant got assigned to. The answer length of all five narratives varied for the six groups between 600-800 words.

### Four Categories of Flourishing

As a result of analyzing all narratives, it could be observed that there was a strong variation in how frequent the four major categories were mentioned in the narratives (Table 2). The category of positive social experiences was most frequently mentioned by participants (42%), followed by personal growth (25%), satisfaction and comfort (20%) and lastly, profound interest (13%)

**Positive Social Relationships.** Compared to the other categories, positive social relationship shows the highest frequency and covers with 42% nearly half of all coded data. Only two of the 30 narratives did not contain any information about positive relationships, demonstrating distribution throughout the whole sample. This category includes company of close persons such as in “When I have a good time with my family, on holiday or at home, I am happy.” and “Then my friends help to just be in the moment and have fun without thinking about other problems which need a solution in my life.”. Participants emphasize especially the presence and time spend with close friends and family members as a source of flourishing. Next to that, working in a group and being part of a team leads participants to experiencing flourishing. This is reflected through the quotes: “Getting along as a team, working towards a common goal and sharing the euphoria on and next to the pitch is very satisfying.” and “Personally, I flourish in my daily work when I can process the construction site with my colleagues qualitatively and economically [...]”. Engaging in social interactions which are perceived as positive also results in a flourishing experience for many participants. Examples here are “Here I can just be myself, we laugh together, all problems are faded out for that time. I feel accepted from everyone, we laugh about the same things and can talk about everything.” and “Also in my occupational environment I experience moments of happiness in contact with my customers, when I can assist in finding solutions to problems or just have an interesting and fruitful conversation.”. Another social activator of flourishing for some participants is the action of helping other people. For some participants this means providing emotional support in some way like in “I am especially happy when I can give people with my help and support a feeling

of happiness through my emphatic nature.”. Others provide their help more through practical means: “Cooking something for my friends or family makes me happy.”. Another social topic which leads some participants in a flourishing state is receiving appreciation and assurance by other people such as in “Assurance by others gives me a nice feeling and I feel as if I gained new energy.” and “It makes me proud to achieve something which is liked by others.”. Lastly, improved social well-being is mentioned in relation to this category. In contrast to the other topics, improved social well-being is experienced as a result of flourishing, rather than being a factor that results in the experience of flourishing. Social well-being is mainly understood in terms of being more socially open, like “I would say in these situations I function better, especially in relation to other people because I am in a better mood then and more willing meet and go out with people.”. For some, this social openness is additionally associated with the experience of social confidence as an effect of flourishing: “I feel well and because of that I have more courage to be outgoing.”.

**Personal Growth.** The category of personal growth also shows quite some diversity in topics that belong in this category mentioned by the participants. Clearly, the most often mentioned topic here is the action of successfully achieving a goal like “I also have the feeling to experience flourishing when I reached the goals I set for myself, for example when I successfully worked on my goals for sport etc. [...]”. All other topics relate in some way to the aspect of goal achievement. In accordance, becoming aware of the own efforts through a desired manifestation of the own achievements is mentioned as a huge activator of flourishing. Examples here are: “Seeing a picture of me in the daily newspaper with a text about my efforts below it.” and “When something positive happens to me, even if it is a small thing such as reaching a high score on a test [...] I become happy.”. Next to that, the positive feelings that come along with the goal achievement are emphasized. This included on the one hand pride as reflected by “I feel good afterwards and am proud that I function so well.”. On the other hand, and mentioned most often as a feeling related to personal growth is high self-efficacy as well as high confidence in the own actions like in “Through that I become more self-confident and have more trust in my abilities [...]” and “I was less nervous and because of that, confident and secure in my work. That gave me confidence and confirmation that I do my work well.”.

