

Rebecca Scipione

Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2014

Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin

Assignment

The consultancy is a continuation of your reflective journal.

- You continue with the activity you used for your journal, or a different one, and/or an additional one.
- You recruit two or more individuals — called clients — to undertake an activity known to increase happiness, either the same activity as your own or a different one.
- You introduce your clients to the activity, for example through a presentation, talk, workshop and/or handout.
- You monitor their engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations, interviews, survey and/or other means.
- You evaluate the effect of the activity on yourself and your clients using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and/or other techniques.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_14outline.pdf

Rebecca Scipione's consultancy report starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-consultancy-tops/>.

CST228: HAPPINESS INVESTIGATING ITS CAUSES AND CONDITIONS

Happiness Consultancy Report

Rebecca Scipione- 4186254

Activity: Tahitian Dance

Choice of activity:

This consultancy investigated the impact of a physical activity Tahitian Dance on subjects reported mood and happiness. I found the benefits of this activity to be significant in improving my mood over a 5-week period and was interested to see if the effects generalised to other people. My own experience reported experiencing positive outcomes, which included an elevation in mood, a feeling of flow in my body and slightly lowered stress levels. I practised Tahitian dance at home from an online beginners class for 40 minutes at a frequency of 3 times a week over a 5-week period. Overall, I really enjoyed Tahitian dance; it was fun and made my body feel alive and energised. I was also able to reflect on my feelings moment to moment – something I normally don't do, and this increased my understanding of my feelings and myself.

Recruitment:

Two clients were chosen out of my friendship group. I put the proposal to a group of five friends and out of these, two friends agreed to be subjects. Both individuals I consider close friends. In addition they were young, fit and flexible therefore considered up to the task and agreed to meet twice a week with me at a mutually appointed time.

Subject 1: Lara*

The first subject Lara* was suitable for this evaluation as she lives in close proximity to me and thus facilitated a flexibility around meeting times to implement the activity. We also have a trusting relationship therefore it made the investigation less formal and daunting for both of us. Lara is 25 years old and works as a swimming instructor. She undertakes a heavy workload of 6-7 days a week in a physically demanding occupation. She also works as a receptionist, where she is confined to sitting for long periods of the day. In this role she experiences stiffness and tightness mostly in her lower back and neck and regularly reports a sore back. She said she feels stressed from the large workload and constant physical stresses on her body. She occasionally feels exhausted in the afternoons, which she stated, leads to feelings of 'bad mood', 'irritable and agitated'.

Lara seemed like a good candidate for this activity, as it offered her an opportunity to be physically active and have fun in a non-work environment. The role of swim instructor is about disciplining children and standing for long periods in a cold pool and precludes fun. The second job, as a receptionist requires her to sit for long periods without social interaction. She is also a busy person, devoting a lot of time to work and her family. I propose that the implementation of this activity will assist Lara with giving time and strengthening her connection with her self, and hence obtain increased happiness.

Before the implementation of the activity I got both subjects to complete a Depression, Anxiety and stress scale (DASS) (Lovibond and Lovibond 1995), which looks at their scores on these 3 factors. Lara's scores were normal range for depression, moderate anxiety and moderate stress. Due to Lara's moderate stress levels it was anticipated that she would benefit from the activity.

*Name changed for anonymous reasons

Subject 2: Clare*

Clare, another successful candidate is also a close friend; she is aged 29 years and works as an emergency nurse. She works long and stressful 12-hour irregular shifts, an average of a 38-hour week, and of these shifts about 3-5 are night shifts a month. This puts heavy strains on her body as she describes regularly feeling stressed and extremely tired as her body clock is constantly out of rhythm. Expectations for her to be calm and fast paced in a highly stressful environment puts strains on her emotionally and physically. She finds it most stressful in the early mornings after a long night shift when there is more risk of her making a mistake. Pressure is on for her to still be alert and focused after a 12-hour shift at 7 in the morning. She describes being exhausted and run down regularly and suffers from regular symptoms of tonsillitis and tightness in her muscles. On completion of the DASS form at the beginning of the 5 weeks, Clare scored normal for depression, mild anxiety and moderate stress.

