

Erin Prior

Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2014

Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin

Assignment

Choose an activity that research says increases personal happiness, such as expressing gratitude, helping others, being optimistic or practising mindfulness. (See Lyubomirsky for ideas.) Undertake this activity for at least 5 weeks, keeping a personal diary of your observations about your experience, with entries once a week or more. You can keep the diary on a blog or as typed or handwritten notes.

During the time you undertake the activity, you should also read academic writing. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers say about the activity and your experience of it.

Your submission is in two parts:

1. A 1000-word reflective journal
2. Your diary.

In the reflective journal, you should report on 5 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

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

Erin Prior's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

Expressing Gratitude

The practice of gratitude is one which is instilled, almost as an obligation, from a very young age – it is a relatively universal memory of childhood having to say a very forced “thank you” to a relative for an uninteresting or disappointing present. Yet recent research in the field of positive psychology has proven that even such gratitude as forced as this has long-term mental health benefits.¹ Gratitude has been seen as both a duty and a virtue throughout history which benefits both the individuals involved and society at large.² As such, there is a universally accepted ‘law of gratitude’³ which emphasises positive social interactions and intentions which, according to Hobbes, is necessary in order to counteract people’s natural self-interest.⁴ It is evident that the forcing of gratitude is not, however, merely polite but it forces one to be aware of what they have, rather than what they do not, and appreciate the positive aspects of their life. Philosopher Alain De Botton states that, in today’s secular world, we don’t give thanks for what we consider to be relatively minor or uncontrollable aspects of our lives – what Cohen refers to as being grateful to the cosmos⁵ – due to the fact that it forces us to think about our vulnerability and confront death.⁶ It is agreed upon by psychologists, scholars and philosophers alike that cultivating gratitude within one’s daily life is crucial to happiness as it promotes mindfulness, positive thinking and resilience to trauma and hardship.⁷

¹ Robert. A Emmons and Robin Stern, “Gratitude as Psychotherapeutic Intervention”, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, vol 69, no 8 (2013), p 849

² Michael McCullough et al. “Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?”, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol 127, no 2 (2001), p 249

³ Adam Smith, in D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (eds.), *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (Oxford University Press: 1979), p 162

⁴ Adam B. Cohen, “On Gratitude”, *Social Justice Research*, vol 19, no 2 (2006), pp 256-257

⁵ *ibid.*, p 255

⁶ Alain De Botton, “Alain De Botton On Gratitude”, *The School of Life*, published 14th March 2010, accessed 17th March 2014, <http://www.theschooloflife.com/blog/2010/03/alain-de-botton-on-gratitude/>

⁷ De Botton, “On Gratitude”; Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness* (Piatkus: 2010), p87; Emmons & Stern “Gratitude as Psychotherapeutic Intervention”, pp 846-855

Lyubomirsky places expressing gratitude as her number one Happiness Activity. Gratitude is also Cicero's number one virtue as he states that it is 'the parent of all others',⁸ a sentiment echoed by Adam Smith who states that 'Kindness is the parent of kindness'.⁹ It was in the light of such ideas that I chose to undertake a gratitude diary as my happiness activity. Having previously attempted a gratitude photo-diary in 2010, I was aware of the benefits, although I then had no background knowledge of positive psychology. Lyubomirsky's 'Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic'¹⁰ placed "expressing gratitude" as my sixth best activity, with "Savouring life's joys" as number one. In choosing to practice gratitude, I saw an opportunity to proactively and routinely savour life's joys, as it would be an easier practice to implement. I determined to keep a blog on which I would publish a list of my "gratitudes" daily and keep track of my moods through a mood-tracking app (Moodlytics). My theory was the (potential) audience would motivate me to maintain the practice regularly, and tracking my moods throughout the day would enforce mindfulness. My initial Subjective Happiness Score¹¹ was 3.5, and was placed in the range for moderate to severe depression, a position from which I was determined to leave. My aim for undertaking this practice was to score above 4 at the end of the 5 weeks, and to feel empowered to further cultivate happiness.