**Satisfaction and Comfort.** In the category of satisfaction and comfort common topics that were mentioned by participants include the feeling to be in a secure environment. On the one hand this secure environment can be constituted through social means such as in “My friends know me well and accept me the way I am. I can talk with them about everything which makes me feel secure and confident.”. On the other hand, the personal meaning assigned to an

actual place is emphasized: “When I work as a potman in the restaurant in which I work for over five years now [...] I move in an environment which demands I have handled successfully many times by now.”. Secondly, the possibility of being able to relax after engaging in activity which is perceived as demanding or stressful is often mentioned by participants. Examples here are “Having the weekend off, after working hard for university the whole week. I find it great to be able to do nothing for a few days without any mandatory tasks [...]” and “Especially, after a stressful week in university I look forward to an evening with my best friends. [...] all problems are blended out during this time.”.

Another topic can be described as experiencing a comforted state of mind. This topic can be divided further into different aspects. Some participants stress the experience of being free of negative thought like “This are moments in which I have less negative thoughts.”. Others, emphasize more the positive feelings of satisfaction that come with a comforted state of mind such as in “Then I am happy and satisfied with myself and my life and think how comfortable I feel and how I do not want to change the situation in any other direction.” and “In the just mentioned situations I have a fulfilling, satisfied but not euphoric yet positive feeling, for me this reflects flourishing.”. Other participants describe a comforted state of mind in a form of mental balance or emotional stability. This is reflected through “On those evenings I go home with a balanced mind.” or, “I was just happy the whole day and had the feeling nothing can disturb my peace now [...]”.

**Profound Interest.** In the profound interest category less variation in topics could be found than for the other codes. Firstly, in order to flourish, most participants who wrote content related to this code mention the engagement in activity that is perceived as interesting or enjoyable. Examples here are “I feel flourishing when something really catches my interest and I experience joy to engage more intensively in that activity.” and “Moreover, I get this feeling when engaging in my favorite sport.”. In accordance with engaging in interesting activity some participants describe the feelings they get from that and how these contribute to their flourishing experience such as in “I get more enthusiastic and efficient.” and “In other life situations I often feel weaken by problems, but when making films those problems motivate me in a positive way. This is for me the core of flourishing.”.

Table 3

*Overview of the frequencies and percentages of coded fragments (N = 170) derived from 30 narratives written by 27 participants. Per personality trait, 10 narratives were analyzed, of which 5 narratives belonged to those participants scoring low on the trait and 5 narratives belonged to those scoring high on the trait. Percentages relate to the total 170 fragments.*

	Extraversion			Conscientiousness			Neuroticism			Total n (%)
	Low n (%)	High n (%)	<i>p</i>	Low n (%)	High n (%)	<i>p</i>	Low n (%)	High n (%)	<i>p</i>	
Positive Social Experiences	15 (9)	10 (6)	0.084	10 (6)	10 (6)	0.461	13 (7)	14 (8)	0.727	72 (42)
Personal Growth	0 (0)	12 (7)	<0.001	4 (2)	10 (6)	0.174	8 (5)	8 (5)	0.945	42 (25)
Satisfaction and Comfort	3 (1)	5 (3)	0.549	4 (2)	6 (4)	0.788	10 (6)	6 (4)	0.281	34 (20)
Profound Interest	8 (5)	2 (1)	0.022	3 (1)	1 (2)	0.188	3 (1)	5 (3)	0.425	22 (13)

### **Differences in Personality and Flourishing**

After establishing and categorizing commonly mentioned topics by participants when describing a situation perceived as flourishing, the differences in personality will be taken into account in relation to the descriptions. Table 3 depicts the percentual division of the 170 coded fragments with a division in the three analyzed personality traits, as well as the significance of the difference between the low and high level scores of each trait and for each code. As can be seen from table 3 except for two conditions, all differences between low and high trait levels are not significant. This is stated with using a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ . In the following, detected differences, as well as the acceptability of the formulated hypotheses will be reported.

