i²
media**research**

The Power of Nice:

A study exploring the relationship between participant ratings of how 'nice' they are, their behaviour, and their reported levels of health, happiness and success

Independent Report

Prepared by i2 media research limited

on behalf of low cost airline and holiday company Monarch

Authors: Eva Ferrari and Prof. Jonathan Freeman

Introduction

In February 2017, original omnibus research commissioned on behalf of Monarch revealed the anecdotal benefits of being nice, including how 'nice' positively correlates with self-reported levels of health, happiness and wellbeing. This new study by i2 media research limited at Goldsmiths University of London, took the omnibus research and looked deeper into the findings using science.

The aim of the study was to explore what 'nice' really means when broken down into the psychological constructs of emotional intelligence (EI), personality variables of empathy and agreeableness, and self-reported ratings of altruism. It also looked at the everyday stressors or difficult experiences even 'nice' people report as making them 'lose their nice', and explored the hypothesis that 'nice' people are better at dealing with them than their less 'nice' counterparts. It went further to explore scientifically if nice people generally enjoy happier and more fulfilling lives.

This question has been studied previously in relation to the concept of emotional intelligence. EI describes how well a person is able to read the emotions and goals of other people, be aware of their own emotions, and manage how they present themselves in a way that best supports their goals in an interaction with another person. Previously published research has shown that people higher in EI are better at dealing with stressful stimuli presented to them in laboratory based studies.[1]

We put this to the test by asking 100 participants to complete a series of psychological research measures before a selection took part in two lab-based demonstrations.
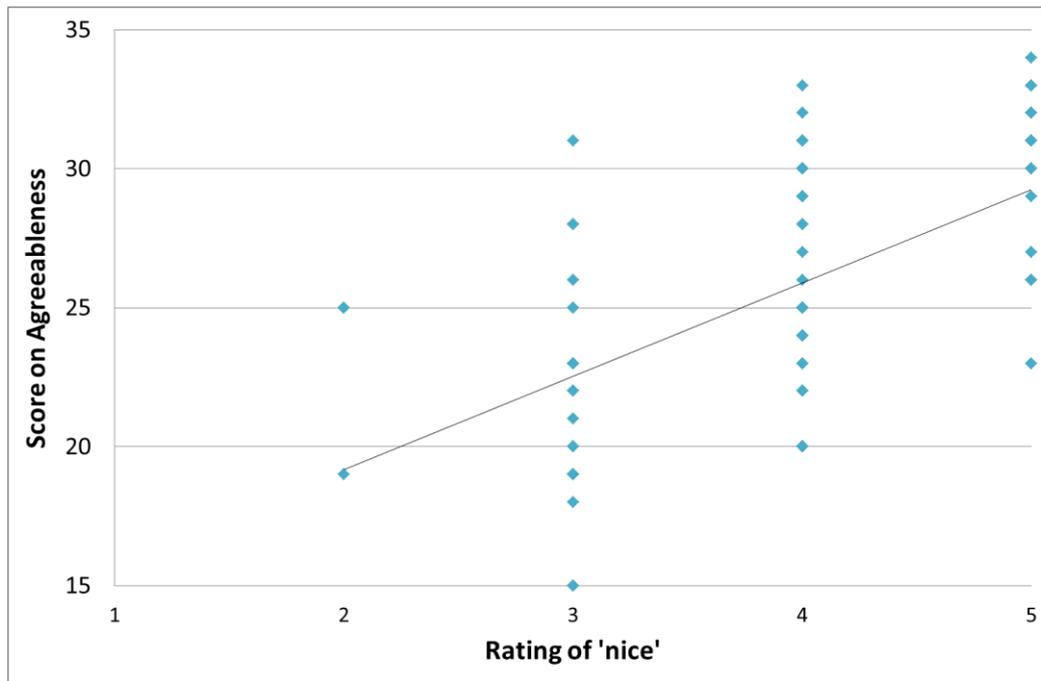
Results

1. How is 'Nice' related to psychological variables?

First, we had to define what 'nice' really means in psychological terms.