Both subjects reported physically and emotionally demanding jobs with serious repercussions for errors. Hence both subjects and ultimately their clients can benefit from stress management and happiness boosting activities. Neither subject presented with clinical symptoms of anxiety depression and stress, or any emotional disorder. Both subjects were fit and active and they were chosen because we have a trusting relationship with each other and this made it easier for us to conduct the evaluation.

*Name changed for anonymous reasons

How were the individuals introduced to the activity?

Five possible candidates were asked personally if they were interested in participating in the activity of Tahitian dance over a 5 week period. Only two people responded with interest. We met altogether at my place where I explained to them that this was an observational study that I was carrying out for a Course Subject at University. The task involved my observation and their subjective experience gained through interview of the activity Tahitian dance in

relation to their happiness levels. I explained that we would meet 1-2 times a week to conduct the evaluation. I asked them to read and fill out the ethics and consent form. Then I introduced them to Tahitian dance by providing a video for them to watch of a professional Tahitian dancer, to give them an insight and familiarise them with the rhythm of the Tahitian dance culture.

Implementation of the Activity:

Prior to each practice every week I requested them write down their feelings and emotions or any comments they would like to add in a personal journal I provided to each subject. For the actual dance practice, I set up two large mirrors and commenced the session with the basic steps. As I discovered through my experience the moves can be quite complex and strength dependent so introducing Tahitian dance slowly was the key. Once they had progressed I put on a beginners learning guide video of Tahitian dance, which they followed along for 35 minutes. During this time I observed their responses and experiences throughout the session. Once or twice throughout the session I asked how they are feeling, or if they have any comments they would like to add. At the end of each session I encouraged them to write about their experiences or to provide a physical and emotional feeling at that moment. Depending on availability and flexibility I observed them both separately and together.

Evaluation of experiences:

I got both clients to fill out the mood questionnaire (DASS) at the beginning of the 5 weeks and again at the end of the 5 week period of participating in the exercise. Scores showed that both subjects experienced lower levels of stress and Lara reported lower levels of anxiety.

At the beginning of the 5 weeks I gave each of them a bound covered book as a reflective journal in which to write their experiences. I asked them to use this book to write down any physical/emotional sensations, feelings and experiences

they encountered within the 5 week period. For personal reasons both subjects were unwilling to share their interment journal.

Summary of Subject experience:

Subject 1- Lara

Weeks 1-2:

During the first two weeks Lara seemed unsettled and distractible. She described feeling weird, saying 'I feel like a freak' and looking at herself in the mirror made her feel 'fat'. This was reflective of Lara's initial difficulty in engaging with her feelings and her body. Hence it required me to ask more specific and direct questions such as 'what do you mean', 'where do you feel that in your body?', 'how would you rate that?'. These techniques allowed her to become more grounded in her body and engaged with the exercise. Lara reported that although she does lots of exercise she often doesn't feel deeply into her body or have awareness of feeling states. Using this line of questioning is mindfulness-based and increases ones awareness of body, thoughts, feelings, actions (Kabatt-Zinn 2003)

During the first two sessions Lara also described feeling bored and becoming frustrated because the moves were difficult and her body wasn't used to it the specific exercise.

Weeks 3-4:

Upon deeper questioning Lara reported that she felt more in touch with her body and stated to enjoy the dance. She reported that she enjoyed the spontaneity of the moves and began to enjoy looking at the way her body moved in the mirror. She stated that it took her focus away from the shape of her body and feeling fat to a 'dynamic' feeling of 'moving with the music'. She said 'I feel like I'm inside my skin'. She felt she had better movement and rhythm and started to feel better

about her self. She also reported that this feeling was sustained for some time afterward.

Week 5:

The final week I could see how Lara's body moved in rhythm. She smiled more often and appeared to be enjoying her own performance. She didn't comment much either to myself or in the journal but my observation revealed a transformation in her face as it became more relaxed. I noticed that Lara improvised the dance moves and she commented that she enjoyed the creative aspect of the dance. Lara reported that the dance had a flow on effect in that she had greater motivation to do other exercise such as running and surfing. This was consistent with her lowered scores on the DASS. At the end of the 5 weeks I got Lara to recomplete the DASS form. Her results showed that she her anxiety and stress levels had dropped from moderate to mild over the past 5 weeks. This was consistent with my results from the DASS test and academic studies.