With a highly significant difference ( $p = <0.001$ ) analysis indicates that compared to participants with low levels on trait extraversion, participants with high levels on trait extraversion do write significantly more often about topics related to personal growth, when they describe a situation as flourishing. The low-extraversion group mentioned no content at all which can be related to the personal growth code. For the whole study this is the only case where a group, whether high or low on any of the three traits, could not be assigned a code at least once. Data of highly extraverted participants on the contrary, was assigned with the personal growth code 7% of the total 170 fragments. With that, the personal growth code got assigned most often to highly extraverted participants. The main topic mentioned by the high extraversion group in relation to this code is the successful achievement of goals as in “Winning a game or competition puts me in a good mood.” In relation to this, feelings of high self-efficacy, “How I function as a person: Efficient, effective.” as well as confidence in the own actions, “What I think: That I do the right thing, thinking about the next steps to do, in this case, my learning even better.” are emphasized.

For the profound interest category assigned to the extraversion groups the second significant difference of this study could be found ( $p = 0.022$ ). Here, a percentage of five for the low-extraversion group can be compared to one percent of data which was covered with this code. Again, these percentages are in relation to all coded fragments. On a qualitative base, members of the low-extraversion group mention well-liked hobbies or activities as a source of flourishing represented by “Further situations are when I engage generally in hobbies or something in which I can realize my own interests.” Other examples for those hobbies or activities are “Museum visits, reading books, watching movies [...]”. The high-extraversion group shows with a frequency of two very little varieties in topics. One person here focusses on profound interest in the coping process with demands to reach a certain goal: “Studying for an examination. What I do: I use my times optimally while I prepare for the exam. (I create

summaries and internalize them).”. Well-liked hobbies are not mentioned by this group as an activator of flourishing.

The positive social relationships category represents the topics predicted in hypothesis one (h1). The category of positive social relationships shows a marginal significant difference ( $p = 0.084$ ) in frequencies between the low and high extraversion group, indicating that compared to participants with low levels on trait extraversion, participants with high levels on trait extraversion do not write more often about social contact and social attention in their narratives, when they describe a situation as flourishing (h1). The result here even suggest that compared to participants with low levels on trait extraversion, participants with high levels on trait extraversion write less often about social contact and social attention in their narratives, when they describe a situation as flourishing. However, due to its marginal significance this result should be regarded as a tendency rather than a statistical proof.

No significant differences were found between the low and the high group for each conscientiousness and neuroticism. This indicates that compared to participants with low levels on trait conscientiousness, participants with high levels on trait conscientiousness, do not show significant differences in their descriptions of a situation as perceived flourishing. Also, participants with low levels on trait neuroticism, participants with high levels on trait neuroticism, do not show significant differences in their descriptions of a situation as perceived flourishing. These findings speak in favor of rejecting h2 and h3.

## **Discussion**

### **Overview of Findings**

The aim of the present study was to examine what people describe as a situation perceived as flourishing and how people’s descriptions of a situation perceived as flourishing differ in relation to their levels on the big five personality traits. In general, the descriptions of a situation perceived as flourishing could be categorized into the four domains, positive social experiences, personal growth, satisfaction and comfort and profound interest, of which positive social relationships was found to be most important in order to flourish. Moreover, findings suggest that, compared to highly extraverted participants, participants low in extraversion attribute significantly less importance to personal growth related aspects but significantly more importance to profound interest related aspects, when they flourish. The descriptions of a flourishing situation by each low vs. high end conscientiousness as well as neuroticism participants indicated not significant differences in the importance participants attribute to certain topics when describing a flourishing situation.

### **Positive Social Relationships as a Crucial Condition of Flourishing**

Findings of this study clearly indicate that positive social relationships are central for the flourishing of the whole sample. In other and simpler words, everyone needs positive social relationships, to some extent, in order to flourish.

Numerous existing literatures share the conviction that positive social relationships are crucial for one's mental health. Models such as PERMA or a six-factor model of psychological well-being, both see positive relations with others as a key component making up mental health. (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2012). Empirical research also confirms this view, by showing that good social relationships are the only absolutely necessary factor in order to be a happy person and emphasizing the importance of social support for experiencing flourishing (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Schotanus-Dijkstra et. al., 2015; Fink, 2014).

