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Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

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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_13outline.pdf

*Taylor Jordan**'s consultancy report starts on the next page.

* “Taylor Jordan” is a pseudonym.

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

Expressing Gratitude and its effect on Happiness – Research & Reflection

Seeking happiness through personal achievement, wealth, and material possessions is fast become a globalised phenomenon (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade 2005). In recent years, it has been increasingly brought to our attention that researchers are discovering happiness is not something to be ‘pursued’. Gaining control over the intentional activities we embark on daily has the power to alter and increase our subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky 2010). Keeping a gratitude journal is one suggested way to increase subjective happiness levels in an individual, as well as providing other physical and mental benefits to those who engage in the activity on a regular basis. Studies by Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts (2003) concluded that grateful people have a sense of abundance, an appreciation of simple pleasures and an awareness of the ways others contribute to their wellbeing. To analyse the relationship between expressing gratitude and its effect on subjective happiness levels, two individuals have been recruited to engage in the activity and provide insight to their experiences. After introducing the methodology used to conduct the research, I will compare the experiences of these individuals and my own across popular and academic research. Benefits and disadvantages of practising the expression of gratitude will also be outlined, along with recommendations for other happiness-boosting activities.

I chose to embark on a journey of expressing attitude as a happiness increasing activity. Prior to this Happiness class I had read a magazine article about a woman who practiced expressing gratitude by taking a photo a day (Venuto 2009). Seeing as I am not very adept at photography and prefer to write (I already keep a personal journal), I decided journaling gratitude would be a more appropriate and enjoyable activity for me. After engaging with the activity for five weeks, I continued the practice and contacted three individuals to begin the activity as well, and two of these saw the activity through (Emily and James). Participants were recruited for the activity either in person or via a phone call and were good friends of mine. I found recruiting friends to be an advantage as we are all very open with one another and our established relationship means they were comfortable with

observation and questions regarding their experiences. To introduce them to the activity the participants were sent an information sheet outlining what was involved if they agree to participate (possible ways to structure the journal, how often to write, examples of what to include), some background information (such as research and benefits of the activity), and consent forms to return if they agreed to engage in the activity. Throughout the following weeks participants were observed via conversational face-to-face interaction and observation, and questionnaires relating to their experiences while engaging in the activity. To monitor my own engagement with the activity, I wrote observational notes throughout my journal relating to my experience with and feelings toward the activity. These observation methods provided me with qualitative research data with I was then able to compare with popular and academic research on expressing gratitude.

Academic research on the discourse of expressing attitude has proven that practising this activity on a regular basis can help us appreciate the good things in our lives, therefore promoting a high level of life satisfaction (Aaronson 2006, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade 2005, Polak & McCullough 2006, Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2006, Lyubomirsky & Layous 2013). By aiming to write one thing we were grateful for in our journal on a daily basis, my participants (Emily and James) and I were able to receive a variety of benefits. Both physical and mental benefits have been identified as a result of expressing gratitude. Aaronson (2006) states that people who regularly express gratitude gain a sense of contentment, generally feel better about themselves, experience less negative thoughts, and have more energy. Studies have shown that timing is of the essence. Expressing gratitude weekly is ideal so the activity does not just become another chore, according to a six week intervention study by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade (2005). I wrote in my journal daily, and found this beneficial as it meant even on a not-so-good day, I still had to find something I was grateful for which often lifted my mood. James also recorded his journal daily, and at a particular time of day so it became more of a routine which he found beneficial. "Otherwise I would have forgotten to do it!" he says. Over time, all three of us began to notice that writing something for which we were grateful for each day started to become a habit, and just part of our daily routine.

Materialistic desires, such as acquiring more wealth and material possessions, have a high consumer value placed on them in today's society and many believe it will make them happy. Contrary to this common belief, research has shown striving for wealth and material possessions actually undermines our happiness and psychological fulfilment (Lyubomirsky 2007). Polak & McCullough (2006) say that a focus on gratitude may have the power to reduce materialistic strivings by helping us focus on and appreciate the positive circumstances in our lives. Prior to undertaking this activity, I had already begun a journey of trying to live a more simplistic life that was less focused on acquiring more 'things'. Sometimes I find myself off-track and buying things I don't need, through keeping a gratitude journal I was able to bring my focus back to appreciating the smaller things and the healthy relationships in my life. In contrast, Emily is a self-confessed shopper and loves to buy new things. After participating in the gratitude journal activity, she began to realise that these new things made her happy straight after purchasing them, but in the long term she had forgotten about that short-loved happiness. "Most of my entries", she said "were not about the latest thing I had bought, but small things in my life that obviously meant more to me".

After focusing our attention away from material possessions, many are able to sit back and savour the small joys in everyday life and appreciate their current circumstances. Grateful people tend to experience high levels of positive emotion and are generally satisfied with their lives (Polak & McCullough 2006). This was something that was raised by my own observations and the other two participants undertaking the activity. James reported being able to take a step back and view his overall circumstances from a new point of view. Already being at a hard time in his life regarding work and study, he was still able to realise how lucky he is to have his basic needs met. The rest is just "the icing on the cake" as he puts it. "Some days, I was able to be so grateful for something that seems so small, like the city lights at night from my balcony" he said. I have also had a very similar experience myself in being able to gain appreciation of the small things I experience every day, such as 'the moon' (witnessing the full moon), 'freshly picked flowers' (going for walks especially to pick flowers for a vase indoors), and 'autumn beach walks' (taking a walk to the beach and enjoying the ocean, even when it isn't swimming weather). Emily noticed that she too began

to feel more content and aware of her surroundings, such as a hot cup of tea on a warm day makes her realise she is grateful for warmth and comfort. Sheldon & Lyubomirsky (2006) report that in savouring positive experiences and situations allow us to extract the maximum satisfaction and enjoyment from our circumstances. Engaging in positive activities also leads people to view more events in their life positive (Lyubomirsky & Layous 2013). In my gratitude journal I have one entry titled 'New plans', whereby I had managed to see the positive sides of an unforeseen circumstance that will have quite an impact on my life and I could have otherwise viewed as a negative change. This phenomenon is discussed by Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts (2003), who acknowledge that grateful individuals are better able to cope with negative events and changes in their lives.