Lara stressed the creative benefits as illustrated by her improvisation of moves during the dance. This in its self shows a transformation, even if it is subtle.

Subject 2- Clare

Weeks 1-2:

Clare was much more receptive and enthusiastic initially. She was more committed and involved and responded well to instructions and questions. She provided mostly positive feedback from the start, saying 'I feel skinnier' after the first occasion. She enjoyed watching her body in the mirror even if her movements were not aligned with the instructor and used feedback to improve her dance. Immediately after the dance session she reported increased mood and motivation and in the first two weeks became activated to clean the house or go for a walk. She reported feeling 'awake and alive before tackling the day' and described the experience as providing her with a 'good incentive for maintaining

an intention to eat well and exercise throughout the remainder of the week'. Clare also reported experiencing physical benefits from the activity, specifically that her back and hips felt less tight after the first week.

Weeks 3-4:

It seemed that Clare's progress during weeks 3 and 4 plateaued as she reported similar experiences to those experienced in the first two weeks. She described feeling a sense of reduced tightness in her muscles as she became more comfortable and increased her repertoire of dance moves each week. Clare reported greater energy and felt as though the dance routine helped structure the rest of her week, which made her feel more relaxed.

Week 5:

In the final week Clare's main comments were associated with body image. Clare describes her overall enjoyment of Tahitian dance came from the fitness component, stating 'I feel healthier and fitter'. Overall Clare's happiness stemmed more from the physical benefits gained through the carrying out of exercise. After dancing she explained that she felt reduced stiffness in her muscles and a tightening of her tummy muscles specifically (which made her happy). This had a positive effect on her mood as she reported feeling less tired and a greater self-confidence due to a perceived greater toned body. Clare also reported lowered stress scores on the DASS after the 5 week period.

Overall, Clare's feedback was mostly positive. She claimed feeling more relaxed and feelings of satisfaction after the exercise.

Benefits of the activity:

One of the biggest advantages was the trusting relationship we all shared as mutual friends. Because there was trust they were willing to share their intimate feelings to me and allow themselves to be observed, something that most people would feel significantly self-conscious in respect to. If I recruited unknown subjects it would be unlikely that they would have been so open and honest with their responses.

We found it was more beneficial for both clients when it was structured into the earlier part of the day rather than in the afternoon as both subjects reported an increase in energy, which carried on through out the day. At times the subjects performed the dance moves independently and at other times (due to convenience together). Both subjects reported a greater enjoyment in the Tahitian dancing when together. They claimed that it was more motivating and time went faster. They claimed 'having more fun' and 'laughing more'.

On observation, they laughed more and were generally encouraging of each other, particularly when making mistakes with the moves. Both subjects also reported that they were more forgiving of their mistakes.

This contrasted with the times that I observed them separately. Individually, they each expressed less positive emotions and hence less happiness when dancing alone. This is consistent with the large body of literature looking at shared activities, groups and the power of the social component whereby shared experiences create greater happiness.

Disadvantages of the activity:

The biggest disadvantage was the short duration in which to evaluate the activity of Tahitian dancing. Tahitian dancing is something that is both exercise (creates endorphins) and also has a mastery component, which additionally adds to the happiness factor. The short period of 5 weeks was insufficient for the subjects to master the complex moves and develop a real sense of mastery with the activity. It is anticipated that more time and longer duration would add greater depth to the evaluation and progress of the implementation of Tahitian dance for

happiness. A larger number of subjects could add reliability and validity to the study. Their unwillingness to share their interment journal was a hindrance to the study.

The activity was carried out in my home, and consequently there were many distractions which affected the subjects focus and consequently their interest and motivation. It is suggested that having access to an actual Tahitian class with a real live teacher could be more beneficial. A more formal environment would provide less distractions and a strict time frame. Furthermore, because Tahitian dance is quite physical, it puts a lot of pressure on your hips; maybe it would be more beneficial to introduce an easier dance type, especially considering there was a 5 week time limit.

Academic Research

The subjects, Lara and Clare reported experiencing both physical and emotional benefits from the activity- Tahitian dance. This corresponds with numerous studies that claim that physical exercise and mindfulness improves mood, self-esteem, depression and anxiety (Stephens 1998). It is also shown to enhance the wellbeing of persons with major mental and physical health illnesses (Brown & Ryan 2003).