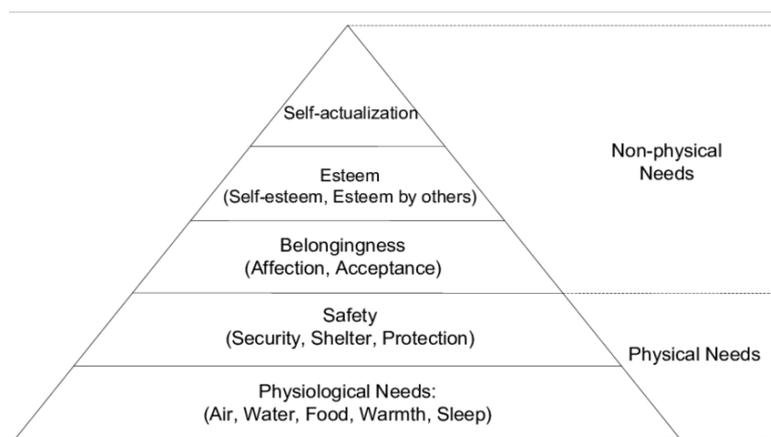
In context of Self-Determination Theory, the three basic psychological needs autonomy, competence and relatedness are formulated. These are said to be innate and universal. Frustration of those needs will result in loss of various aspects making up overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Satisfaction of this needs, on the other hand, results in flourishing (Ryan, Curren & Deci, 2013). The need for competence refers to a need of being in secure social environment which allows open expression of one's capacities and thus delivers social interactions which help to build and form the own character (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Secondly, relatedness refers to the human need to experience a sense of belonging and perceiving other's as caring and sensitive to the own character. Other research finds relatedness to even be the best predictor of flourishing, compared to autonomy and competence (Mesurado, Salanga, & Mateo, 2016). Conclusively, SDT and this study's findings are in line, since SDT includes basic concepts, related to positive social relationships, as a universal, high order human need.

Literature demonstrates consensus about the importance of positive social relationships for flourishing and mental well-being. What the current study adds, are deeper insights into the understanding of these positive relations by categorizing related topics. Findings indicate that diverse conditions, such as company of close persons, positive interactions, being part of a group, or helping others can contribute to the experience of a positive social relation and thus ultimately in flourishing.

### **Personality Differences and Flourishing**

**Extraversion, Personal Growth and Flourishing.** For the extraversion dimension, literature suggests differences of the importance positive social relationships have for flourishing (Costa & McCrae, 1988). Against expectations, no significant difference on the positive social relationships category but on the personal growth category was found for the

extraversion group. Participants low in extraversion actually attribute outstandingly low importance to personal growth for their flourishing experience, compared to high extraverts. No literature exists on the connection between extraversion and personal growth. Still, this finding can be aligned with some theory. The theory of basic human needs developed by Maslow in 1943 (Figure 1), claims that the next step on the hierarchy is only reached or desired if the ones before are sufficiently satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Transferred onto the flourishing concept it could be inferred that a state of flourishing is reached when the most desired need is sufficiently satisfied, which also is in line with earlier described SDT (Ryan et al., 2013). Maslow (1943) does not differentiate between people with different personalities but proposes his model for every individual. If it is the case that highly extraverted people face the same set of needs as low extraverted people, it stands to reason that these groups of people must be at different stages on the hierarchy and with that, have different needs perceived as desired in order to flourish.



*Figure 1.* Hierachy of human needs by Maslow

It can be assumed that physical needs and safety needs are satisfied due to Germany being the place of living for the whole sample. Introverted people, have probably more of a hard time establishing a satisfying amount and quality of social relationships and fulfill their needs for belongingness due to their social passivity. This results in heightened desire for positive social relations, just because they have the hardest time establishing those experiences. Extraverted people on the other hand, have their belongingness or social needs well satisfied due to their socially open personality, providing them with larger social networks and support as well as the feeling of belongingness (Swickert, Rosentreter, Hittner, & Mushrush, 2002). When transferring the personal growth category on Maslow's hierarchy, it could be seen as equivalent to the highest stage of self-actualization and partly to the second highest stage in terms of need for self-esteem, prestige or accomplishment. These stages are of greater importance for high extraverts when it comes to flourishing, since they have their belongingness

needs already satisfied. Because for people low in extraversion the central need lies in social belongingness and is mostly not sufficiently satisfied, these people do not regard personal growth as essential for their flourishing.

