Sas Petherick: 13007504

Positive Psychology
P57518

Sas Petherick

Student Number: 13007504

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Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together ~ Goethe
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Introduction

Every client I have had the honour of coaching has stated a desire to be happier. While the nuanced specifics of what happiness means to each person is different, subjective happiness is one of the key determinants of overall life satisfaction. Subjective happiness is of central concern to positive psychology: particularly interventions that foster and increase our experiences of positive emotion.

I am intrigued by Seligman’s (2011: 20) bold claim that “doing a kindness produces the single most reliable momentary increase in well-being, of any exercise we have tested”. In this action research study, I am seeking to answer the question: what are the effects on volunteers of carrying out intentional act of kindness, as part of a coaching engagement? I am interested in exploring the efficacy of this intervention, as a means for clients to create new personal resources. The research was conducted in two parts: firstly three volunteers undertook several intentional acts of kindness over the course of a week; secondly, using Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden and Build Theory’ we explored how this experience might provide a new perspective on an area of dissatisfaction in their lives: “broaden people’s momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources” (Fredrickson, 2001: 219).

The literature review explores the experience of kindness, acts of kindness as a means to generate positive emotion, and the impact and appropriateness of kindness in a coaching context. The research methodology and findings follow.

Literature Review

The themes addressed in this literature review include: the nature of kindness, the correlation of kindness and positive emotion, and the considerations of using Intentional Acts of Kindness (IAK) as a coaching intervention.

Buddhists call it mudita – the up-swelling of the heart at feeling happiness for someone else. Kindness is similarly described as producing a ‘warm glow’ (Isen and
Levin, 1972: 384); kindness provides opportunities to make a positive impact on the world even in a small way (Lewellyn-Jones, 1998) and may also be a mechanism for satisfying our inherent universal need for relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000; cited in Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2009: 165). Kindness contributes and supports relationships and social harmony and could therefore be considered adaptive: happy individuals tend to be relatively more cooperative, pro-social, charitable and ‘other-centered’ (Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon, 2005: 112).

Performing acts of kindness, features as a common intervention in positive psychology research, lending credibility to the hypothesis that a relationship between feeling good and helpfulness exists. However, Lykken and Tellegen (1996; cited in Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon, 2005) suggest that “trying to become happier may be as futile as trying to become taller”; Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon (2005) cite a number of studies that suggest a ‘set-point’ level of happiness, with subjective reporting pointing to a stable relative level enduring over time. To add to this rather pessimistic view, hedonic adaption constrains all happiness-inducing effects: we rapidly adjust to new improved circumstances, and so all happiness is temporary.

Encouragingly, Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon (2005) suggest 40% of our happiness level may be influenced by intentional cognitive, behavioural or volitional activity. Conducting acts of kindness is one such activity. But not all acts of kindness are the same; Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon (2005: 125) found that in varying acts of kindness, the experience of positive emotions remained potent; Borgonovi, (2008: 2322) found that volunteering for family members and friends is not correlated with positive mental outcomes and Lyubomirsky, Tkach and Sheldon (2004) asked students to perform five acts of kindness per week over six weeks and participants who undertook their generosity in a single day, experienced a significant increase in well-being. Small, varied regular acts of kindness undertaken towards strangers,
appear to have the best chance of limiting the impact of hedonic adaptation “we do adapt to the little things, but because there’s so many, it will take longer” (Rosenbloom, 2010).

Despite no guarantee of the causal relationship between kindness and positive emotion, there may be an innate drive to exhibit kindness. Hepach, Vaish and Tomasello (2008) found that 2-year old children demonstrate an intrinsic motivation towards helping behaviour and do not require praise or reward, suggesting that from an early age, humans seem to have genuine concern for the welfare of others. Approximately 44% of the adult population in the United States engage in formal volunteering; the rise in the ‘Sharing Economy’ provides a means for people to share skills, space, time and products; coupled with growing industries of micro-financing and crowd-funding, provide new mechanisms for people to engage in kind acts. Those who volunteer weekly, report the same increase in happiness as moving from a personal income of less that $20,000 to incomes between $75,000 and $100,000 (Borgonovi, 2008: 2326). While it is unclear from this research, if the reported level of happiness was subject to hedonic adaption, this lends scepticism to popularised correlations between wealth and happiness: in support Myers (2000) observed that with US citizens personal relative income has more than doubled in the last 50 years, reported happiness levels have remained constant.