Lambert & Fincham (2011) yielded results from a study they conducted which concluded that expressing gratitude is highly beneficial for fostering relationships. Generalised gratitude is defined by Lambert & Fincham (2011) as an emotion or state of being resulting from having an awareness and appreciation of things that are valuable and meaningful to an individual, extending to the value or behaviours of another person. This was a common feature across all three of our experiences with expressing gratitude, particularly across de facto or married partnerships. Emily has been married for almost a year, and reported feeling more content and appreciative of her husband's actions and behaviours. "When my husband cooks dinner or does the washing up, I feel grateful towards him for his thoughtfulness and kindness". Expressing gratitude can also lead to a stimulation of moral behaviour, which can aid in building social bonds (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2006). Emily also experienced this phenomenon following her awareness; "it often provokes a kind deed in return, such as me baking a cake". Through expressing gratitude on a daily basis, I also came to appreciate my partner more, seen in the entries 'A pizza night!' (When I came home after a long day and my partner had pizza made for me) and 'being thankful that my boy is so understanding' (after a stressful day I was quite snappy and irritable, but my partner was still supportive and understanding). This awareness often meant I made an effort to show my appreciation through my reciprocal actions, even if it was just specifying in words the things I was thankful for him doing. James also noticed he benefited from expressing gratitude in appreciating the things he and his partner enjoyed doing together, such as

going out for breakfast. “Since then”, he says, “We have begun to do more of the activities we enjoy together, like going on camping trips and bushwalking more”.

Popular research on the topic of expressing gratitude and happiness commonly yields the same ideas as academic studies. Sherri (2013) states that it is of particular importance to find a medium of writing that suits each individual, be it a computer or a pretty notebook that means you remember to write in the journal. I chose to keep my journal in the form of a notebook, meaning it was portable and I could write at any time of day so I did not forget. James noted this as a downfall for him, having recorded his journal on the computer, he quickly realised he didn't use the computer often enough and forgot to write. Emily also chose to do hers in a notebook, for the reason that it was easier for her to pick up and write whenever the moment took her.

Popular reporting focuses on the increased benefits for individuals when undertaking the activity. Of particular importance is learning to focus on what we have, rather than what we don't. Weblog post by Sherri (2013) states that changing the way we see life and our circumstances enables us to see the positive side of whatever life may throw our way. In regard to my experience with the activity, it definitely taught me to be more comfortable and content with what I have and my life as it is now. I tend to be someone who compulsively looks to the future; making plans and mapping out how I want my life to be. Journaling gratitude helped me understand that this life I am living is now and I became far more present in each moment. A magazine article featured an interview with Hailey, who for a year had taken a photo a day of something she was grateful for (Venuto 2009). Hailey noted that she began to appreciate things that she would have otherwise rushed by, caught up in running from one thing to another throughout her day. James reported this through his experience with expressing gratitude, noting that he was more aware of his surroundings and in finer detail. “I found myself noticing seemingly unimportant things, like a particular tree, or a nice-smelling gardenia”. By focusing on the journey rather than the destination, we are able to notice all the small things that make our life so rich (Venuto 2009). This was noticed in Emily's experience too, whereby she found herself writing more entries than her

regular ones; being aware meant she found more things to be grateful for, and so the cyclical nature of gratitude continued. This was likened by Filmer (2011), to the law of attraction; being grateful for any situation will draw into your life more of what you are being grateful for. James noticed that many of the things he was grateful for had been there the whole time; though recording them in his journal meant he was consciously aware that they were there.

For anyone who is considering undertaking a happiness-increasing activity, I would recommend starting a gratitude journal, namely for the benefits experienced by myself, Emily and James. I think it is first important to choose an activity that is suited to you and your values and attitudes, and activity that fits with your current lifestyle (Lyubomirsky 2010). This could be an area of your life that you feel is lacking or that you are not as happy with. At times I thought it may have been more beneficial for me to partake in a different activity, such as meditation or physical activity, as these are areas of my life that I feel I would benefit from focusing on. I already consider myself a rather grateful and optimistic person, and sometimes I didn't find expressing gratitude was as challenging or as noticeably life-enhancing as it could be for others. The most important thing is persistence, I found it quite difficult to begin the daily routine of expressing gratitude, however after three or four weeks of persistence it became part of my daily routine to sit and write something I was grateful for at the end of each day.

Expressing gratitude has been proven by academics and documented by popular reporters as one way people can increase their happiness levels and gain a greater appreciation for the world around them. Through expressing gratitude myself and recruiting Emily and James to record their own gratitude journals, the benefits and advantages of doing so have been solidified along with academic and popular evidence. All three of the people who participated in the activity (myself included) found that the benefits of the activity greatly enhanced our lives, making us more appreciative and thankful for the physical and social relations we all share. For anyone beginning their own happiness activity, I think it is most beneficial to choose an activity that fits with your lifestyle and focus on making it a habit.

WORD COUNT: 2,482

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