

## Session 1

### L4 Positive Psychology

16 Jan 2014

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## Discuss

PosPsy is about happiness, roughly speaking.

### What is your current idea about what happiness is?

Think for a minute about this WITHOUT talking to anyone; write down your personal answer.

Then turn to one or two people near you, and discuss each others' answers to this.

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## Developing a view of PosPsy in general

One aspect of this is to decide how to distinguish and relate:

- Pleasure
- Joy (The emotion of unexpectedly good outcomes)
- Happiness ??
- Well-being (shown to relate to physical health; but exercise suggests most of us are unconscious of it)

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## Gratitude

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## Emmons & McCullough 03 Counting your blessings

### Study 1

Gratitude vs. Hassles vs. Life events / circumstances  
N=201 health psychology students  
Once a week for 10 weeks.

Gratitude was better than both hassles and life events, not on pos/neg affect scores, but on life as a whole, expectations for upcoming week, physical symptoms, and hours of exercise.

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### Study 2

Gratitude vs. Hassles vs. downward social comparison  
N=157 health psychology students  
Once a day for 16 days.

Gratitude better than both hassles and life events, not on neg affect scores nor health outcomes, but on pos affect score. The other ratings not reported.  
Effect twice as large as in study 1 (std. mean diff = effect size)

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### Study 3

Gratitude vs. nothing (just do the self-ratings)  
N=65 sufferers from neuromuscular diseases.  
Once a day for 21 days.

Gratitude better than control condition, on pos and neg affect scores, on the life ratings, and on sleep, but not other health measures. Observers' ratings (e.g. spouses') also sig. higher.

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### Burton & King 04 (1) Writing about a single +ve experience

Burton & King (2004) study:

Write for 20 mins per day, for 3 days.  
Either about describing your shoes, plans for today  
Or about an IPE: Intensely Positive Experience

Both enhanced positive mood, and fewer health centre visits.

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### DISCUSS

•Do you spend any time reviewing good things that happen to you, or good aspects of your life?

•In what ways do you do this?

Think for a minute about this WITHOUT talking to anyone; perhaps write down your personal answer.

Then turn to one or two people near you, and discuss each others' answers to this.

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### Writing about -ve experiences

Both private and interpersonal gratitude is plain positive thinking. However, going back to solo gratitude (counting your blessings), Burton & King pointed out that:

Other evidence already showed that writing about traumatic events (Intensely Bad Experiences) had similar effects to writing about positive ones cf. catharsis. Smyth 1998; Pennebaker.

What might be going on?

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### What's going on?

Perhaps it is working on, acknowledging, not repressing, but not being overwhelmed by, emotionally powerful experiences.

Cf. Mindfulness.

Cf. Self-efficacy or self-regulation: feeling you understand your life;

Cf. finding (creating) meaning for your life.

Identity: "writing a life story for yourself"

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### Formats for gratitude exercises

1. Benefit finding.
2. List things to be grateful for (count blessings)
3. Write a 20 min. private essay on something very good
4. Writing to someone else: a 2 party transaction
5. Telling it to the person face to face (Seligman's exercise) (p. 72 Authentic Happiness 2003)

One reason for extending it in this way is to combine benefit to the writer with benefit to the recipient of the testimonial.

A social dimension to positive psychology.

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## Gratitude aspects (1)

We might think about gratitude as having 3 benefits:

1. Benefit on the donor: Feedback for the donor's self-regulation: can they tell that the recipient benefitted? (small children)
2. Mutual knowledge, and the acknowledgement of, benefits / favours. This may involve the value of the benefit AND the cost of the donation.
3. Benefit on the recipient. Counting one's blessings, which may be important for recipient's self-regulation by adjusting their attributions of:
  - Register value received
  - Awareness that this need not have occurred
  - It wasn't under one's own control

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## Gratitude aspects (2)

What aspects might it have?

- Agency: not attributing it all to oneself; recognising that we aren't in control of everything in our lives.
- Review goals, but also accomplished goals
- Draw up a balance sheet for the day: reflection.