The assumption that acts of kindness ‘automatically’ generate positive emotions warrants scrutiny. Lewellyn-Jones (1998) found that acts of kindness elicited reactions of gratitude, surprise, disbelief, as well as more negative reactions such as scrutiny, rejection and anger. Baskerville et al. (2000: 293) found that people tended to respond more positively to kindness when the giver was white regardless of the race of the receiver, and Otake et al. (2006: 362) found that women respond more positively when observing a random act of kindness that do men, suggesting that women may be more attuned to kindnesses. For a coachee sceptical or
uncomfortable with undertaking acts of kindness, the likelihood of an experience of positive emotion may be low, and may even serve to reinforce existing negative feelings towards their community.

Consideration is warranted of what undertaking acts of kindness can offer coaching clients in terms of improved outcomes. Fredrickson (2001: 224) posits that not only do positive emotions feel good in the present, but also through their effects on broadened thinking, increase the likelihood that people will feel good in the future, became more resilient to adversity and build enduring psychological resources. Clearly any emotion can have a negative as well as positive valence depending on the context in which it occurs. Indeed, the ability to transcend the ‘muck and bullets’ of modern life, is an arguably more pragmatic and realistic definition of what is meant by positive. Such binary classifications of positive and negative are at risk of minimising the experience of those who have grown from negative experiences, as well as injecting a ‘Pollyanna’ quality to the acts of kindness that do effect positive emotion.

Positive psychology also presents the relationship with kindness and happiness as causal, rather than merely correlative. The research suggests that happy people not only desire to be kind, but they are also more attuned to the recognition of kindnesses and more likely to behave in kind ways (Otake et al. 2006: 366). Its possible that this intervention may have little to offer those who are facing significant challenges, or our more misanthropic coaching clients, though one must remain mindful of the “tautological inevitability” of labelling characteristics (Miller, 2008: 606). Equally, coaching clients who regularly engage in kind acts, or report contentedness with their existing level of happiness, may not experience a marked affect of positive emotions. Indeed, by placing responsibility for happiness with the individual, those who don’t experience positive emotions, may somewhat paradoxically, encounter a decrease in subjective well-being.
In disregarding the pathology model and focusing on clients’ strengths and increased well-being, positive psychology is a natural ally to coaching. However, unrelenting and enduring positivity is unachievable. While varying the type and frequency of kind acts may reduce the impact of hedonic adaption, there is a risk that in emphasising the benefits of positive emotion for its own sake, the client feels at fault if the act is not well received or the ‘warm glow’ of kindness not achieved; we also risk disregarding the potentially worthwhile outcomes of experiencing negative emotions.

**Methodology**

This research seeks to explore the impact of intentional act of kindness, as well as the efficacy of Fredrickson’s Broaden-and-Build Theory (2001: 219) in using positive emotions to broaden the client’s momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. My coaching approach is grounded in cognitive coaching and I am seeking to explore the compatibility of this intervention in order to evolve my practice.

In planning this study, and in an effort to use a ‘disciplined, systematic process’ I adopted McNiff and Whitehead’s (2006) six-stage model of Action Research: a cyclical form of enquiry that involves taking action, evaluating outcomes and redefining the central concern. My assumption is that any knowledge created by this enquiry is specific to the experience of the volunteers and my own reflections; they are therefore unable to be extrapolated to any generalised conclusions. All participants were informed, consenting and involved in the research process (please see Appendix C) and I am grateful to Rose, Blanche and Dorothy, who kindly volunteered as active participants in this research: their reflections, knowledge and experience was both surprising and enlightening.