Whereas 'nice' is used in common parlance and well understood, when used to describe a person it is by definition not very specific. A key goal of this study therefore was to describe nice in terms of better defined, validated psychological measures and scales. Specifically, we explored how participants' ratings of how 'nice' they consider themselves to be are related to their emotional intelligence (EI), their agreeableness, their empathy, and self-ratings of altruism, compassion, trust and consideration.

Our results show that how 'nice' people rate themselves is significantly correlated with agreeableness, trust, compassion, consideration, empathy, emotional intelligence, altruism, and extraversion. So far, so good – we now know what nice really means and how to measure it. This is illustrated in the graph below, showing the relation between agreeableness and ratings of 'nice'.

---

[1] Previous studies include tests where participants are required to keep their hand submerged in icy water for as long as they can bear the pain (known as the cold pressor task), and difficult mental arithmetic tasks (e.g. counting down in steps of 7 from a 4 digit starting number). *Schneider, T. R., et al. (2013) Emotional intelligence and resilience. Personality and Individual Differences,* http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2013.07.460

These results are consistent with those reported in other studies.[2]

2. What makes people lose their 'Nice'?

So 'nice' is meaningful in psychological terms. But even generally 'nice' people are not *always* 'nice'. Unless a person is too 'nice' there are always going to be times, situations and contexts ('tipping points') where adaptively they lose their 'nice' – or act in ways that are less than nice than they usually would do. Our research looked at these 'tipping points' and the extent to which these triggers caused even nice participants to lose their nice. Results showed the following in rank order:

Selection of tipping points (situations/events people agree makes them 'lose their nice')	Agree/Strongly Agree
Rudeness	73.4%
Losing an important item or document (e.g. passport, wallet, keys)	59.4%
Bad service (e.g. inattentiveness, unhelpfulness or negligence)	57.1%
Discourteous or inconsiderate behaviour (e.g. people pushing onto a train before people have left it, loud mobile phone conversations)	53.8%
Forgetting an important event (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, meetings)	53.1%
Noise based stresses (e.g. unruly children, alarms sounding)	46.5%
Confrontation (e.g. arguments or disagreements)	44.6%
Frustrating time-based situations (e.g. delays, traffic, queues)	38.5%
Acute stress (e.g. near miss, people spilling wine or food in your house)	26.2%
High-pressure scenarios (e.g. interviews or exams)	9.4%

[2] Egan, S. J., Vinciguerra, T., & Mazzucchelli, T. G. (2015). The role of perfectionism, agreeableness, and neuroticism in predicting dyadic adjustment. Australian Journal Of Psychology, 67(1), 1-9. doi:10.1111/ajpy.12038

As shown in the table above, the events and situations which the highest proportion of participants reported as 'tipping points' for them 'losing their nice' related to rudeness (73%), losing important items or documents (59%) or bad customer service (57%). Contrary to expectation, these were more often cited triggers than confrontation, noise-based stress and high-pressure scenarios such as exams or interviews.

*People who rate themselves as nicer are less likely to 'lose their nice',
indicating they can deal with stress better than others in their everyday lives*

Interestingly, people who rated themselves as 'very nice' or 'quite a bit' nice were significantly less likely to report that some of the situations/ events would trigger them to lose their nice. People who rated themselves at the higher end of the 'nice' scale, were significantly less likely to report that they 'lose their nice' over bad service or a confrontation, in particular.

3. What is 'Nice' in practice?

So, we now know what 'nice' means and what makes people 'lose their nice', but how about the types of things that people do when they're not 'losing their nice'? The participants reported the frequency with which they have done any of the following 'nice' things for others, and the ranked results are shown below.

Nice behaviours	Often/whenever I can
Given directions to a stranger	82.8%
Delayed an elevator and held the door for a stranger	79.7%
Given your seat on the bus/train to an elderly or pregnant lady	78.5%
Bought 'charity' Christmas cards deliberately because you knew it was a good cause	64.6%
Donated time or money to a charitable cause	63.1%
Helped a colleague or classmate I didn't know well with an assignment since I had more knowledge than them	49.2%
Volunteered to look after a neighbour or friend's pets or children	41.3%
Helped someone carry heavy bags	32.8%
Helped push a stranger's car that was broken down	32.8%
Sacrificed an old birthday or wedding present for a charity donation	30.8%
Let a neighbour who I didn't know well borrow an item of some value (e.g. a dish, tools, etc.)	30.8%
Helped someone cross a road	28.1%
Donated blood	23.1%
Helped an acquaintance move house or do DIY	21.5%
Given money to a stranger who asked for it	16.9%

'Nice' people are more likely do 'nice' things for others than those who rate themselves as less 'nice'

'Nice' people are significantly more likely to report doing 'nice' things for others than people who rated themselves as less nice. People who rated themselves at the higher end of the 'nice' scale, were significantly more likely to report that they frequently help someone carry heavy bags, push a stranger's broken down car, and hold lift doors to allow someone else to get in.