Gratitude is reliant upon an understanding of oneself and one's place within greater society,¹² whilst also helping to create meaning for the individual. There is some disagreement amongst scholars on whether forced gratitude creates real meaning in or appreciation of life. Vernon is 'suspicious of this tyranny of thanks',¹³ which seems ambivalent towards and

⁸ McCullough et al., "Is Gratitude a Moral Affect?", p 249

⁹ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p 225

¹⁰ Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, p 76

¹¹ Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, p 33

¹² Cohen, "On Gratitude, p 258

¹³ Mark Vernon, "On the Tyranny of Thanks", *The School of Life*, published 25th February 2011, accessed 17th March 2014, <http://www.theschooloflife.com/blog/2011/02/on-the-tyranny-of-thanks/>

manipulative of natural appreciation of peoples or moments. I initially agreed with Steindl-Rast when he states gratitude is ‘an act of heightened and focused intellectual and emotional appreciation’.¹⁴ Whilst there is an element of force involved, in the first two weeks of my gratitude diary I felt as though this focused me on aspects of my day for which I was legitimately grateful but had not noticed, stating

... I have come to view it – as a way to notice that the day wasn't as bad as I felt it was. I don't necessarily feel happier, but I feel calmer...I have more of an ability to accept negativity and...move on from it.

My score on the Subjective Happiness Scale reflected this, as it increased to 3.75 by 25th March. Throughout the next three weeks, however, as my schedule became increasingly busy, and I became more stressed, I began to find expressing gratitude daily extremely difficult.

Lyubomirsky states that optimal timing is absolutely critical and it is clear that my intended timing was far from optimal, as judged by the research and my experience. Of those involved in Lyubomirsky's research, only those who recorded their thanks once weekly gained a significant and lasting increase in wellbeing.¹⁵ Lyubomirsky also states that over-practicing a happiness activity can create a sense of being overburdened or fatigued.¹⁶ Observing this within myself, I modified my practice – determining that on Wednesdays I would record my gratitude and on Sundays I would reflect, which quickly dwindled to Sunday becoming my gratitude day. This immediately lifted a weight from my shoulders and increased the benefit I was receiving from the practice with my Subjective Happiness Score increasing from 3.75 to 4.25 over the remaining three weeks. Although I had difficulty with keeping the diary, I still found myself expressing gratitude regularly and being more mindful of my moods and what caused them. I do,

¹⁴ David Steindl-Rast, “Gratitude as thankfulness and as gratefulness”, in Emmons, R.A, and M.E McCuollough (eds.), *Psychology of Gratitude*, (Oxford, NY: 2004), p 283

¹⁵ Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, pp 90-91

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 132

however, attribute the benefits I have received from the practice as more to this mindfulness, which was encouraged by the expression of gratitude. Bono and McCullough support my feeling, stating that ‘the grateful thinking condition’¹⁷ has the most positive affect, as the demand of writing may disrupt the experience of positive affect or cause anxiety. The active of encouragement of gratitude within one’s daily life is fairly universally supported by research and, within my experience, I would agree that gratitude is an essential component of cultivating your personal happiness.

Upon reflection, I found that expressing true gratitude gave me an increased sense of joy in response to life and motivated me to create more ‘goodness’¹⁸ in my life and in that of others. As such, I can certainly see the benefits of practicing happiness, overall, not just gratitude. For me, true gratitude is the result of cultivating mindfulness about simply being alive. From my research, the conscious cultivation of gratitude plays a significant role in the creation of a positive life, especially gratitude as a mindfulness practice that connects one to life and the act of being alive. From my practice of gratitude and, in turn, mindfulness, I feel empowered to continue to choose a positive life for myself which I believe will not only increase my happiness but also help my productivity in achieving my future goals.

Final Word Count: 1, 078

¹⁷ Giacomo Bono and Michael E. McCullough, ‘Positive Responses to Benefit and Harm: Bringing Forgiveness and Gratitude Into Cognitive Psychotherapy’, *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly*, vol 20, no 2 (2006), pp 153-154

¹⁸ Emmons and Stern, “Gratitude as Psychotherapeutic Intervention”, p 847

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