**Research Design and Re-design**
Three volunteers were invited to carry out 2-3 intentional acts of kindness within a one-week period and to chronicle their experiences. In the week following I conducted a semi-structured interview by phone, to gather data on the volunteers' experiences.

My original intention was to use my own reflections as a secondary data source however, I was mindful that without an aspect of the research being relevant to coaching, I would be conducting a case study. During the process of reviewing the literature I decided to introduce Fredrickson’s (2001) Broaden-and-Build theory into the interview, to explore the effect of any positive emotions in broadening the volunteer’s momentary thought-action repertoire, in order to build new insight on an area of dissatisfaction in their lives.

**Research Approach**

The volunteers were invited to participate in the research by phone. I explained the central concern of the research, and discussed any questions. I then emailed consent forms and information sheets, along with a list of ideas for their IAK (attached as Appendix G). I was conscious of not prescribing specific acts of kindness and encouraged the volunteers to do what felt appropriate for them. I also encouraged them to chronicle any thoughts if they did not undertake their IAK.

During the invitation stage of the research, I did not mention that we would use of Broaden and Build Theory to explore an area of life dissatisfaction. I am unsure if this impacted the experience of the volunteers, but I did not want to overcomplicate the process. I was also mindful of predicting that the volunteers would have a positive experience, though this was my assumption.

Two of the semi-structured interviews were recorded, though not transcribed (questions are attached as Appendix F). Unfortunately due to a technical malfunction, one interview (Blanche) did not record and so my data is based on the notes I took.
during our conversation. I did listen to the two other interviews again and noted any salient points. My interviews took place within one week of the IAK, except for Rose which was two weeks following.

**Concerns of bias**

I was aware of two potential biases within my research. As part of our exploration of positive psychology based interventions earlier in the semester, I had carried out an act of kindness and experienced a positive and quite profound effect. The peer review process (Appendix D) helped me to reflect that I had assumed the experience of the volunteers would also be positive. Remaining mindful of this potential for a lack of objectivity has (hopefully!) fostered a more robust and balanced approach.

My second concern is a bias inherent within the Action Research approach, where the practitioner researcher acts in partnership with the participants. The volunteers, while no longer coaching clients, were known to me in a coaching context. I was aware during the semi-structured interview of my tendency on several occasions to fall into a coach role, rather than that of data-gathering researcher.

**Data analysis and discussion**

Three common themes emerged from the data: during the research, the volunteers all experienced emotions that could be characterised as negative; secondly, responses from the recipients were often far from positive; thirdly, the volunteer’s reports of experiences that were positive were marked and profound.

Prior to undertaking their first IAK, all volunteers describe varying degrees of nervousness, self-consciousness and apprehension. Perhaps as a result of this, their first acts of kindness were either anonymous acts (leaving money in a parking machine, leaving a note on the bathroom mirror at work), or acts of self-kindness (allowing for more time than was needed in a carp park, so as to avoid the stress of rushing). All described a sense of ‘whimsy’ at the secretive nature of these acts “I felt
kind of sneaky and giddy about it. Like will anyone in the office recognize my handwriting?" (Rose, transcript); “it felt good and a bit naughty – I was giggling about it” (Dorothy, transcript); “I never do this! It felt so silly/sad to feel like this was a treat” (Blanche, notes). Having undertaken the first act, the volunteers seemed to then get into the swing of their assignment: “it made me want to do it more often” (Rose, transcript). It may be interesting to research further, the experiences of acts of kindness conducted anonymously and those involving human connection: my sense is that anonymous acts may be more impacted by hedonic adaption. Dorothy reported: “it was just money that I’d given and a financial gift it isn’t as rewarding as a personal connection”.

A second emergent theme, is that not all responses engendered a ‘warm glow’ of positive emotion, nor was the audience always receptive, lending credence to Lewellyn-Jones’ (1998: 180) claim that acts of kindness could be termed “positively deviant” as they violate the norm, and people may react to them negatively.