4. What are the tangible benefits of being 'nice' and having high emotional intelligence?

There is a significant relationship between participants' ratings of how 'nice' they are and their ratings of being relaxed, happy, healthy and successful—as well as how well they are able to take criticism. Nicer people report being more happy, more healthy and more fulfilled in their careers. The graph below shows how people who rate themselves as 'nicer' also rate themselves to be happier.
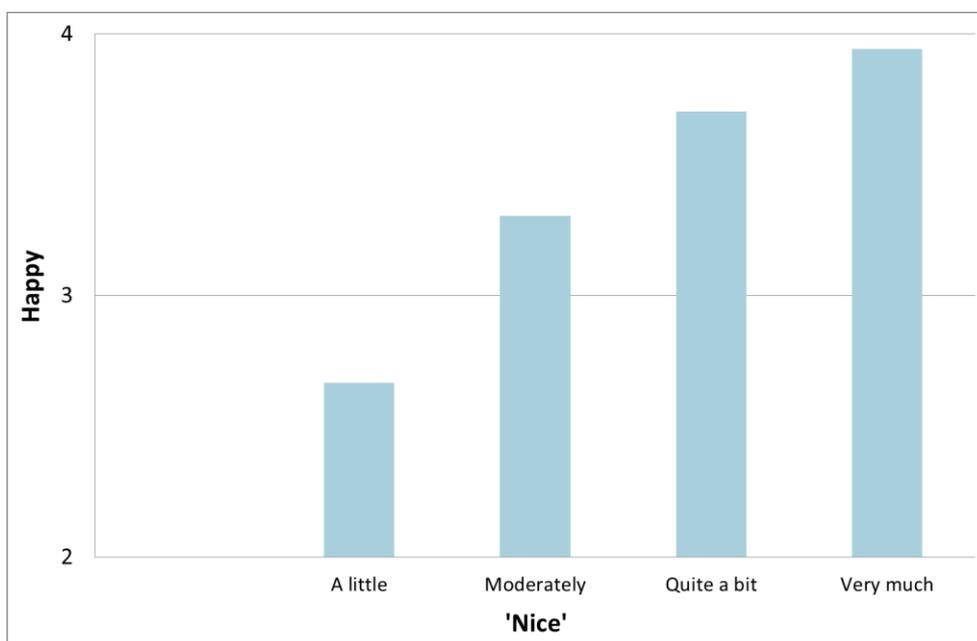
There was also a trend towards higher ratings of 'nice' being associated with the number of close friends participants reported.

People who reported higher income scored higher on emotional intelligence

Consistent with previously published research[3] results showed a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and income, in this study participants with a high level of emotional intelligence (EI) were more likely to have a higher income.[4]

[3] Abhishek Shukla and Rajeev Srivastava, 2016. Meta Analysis of the Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Different Behavioral Intentions. Research Journal of Business Management, 10: 58-73. DOI: 10.3923/rjbm.2016.58.73 URL: http://scialert.net/abstract/?doi=rjbm.2016.58.73

[4] orkan Ahmetoglu, , Franziska Leutner, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2011) EQ-nomics: Understanding the relationship between individual differences in Trait Emotional Intelligence and entrepreneurship. Personality and Individual Differences, Volume 51, Issue 8, December 2011, Pages 1028–1033

i2 media research

5. How did Monarch employees score on the test?

In addition to members of the public, a randomly selected sample of Monarch employees were put through the same 'nice' test.

Monarch employees scored significantly higher than the general sample on agreeableness and empathy

Based on the sample tested, Monarch employees scored higher compared to the rest of the sample on levels of emotional intelligence and scored significantly higher on agreeableness and empathy (perspective taking, empathic concern) and on the study's measures of altruism, compassion, and consideration.