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## Themes it may relate to

1. Mindfulness. Not repressing emotion, acknowledging it, but equally not allowing it to direct conclusions, nor to repeat endlessly.
2. Need to counteract instant, often catastrophising, thoughts but a careful consideration of all the possible aspects.
3. Self-efficacy or self-regulation: feeling you understand your life; "writing a life story for yourself". Creating a plan-level grasp of your life, as well as the reaction-level grasp.
4. Align, connect actions and events to life goals and meanings: meaningfulness (reflection)
5. Seems to contradict the view: positive not negative, strengths-based, must be more balanced only in a positive direction ....

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## So:

### Aspects of gratitude as a PosPsy topic

- Stat. sig. results in controlled studies show that there are real benefits
- It is a solo self-help exercise which anyone can do
- But there is a social form too
- It is a "new" practice, yet equally an old religious practice.
- It is related to aspects of the "old" 12-steps practice for recovering addicts: that things outside our control can and do benefit us.
- It can have medical benefits; yet equally happiness effects
- We probably do not understand the underlying cause or essence yet.
- It probably has some sig. relationship to psychology theory e.g. self-efficacy, self-regulation.

## Learned optimism

Better starter ref:

Schulman, P. (1999), "Applying learned optimism to increase sales productivity", Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, Vol. 29 No.1, pp.31-7.

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## General introductory ideas

Causality is always multi-factor: asking "why" or for "the cause" is common but mistaken. (breaking a glass)

Similarly effects are usually multiple, not singular. So asking "what is / will be the effect of ..." is mistaken. (cooking a meal)

In fact the value of an event for us, for its effects on our goals and needs, is often multi-valued, not single. (Teaching this course and its effect on me.)

This makes the psychological action of attribution wildly under-determined.

## Transition: Attributions

Seligman's ABCDE exercise is about reconsidering attributions of effects / future expectations.

The fundamental attribution error is about attributions of the cause of a person's (past) action.

In this area, we in fact make attributions about:

- Causes of events (and hence future expectations)
- Causes of human actions
- The value of events (to us)

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## Learned helplessness / optimism

Learned helplessness is when experience of failure makes someone expect to fail, and so to give up.

Learned optimism refers to exercises that are short of experiencing success, but have a similar effect in combatting learned helplessness.

It does so in a way not dissimilar from CBT: by reconstructing the unwarranted cognitions that support the despair and the despairing behaviour.

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## Seligman's ABCDE exercise

**A** **dversity**. A bad thing happens, a failure.

**B** **eliefs** You generalise to low expectations for the future by believing it is general.

**C** **onsequences** Despair, helplessness, giving up

**D** **isputation** You dispute the conclusions; look for evidence and counter examples

**E** **nergisation** is the result of this self-help

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## Discuss

Do you tend to catastrophise?

Do you have a technique like ABCDE for combatting this?

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## About the field of PosPsy

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## What is the subject matter: Well-being?

The WHO (world health organisation) definition of health, now and since 1948, is:

"Health is a state of complete  
physical,  
mental and  
social well-being  
... and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity".

"Well-being" is most often preferred as a term, since we are often unaware of it. (Indeed, Heidegger argued that consciousness' sole function was to address problems, not normal being.)

## PosPsy: a "new" field

The founders (e.g. Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi) argued that since WWII, western psychology had focussed only on abnormal psychology (of mental illness) and almost entirely neglected healthy mental functioning and its nature.

(Obviously this isn't wholly true: perception, memory, ....)

Yet there was little work on what was healthy, or what was more or less good.

On the other hand, many PosPsy techniques (e.g. gratitude, mindfulness) have medical as well as happiness benefits.

An intermediate position might be, that we should be studying preventive mental practices, cf. "healthy eating" w.r.t physical illnesses. Cf. Brown & Harris 1978 "vulnerability factors".

## Main nature of PosPsy as an intellectual field

This area attracts hobbyists and self-help people.

It attracts mad claims.

There is also some well designed experimental work.

In other words: it is great area for critical thinking.

Its founders present it as a new and different area. Sceptics however can argue that it is just a new brand for mainstream ideas. You will find, then, that good papers within PosPsy may not mention "posPsy"; and may appear in all sorts of journals.