While paying for a purchase, Dorothy complimented and thanked a shop owner for making Christmas shopping easy: “the woman thought I was saying ‘have a merry Christmas’ and wished me one back, while completely talking over me. She hadn’t heard me at all!” (Dorothy, transcript). Rose attempted to bond with a ‘stand-off-ish’ colleague by intentionally being kind to her: “interactions with her never feel genuine. I feel like we interacted more than we usually do but it never felt great” (Rose, transcript). In another example Dorothy picked up a book dropped by a women stacking shelves in a bookstore: “she was really flustered and said ‘oh you really shouldn’t have done that you don’t need to do that’”.

As they reflected on these relatively negative encounters, I observed both Dorothy and Rose reacting with equanimity: “some people just don’t want you to do things. But its their issues – they don’t want to be fussed over – its not a rejection of me” (Dorothy, transcript); “even if someone does have a negative reaction, if you’re doing
it from a place of love, their opinions don’t really matter” (Rose, transcript). I found myself reflecting on the “uncertainties and misunderstandings about what defines positive and negative” Lazurus (2003: 99): were these volunteers drawing on embodied resilience gained from previous experiences of positive emotion, or were they able to make something useful from their relatively negative experience? While the experience may not have been positive, Dorothy appeared to have gained a ‘broadened’ perspective: “after I had been brushed off I just felt really grounded and powerful and like my space was occupied in the world and I’m doing this to the best of my ability and it felt good. It felt like a powerful place to be acting from” (Dorothy transcript). While phenomenologically distinct, an experience of negative emotion has the ability to foster growth and resilience as much as those that are positive.

Consistent with the literature, the volunteers also noted differences in their experience with people they knew: “I did wonder if there a closet form of manipulation going on here, with loved ones like ‘I’m do this but I’m expecting this back’” (Dorothy, transcript); “I feel like if I am kind to my father it doesn’t feel as genuine as I have to try so hard. And he’ll probably question what am I trying to get out of it” (Rose, transcript). An additional comment from Rose suggested that having a self-concept identified with kindness, may at times, be a burden, even a source of negative emotion: “My mum is always talking. Always. I’m struggling with it because I am so kind and I don’t want her to think I am ignoring her or that I’m frustrated with her, even though I am, but that kind of makes me resentful. I’ve realised that it’s difficult to be myself” (Rose, transcript).

One of the main goals of this research was to use Fredrickson’s ‘Broaden and Build’ theory, which evidenced the third theme of positive experiences. Reports of the IAK that were positive, were marked upsurge of emotion, evident in both the volunteers tone and use of positive descriptors. These experiences did appear to create the physiological and emotional ‘broadening’ described by Fredrickson (2001),
Lyubomirsky, Schkade and Sheldon (2005: 125) and Seligman (2011: 24): “I could feel the energy and the joy from the other person. It felt really warm, kind of buzzy almost – kind of tingly” (Rose, transcript), “I just felt joyful, happy” (Blanche, notes), “the feeling right here in my chest of genuine connection with somebody was amazing! And I could see it in his eyes as well - it was a genuine light on for both of us” (Dorothy, transcript). All volunteers described their experiences of positive emotion as durable: lasting for several hours and able to be re-experienced to a lesser extent as they recalled their encounters. I was aware of my own sense of joy (and relief!) that they’d had these experiences, evidence of my bias.

When I asked how their experience might help them in the area of least satisfaction in their life, all volunteers responded with ideas that appeared to build on the positive emotion, reminiscent of the “triggered upward spiral” described by Fredrickson (2001: 224). Dorothy, recovering from a long illness, noted: “I do have energy for the small gestures…its a really beautiful place to be, feeling connected. I’m starting to wonder if its just connection with any kind of human is really important and that’s really what this world is about.” (Dorothy, transcript). Blanche in referring to her impending workplace change said: “I’ve realised I can be so much kinder to myself – I don’t have to force or push – I can trust that it will work out” (Blanche, notes). Rose commented: “this exercise has definitely proven to me that intention is powerful”. These comments illustrate the potential affect of positive emotions in broadening the “momentary thought-action repertoire” as Fredrickson (2001) suggests. It seemed interesting to me that these newly broadened perspectives did not involve specific actions or a desire to ‘do’ anything new; rather, the volunteers seemed less constricted in their thinking.