6. The lab based demo

As part of the study, two lab based demonstrations were used to explore how participants reacted to different stressors. This was then compared with their results from the psychological research measures to observe, qualitatively, expected patterns between how nice someone is and how they react to stress.

The first comprised a compilation of audio-visual stimuli showing footage of different events, circumstances and occurrences that had previously been identified in the omnibus research as causing high levels of negative arousal – or stress – in participants. Examples included overcrowded underground stations, crying children and high pressure scenarios such as interviews or exams. When presented with these stimuli, participants' reactions were captured using Facereader™ technology, which projects a mesh onto a video of participants' faces to pick up micro expressions such as slight twitching of the eyes, furrowing of brows or movement of their lips.

The second was a timed endurance test where candidates were played a very loud, aversive noise through headphones (simulating a stressful event) and asked to press a 'stop' button when they could no longer tolerate it.

The lab sessions provided positive qualitative demonstrations in support of the hypothesis that 'nice' participants – or those with a higher level of EI, empathy and altruism - were able to endure stress, and maintain more composure when presented with difficult situations.

In line with this, of the Monarch employees who took part in the lab demo, 60% were able to listen to the aversive sound up to the time limit set for the demo. This suggests that they have good strategies for managing the frustration and annoyance they experienced whilst being exposed to the aversive sound. Whilst it is of course possible that the Monarch employees were trying especially hard during the demonstration, it is important to note that these observations are consistent with what we would predict, as being aware of and able to control your reactions to emotive situations is a component of emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

To sum up, the main findings of this research are that:

1. How 'nice' people rate themselves to be is significantly related to their emotional intelligence (EI) scores, and to the psychological constructs such as empathy, agreeableness, and ratings of altruism.
2. Selected top tipping points that make people 'lose their nice' were identified as:
   o Rudeness (73%)
   o Losing important items or documents (59%)
   o Bad customer service (57%)
3. Higher self-reports of being 'nice' were associated with lower agreement that situations/ events are 'tipping points' that make participants 'lose their nice'.
4. The top 'nice' behaviours (to others) were identified as:
   o Giving directions to strangers (83%)
   o Holding doors or elevators for strangers (80%)
   o Giving seats on public transport to those in need (79.5%)
5. Higher self-reports of being 'nice' were associated with doing more 'nice' things for others in the practical sense
6. Monarch employees in our sample scored significantly higher than the remainder of the sample on agreeableness and empathy (perspective taking, empathic concern), and significantly higher on altruism, compassion, and consideration.
7. Negative facial expressions, indicating stress, were clearly visible in participants' reactions to the aversive stimuli, but consistent with them being 'nice' and scoring higher on EI these were not as pronounced as we sometimes observe.
8. 60% of Monarch employees demonstrated high resilience to the aversive noise stimulus, showing their high tolerance for stress and frustration.

Methodology

The data was collected through a bespoke questionnaire that was developed by i2 media research to explore what 'nice' means in terms of specific psychological constructs. Alongside answering questions about how nice, healthy, happy and stressed they perceived being, participants completed a series of psychological research measures assessing their:

- Agreeableness,
- Empathy
- Emotional Intelligence

Participants were also asked about the frequency with which they tend to perform specific pro-social behaviours, as well as to report on the effect that certain unpleasant situations have on their mood (i.e., make them 'lose their nice').

A lab based demonstration was also conducted at i2 media research's laboratory. Here, 10 people took part in the demonstration in which they were required to perform two different tasks, each involving a specific stressful/aversive stimulus:

- watching a 5 minute video compilation representing typical stressful situations (e.g. traffic, confrontation, children's tantrums, awkward situations, etc.)
- listen to an aversive sound played at high volume for as long as possible.

Facereader^{TM}, a software tool for automatic analysis of facial expressions was used as a demonstration of the measurement of the volunteers' emotional responses as they were exposed to both stimuli. The software can be used to score a person's facial expression, frame by frame, according to how much of 7 discrete emotions their face is portraying: sadness, happiness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise, neutral.

(Picture by Noldus Information Technology http://www.noldus.com/human-behavior-research)

Participants to the demonstration were also timed on the length of exposure to the aversive noise.