Qualitative findings of the current study support the connection with Maslow's hierarchy, indicating that high extraverts emphasize goal achievement and high self-efficacy. Although only found to be marginally significantly different, low extraverts express their need for belongingness through their emphasis of company of close persons. High extraverts express appreciation by others and social confidence as essential for their flourishing which shows that social factors constituting their flourishing create the transition to personal growth needs.

**Extraversion, Profound Interest and Flourishing.** For participant's low in extraversion, engaging in activity which is perceived as profoundly interesting, is significantly more important in relation to their flourishing than it is the case for highly extraverted people. First of all, it is to notice that on a qualitative level, those profoundly interesting activities are mainly constituted as hobbies or following the own interest, such as reading books or visiting a museum. Extraverts reported no preference of those interests.

Research suggests that extraverts choose to do much more dynamic and social activities in their leisure time, compared to introverts who tend to avoid those activities (Furnham, 1981; Furnham, 2004). Thus, qualitative findings of the current study are in line with existing research by showing non-dynamic and non-social activity preference for people low in extraversion. On the other hand, existing literature does not provide any evidence for less extraverted people to gain more pleasure from activities perceived as profoundly interesting than extraverts do. An explanation of this surprising finding could be given when taking the coding process into account. Extraverts have been found to use their leisure time to engage in social contact which satisfies their strong social motives (Brandstätter, 1994). From that, it can be reasoned that highly extraverted people do engage in activities perceived as profoundly interesting, but those are of social nature. In the coding process, these were most likely to fall into the category of positive social relationships rather than profound interest which could play a role in explaining the significant difference for low and high extraverts here. Still, interesting results can be inferred from that observation. Qualitative findings suggest that there is a difference in what is perceived as profoundly interesting and ultimately what is perceived as so interesting that it triggers a flourishing experience. For less extraverted participants this interest lies more in non-dynamic and non-social activities which are perceived as interesting themselves. Highly extraverted participants find this interest that triggers flourishing in social situations, which are not only enjoyed because of the social factor itself but also because of them perceiving social

encounters as interesting in general. This contributes more to their flourishing than the engagement in hobbies or solitary activities.

### **Interpretation of Insignificant Findings**

In contrast to extraversion, for the traits conscientiousness and neuroticism, not a single significant difference between the low and high end group was found in the level of importance they attribute to the four categories constituting flourishing. This finding suggests that the level on conscientiousness and neuroticism does not have a major influence on what general aspects constitute a person's experience of flourishing.

Existing literature contradicts this finding, stating that there are indeed differences. Highly conscientious people value accomplishment and organization more than low conscientious ones. For high neuroticism, positive relationships, in which one feels liked and cared for, are found to be of value (Costa & McCrae, 1988). However, not much literature exists which examines the influence of conscientiousness and neuroticism on the way a person flourishes. So, although studies share the view that conscientiousness and neuroticism influence if a person flourishes or not, the current study implies that both traits do not yet influence the way a person flourishes (Villieux, Sovet, Jung, & Guilbert, 2016; Schotanus-Dijkstra et. al., 2015).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this study is the qualitative approach. It opens up the possibility to give detailed answers and express thoughts without restrictions. This contributes to gaining a clearer picture of a person's beliefs and values (Choy, 2014). Through that, a much more accurate, logical and honest impression of a participant's way of flourishing could be captured.

Another strength is, in form of the HEXACO-60, the reliable measurement method that was used to assess participants' personalities. As demonstrated in the method section, this questionnaire is validated to give an accurate picture of a person's personality.

Thirdly, the study design is very cost-efficient. No financial expenses were needed for implementing this study, presupposed time and general computer programs needed for research (Word, SPSS etc.) are an available resource. This makes this study easily replicable.