**Considerations for coaching and mentoring practice**

My coaching approach is predominantly focussed in cognitive coaching and I am drawn to the adaptive significance of positive emotions, namely their potential for
helping clients to build personal resources that can be drawn on in the future. I regularly set ‘homework’ for clients to try out interventions and gather evidence for their own toolbox.

When I embarked on this study, I was uncertain how this intervention might be compatible with, or used in a cognitive coaching practice. I am now comfortable that IAK is a natural ally: the experimental nature of the intervention, the risk of judgement, the invitation for the coachee to construct new meanings from events and to accept themselves unconditionally – are all consistent with the goals of cognitive coaching.

It is clear that not all IAK’s will be met positively – though as the volunteers showed, this may not result in a negative experience for the coachee. An unexpected or negative response could also present opportunities to draw on personal resilience and to let go of worrying about the reactions and opinions of others. The context and the thoughts of the coaching client will influence this.

Of the IAK that were welcomed, the volunteers described experiences of positive emotion such as joy, interest, connection and markedly enjoyable physiological responses. Recollections of such experiences did appear to broaden the scopes of thinking and enable a more flexible and philosophical approach to an area of life dissatisfaction, consistent with Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build Theory. The study did not measure the longer-term effects of these experiences. So while there is no guarantee that undertaking an IAK will result in an experience of positive emotion, when it does, there is an opportunity to use this good feeling to access or build on personal resources. Intuitively, it seems appropriate to presume that when we are feeling good we are more likely to have access to creativity and possibility. I am interested in how a coaching client, presenting with stress or anxiety might experience IAK. It is possible that this would serve to reinforce their existing state, equally it may be a catalyst to access resilience and an improved emotional state.
The IAK’s that involved a direct connection with strangers, fostered the most profound experiences of positive emotions. This is perhaps one of the most encouraging aspects of this research: how much more connected to the wider community that the volunteers felt: “I think everyone is very fearful because of the media and we are all on our phones and just not present. But just that little moment - its bigger than anything. It’s a real connection” (Dorothy, transcript).

**Conclusion**

Positive psychology has much to offer coaching in shifting away from pathology-focussed deficit models, as well as providing an empirical basis for positively transforming client’s lives.

On the basis of my own experience, I assumed that the volunteers would have positive experiences and that this would boost their happiness over the Christmas season. In reality the results of undertaking IAK, was a mixed bag. It strikes me that this is representative of how positive psychology is viewed in the context of messy, imperfect and complex lives.

From a coaching perspective, it is of interest to understand the extent and the means by which subjective happiness can be influenced by positive experiences of kindness, given the prevalence of this desire as a goal of coaching clients.
References


Appendix A: Ethics Form – signed

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix C: Consent Forms – 3 x signed

(originals attached)
Appendix D: Summary of the peer feedback
(from Katie)

Evaluating the impact of intentional acts of kindness is an interesting research topic and you've identified a good body of references to support it. The descriptions from Peterson (2006, p. 160) and Seligman (2002, p. 148) for kindness as one of the VIA strengths of humanity, might add another dimension. On a kind of related note, I watched a TED talk this week by Daniel Goleman asking "Why aren't we more compassionate?" He describes an experiment using the parable of the Good Samaritan with a predominantly practical and selfish finding about the choices people make in compassionate acts.

From the review of research proposals with Carmelina there were some general comments that she shared. Others may remember more points and can chip in also, or correct me if I've misinterpreted these.

- In framing the research question, Carmelina recommended that it should specifically mention coaching.
- For the project to be considered action research, there should be an element of the practitioner responding to the intervention used, i.e. changing the way they coach. The "plan-do-study-act" cycle (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p.88). Otherwise it can be written up as a case study.
- For the data collection, Carmelina suggested that it is not required to transcribe the whole of the interview with the volunteers. Listening to the recording and transcribing excerpts for reflection and inclusion in the write-up is sufficient. This was a bit of a relief for me and considerably lessens the workload.