Each topic has connections to old cultural practices, to existing fields of psychology, to exercises which might be interventions by professionals, or self-help exercises, to evidence or perhaps only to unsupported claims....

## About this course

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## Textbooks?

*[This list is also on a web page of mine.]*

Ben-Shahar, Tal. (2007) *Happier: learn the secrets to daily joy and lasting fulfillment* (London : McGraw-Hill) < In GU library: Psychology G90.H2 BEN >

*[This is the book I started with myself]*

Seligman, Martin E. P. (2002). *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press)

Boniwell, Ilona (2006) *Positive Psychology in a nutshell: A balanced introduction to the science of optimal functioning*

Hefferon, K. & Boniwell, Ilona (2011) *Positive Psychology: Theory, Research and Applications* (OU press) < In GU library: Psychology P700 DON >

*[This is from the people teaching the first/main UK course on PosPsy at the University of East London]*

Stewart I. Donaldson, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Jeanne Nakamura (eds.) (2011) *Applied Positive Psychology: Improving Everyday Life, Health, Schools, Work, and Society* (New York: Psychology press) *[Not so much a textbook, but still a compendium]*

## Main approach to this course

I decided to put on this course because I thought it was an area many of the students here would be interested in, yet would never be taught by anyone else.

I am not an expert or a researcher in PosPsy.

It is therefore highly appropriate for me to structure this course around the educational idea of Student Generated Content: most material on this course will be created by the students (you) themselves, and shared.

The main coursework is for each group to create a web page that is the most helpful possible aid to one issue in PosPsy.

## What is useful in a web page, in a colleague?

Over the years, I've found colleagues really really helpful, but not by writing detailed reports just for me with zero errors in.

Instead, it's about orienting me, giving me a vital clue, telling me what is worthwhile and what isn't; warning me of pitfalls I'd have fallen into ....

What would you most want to know about each of 19 PosPsy topics, when you will probably only study a few (1 for a very bad student; 6 for a pretty diligent student)?

Mainly: help in choosing which topic to invest in; and then, where to start studying it.

## What is useful in a web page, in a colleague? (2)

This is a good match to how almost everyone reads web pages all the time: glance and click onwards if it doesn't seem to have what you want right there at the top.

Although people act more patiently on the web than anywhere else, in fact the kind of writing needed for a web page is the same as that taught to journalists, and the technique it is well if you use when writing for those you are desperate to read you e.g. funding referees, job applications.

I call this format "Pyramid writing". I.e. the title (headline) has to get the reader to read the first sentence. The first sentence has to get them to read the first paragraph, ....

## Suggested subsections

The suggested subsections on your wiki pages for each PosPsy topics are:

- \*Title (reconsider whether the allocated name is best)
- Key experimental results: best single starter reference
- A very short critique of whether there is a gap between the announced theory, and the empirical result
- An example of wild uncritical claims in this area
- One or more practical exercises an individual could carry out.
- An old cultural connection. E.g. for gratitude, thanksgiving prayers in church being admired.
- If you were only going to read, say, 3 things: which would they be.
- \*History of the topic
- \*Clinical applications
- An annotated longer reference list of other possibly relevant papers

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## Free bonus: Graduate attributes

The coursework, then, is central to "providing" the course content.

However it is also introducing you to some extra skills likely to be useful to you in future. These include:

- Creating a web page
- Writing in a "pyramid" style
- Working in a team you don't know and didn't choose, to a deadline, on something crucial to your career. Just like many professional jobs, then.

## What you need to do

You have been allocated to a group of  $\approx 3$  (see handout). At the end of this session, we'll try to get you to meet your group.

In next week's session we'll finalise the topic each group will do. I've allocated a starter topic for each group, but you don't have to stick to that.

Read as many as possible of previous years' wiki pages, partly to search for topics and get a broad glimpse over the breadth of PosPsy; but partly to develop some experience on what is and isn't helpful in the format and content of such pages.

There's a downloadable critique sheet: fill it in for several wiki pages and bring them to the next session.

## A place to stop

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/courses/posl4.html>

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