Probably the most impactful limitation of this study is the small sample size. Each of the six groups just consisted of five participants. Thus, the results for each group whether qualitatively or quantitatively are based on only five narratives. Although the participant pool of people who answered the personality questionnaire as well as wrote a narrative was consisting of a larger number, no more participants were available whose scores would allow them to be put into the lower or higher group of any trait. The small sample limits the representability of this study and

does not allow generalizing findings onto bigger populations. Further, reliability is restricted since p-values are calculated with few data, which in turn heightens the possibility for finding false-positives or false-negatives. So, correct significance as well as insignificance of results can be ensured better with a larger sample size (Hackshaw, 2008).

A second limitation is the qualitative approach. What limits the study here is that participant's narratives vary in answer lengths. So if a participant was more talkative or expressive in their way of description this means that a code was more often assigned. For example, if a variety of example situations were given which relate to the same code but emphasize different aspects of it. Then this participant of course contributed more to the frequency of a code than a participant who gave very short descriptions. In combination with the first limitation of a small sample, a talkative participant could impact the study results to some extent. On the other hand, average answer length was relatively similar for all groups. 600-800 words for every group (five low + five high) imply that even if one participant wrote more, a participant in the same group wrote less, so that in the end not much variation between groups was evident.

The third limitation is that the Hexaco-60 was used to assess the personality traits of the participants who were chosen to be included in the actual study. Although many studies ensure its psychometric properties, the Hexaco-100 would be even better here to get a more accurate picture of an individual's personality, since it shows even better psychometric properties (Ashton & Lee, 2009). However, this would mean much more effort for participants which could have negative consequences on the willingness to participation and on the maintaining of participants' concentration.

A fourth limitation is that participants' narratives were analyzed based on their levels on only one personality trait. The chosen analysis of the study excluded the possibility for a combined analysis based on all trait levels of a participant. So, a participant's narrative was analyzed only under the light of her level on one of the Big Five personality traits. Including the levels on the remaining traits into analyses could have given even more insight into how a flourishing experience is related to the whole character of a person and not just to a personality trait that is possessed to a high degree. Nevertheless, this would increase complexity as well as work load to a large extent and would not be in line with the resources of this study.

### **Future Research and Practical Implications**

Findings of the current study imply that there are only few differences in the way a flourishing experience is constituted for different persons. This seems to limit the influence personality has on flourishing. However, finding differences even in a small sample allows the assumption that there is the possibility of finding more differences in future studies and making the differences that were found better visible. Due to the lack of existing studies analyzing the factors that constitute a flourishing experience, as well as their relation to personality traits, more qualitative studies on this topic are needed. With that, results can be compared directly and flaws in study design can be better detected. Future research should aim at avoiding impactful limitations of this study. Main emphasis here lies on establishing a larger sample size to gain representative and reliable results. Work from the current study can still help in further developing fitting coding schemes and underlining tendencies of differences. If research gets deeper insights into personalities influence on the way a person flourishes, this can be used in all kinds of therapeutic settings. Just by conducting a personality test, therapists would get direction in what a client needs in order live a flourishing life and could develop new approaches tailored at the different desires based on personality traits. For better understanding, future research should try to compare all personality traits simultaneously when conducting analyses, in order to understand the relation between flourishing and a person's whole character instead of individual traits.

### **Conclusion**

The results demonstrated that aspects of positive relations were most often mentioned when laypersons described the concept of flourishing, which is in line with theoretical concepts of well-being wherein positive relations has a prominent role. Further, findings indicate that there are significant differences observable in how participants describe a situation perceived as flourishing depending only on their levels on trait extraversion. Specifically, low extraverted participants attributed more importance to the execution of hobbies and interesting activities for their flourishing, which is not in accordance with existing research, but could be caused by the coding process of this study. Highly extraverted participants on the other hand, attributed more importance to personal growth aspects, with specific focus on goal achievement, which is replicated by other empirical studies but fits to the concept of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Further investigation of factors constituting flourishing and their relation to personality should aim at enhancing representability of results by implementing a similar qualitative study design in a larger sample.

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