Given the short time period for the project, it may not be possible to draw any conclusions about how sustainable the impact is. The research question also focusses on the positive impact. It might be more balanced to also ask whether the volunteers experienced any downsides from performing the acts of kindness. For example if it was not appreciated by the recipient.

I hope this helps and feel free to ask if anything isn’t clear. Good luck with the research and I’d be very curious to know your findings.

Best wishes, Katie

http://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_goleman_on_compassion


Appendix E: Reflections on Feedback

Ever since we explored interventions for ourselves I have been looking forward to this assignment! My experience of carrying out a kindness had quite a profound impact on me and so I was quite clear about what I wanted to do as part of this research.

I didn’t really plan to take enough time for the set up of the research and underestimated just how much preparation would be required. Missing the last class was unfortunate timing and I feel as though I am still catching up. Subsequently I have been late in submitting my plans and feedback and in catching up on the reading.

I found Katie’s feedback so helpful in helping to refine the question so that it was directly related to coaching. Carmelina’s note to remove the assumption of positive impact from my research question has helpfully opened up the possible findings. I am also introducing a secondary data source of my own reflections on how the volunteers respond to the invitation.

On reflection, when I was writing the research proposal, instead of starting with the key themes and broad ideas, I had almost decided the outcome would be positive. Having the feedback has helped me to create a possibly more robust approach.

I am also aware of an old thought pattern I have of trying to ‘get it right’. This means that I tend to read feedback as criticism and I have a tendency to procrastinate instead of just engaging with the material.

This has been such a helpful exercise in understanding just how important the process of setting up research is, and how helpful feedback can be in refining the research question – particularly as we prepare for the thesis next year.
Appendix F: Semi Structured Coaching Interview Questions

What is the area of least satisfaction in your life right now?

What is your definition of kindness?

Tell me about your experience (thoughts and feelings) before you undertook the first Intentional Act of Kindness.

Tell me about your experience of Intentional Act of Kindness?

What are your thoughts and feelings about yourself?

What are your thoughts and feelings about the recipient?

What are your thoughts and feelings about the community you exist in?

Thinking back to the area of least satisfaction in your life right now – how can your experience of Intentional Act of Kindness help you?
Positive psychology is a relatively new area that focuses on helping people be happier. Learn how it might help you live a healthier, more joyful life. Positive psychology is designed to "complement and extend the problem-focused psychology that has been dominant for decades," explained the late Christopher Peterson, author of "A Primer in Positive Psychology" and professor at the University of Michigan, in a 2008 article published in Psychology Today. "Positive psychology is...a call for psychological science and practice to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; and as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling as Positive psychology is "the scientific study of what makes life most worth living",[1] or "the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of life".[2] Positive psychology is concerned with eudaimonia, "the good life", reflection about what holds the greatest value in life â€“ the factors that contribute. It builds further on the humanistic movement, which encouraged an emphasis on happiness, well-being, and positivity, thus creating the foundation for what is now known as positive psychology.[5]. Positive psychologists have suggested a number of ways in which individual happiness may be fostered. A website that welcomes everyone with an interest in Positive Psychology. Cultivating Positive Thinking in a Pandemic. by Kelly Seaward - Ding. The Power of Gratitude The Pandemic has refocused our lives. The restrictions have created a different way of living, a new perspective and reflection process. For some of us, the treadmill of life has slowed down, for some, it has stopped completely and for some read more. The Positive Psychological Power of Rethinking Your Dreams. Positive Psychology. An Introduction. Martin E. P. Seligman. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. University of Pennsylvania. The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities. The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism. He defined positive psychology as: â€œthe scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels that include the biological, personal, relational, institutional, cultural, and global dimensions of lifeâ€. According to Seligman: â€œthere are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future-mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, the capacity for flow and insight, to name several. Seligman described three main aims for positive psychology: 1. Be as concerned with human strength as human weakness 2. Be as concerned with building strength as repairing damage 3. Be concerned with making lives of normal people fulfilling.