Exercise has been a beneficial strategy in preventing psychological and psychosomatic symptoms in adolescent and adult populations and promotes advances in positive feelings, mood, self-esteem and self-control (Duberg et al. 2013). This was significant in both mine, Lara and Clare's experience with Tahitian dance, as we all experienced enhanced feelings of mood, self-confidence and self-control. We also all reported a reduction in stress levels after the 5 week program.

A specific movement and mindfulness evaluation from a rehabilitation clinic in the United States carried out a study, which comprised of dance and movement therapy and mindfulness interventions. Results showed an improvement in mood, self-confidence, self-awareness and acceptance and relaxation. Most

participants also reported a reduction in stress and anxiety (Duberg et al. 2013). This is specifically evident in Lara's evaluation where she reported lower levels in both anxiety and stress after the 5-week program.

An important aspect of Tahitian dance is mindfulness; which numerous studies (Kabatt-Zinn 2003; Brown & Ryan 2003; Roberts 2009; Lyubomirsky 2007) report that practicing mindfulness improves mood, stress levels and quality of life. Roberts (2009) proclaims that practising mindfulness makes us feel happier. Lara, particularly, demonstrated experiencing mindfulness, which improved her self and body recognition and self-confidence. Based upon my observations Lara appeared to move away from purely a physical experience to a creative and emotional one. This had beneficial effects on her thoughts and mood. This was consistent with my own experience.

Both subjects also reported increased enjoyment, mood and fulfilment when participating in the activity together. This was also evident in a study implemented in an aged care facility, which displayed the importance of socialising for wellbeing. Results showed that social dancing at the nursing home had positive affects for patients with dementia, as it increased mood and wellbeing (Palo-Bengtsson and Ekman 1997).

Safety is imperative and is highly relative to the two chosen subjects who work in high-risk surroundings. The importance of a non-stress environment is crucial in reducing the likelihood of error in high-risk situations. It also promotes happiness and a better and safer work environment for all (Heydenfeldt et al 2011).

Recommendations:

Recommendations would be to execute the activity and observations in a formal setting.

Although both subjects reported a positive experience they also commented that they would rather do an activity that was already familiar to them and both

nominated surfing. They felt that the benefits of numerous factors such as; being in nature, riding the wave (being in flow), mindfulness to the surfing conditions, the direction and shape of the wave, the timing of the break, all better expressed both a mindfulness aspect and exercise that was more consistent with feeling happy for them personally. From their experience with the Tahitian dancing and their greater understanding of doing activities to enhance happiness, they felt inspired to make a commitment to get out in the surf more often and just go for it.

References:

Brown, K & Ryan, M 2003, 'The Benefits of Being Present: Mindfulness and Its Role in Psychological Well-Being', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, The American Psychological Association, Inc, Vol. 84, No. 4, pp. 822–848.

Duberg, A Hagberg, L Sunvisson, H Möller M, 2012 'Influencing Self-rated Health Among Adolescent Girls With Dance Intervention A Randomized Controlled Trial', *Journal of Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*, viewed on 15th April 2014.

Heydenfeldt, J et al. 2011, Performance Improvement, Vol.50, Iss.10, pp.21 – 27, available from Wiley Online Library.

Kabat-Zinn, J 2003, 'Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future, *Clinical Psychology: Science & Practice*, Vol.10, Iss.2, pp.144 – 156, available from JSTOR, accessed 11/03/13

Lovibond, S & Lovibond, P 1995, 'Manual for the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales', 2nd. Ed., *Psychology Foundation*, Sydney ISBN 7334-1423-0.

Lyubomirsky, S 2007, *The how of happiness*, 'Little brown book publications', London, UK

Roberts, T 2009, *The Mindfulness Workbook: A Beginner's Guide to Overcoming Fear & Embracing Compassion*, 'New Harbinger Publications', USA.

Stephens, T 1998, 'Physical activity and mental health in the United States and Canada: evidence from four population surveys'. *Prev Med Journal*, Vol. 17, pp. 35-47.

Palo-Bengtsson, L and Ekman, S 1997, 'Social dancing in the care of persons with dementia in a nursing home setting: a phenomenological study', *Division of Geriatric Medicine, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 119-123.