A Memory Based Positive Psychology Activity Intervention

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Introduction

• The field of Positive Psychology focuses on positive emotions, character traits, and techniques used to increase happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).
• This is commonly studied by testing how positive activity interventions (PAIs) effect scores on various measures of affect and well-being.
• Previous research has demonstrated the effective use of some PAI techniques to reduce unhappiness and increase overall happiness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).
• Sin and Lyubomirsky (2005) conducted a meta-analysis and found that although there are many factors that contribute to the success or failure of PAIs, there was an increase in well-being and a decrease in depressive symptoms overall.
• Studies have suggested that autobiographical memories are related to self-concept and well-being.
• Positive autobiographical memories elicited positive self-evaluations and negative autobiographical memories elicited negative self-evaluations (Fitzgerald, Stade, & Lawrence, 1988).

Method Continued

Measures

• Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE). The scale is designed to assess subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being (Diener & Diener, 2009). This is a 12-item questionnaire that includes six items to measure positive feelings and six items to measure negative feelings with a score of 1 (very rarely or never) to 5 (very often or always).
• Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). This scale is a 4-item scale of global subjective happiness. Two items ask respondents to characterize themselves using both absolute ratings and ratings relative to their peers. The final two items describe happy and unhappy individuals and ask respondents the extent to which each characterization describes them. The items are on a 7-point scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Method

Participants

• Participants were 191 individuals enrolled in psychology classes at California State University, Fullerton. The resulting sample was 67% female and 33% male (13% failed to report), with an age range of 17 to 29 and a mean age of 19.9 (SD = 2.7).

Results and Discussion

• Figure 2 shows that the overall trend was for mean scale scores to change in the predicted directions. These trends were not statistically significant for the SHS (all F’s > 1). For the CESD there was a trend for an interaction [F(2,141)=1.19, MSE=.030,21, p<.12, ηp2=.03] with both interventions decreasing over time, but not the control. The positive affect subscale of the SPANE showed a significant interaction [F(2,115)=7.71, MSE=.522, p<.01, ηp2=.08] with scores decreasing for the control, increasing for the gratitude group, and remaining stable for the positive psychology group. Scores on the negative affect subscale decreased for all groups [F(1,116)=5.47, MSE=.868, p<.02, ηp2=.05].
• To test whether our conditions were different as intended, we ran tests comparing participant ratings of the memories they reported. The primary indicator was that valence ratings (3 to -3) were lower for the control group (neutral memories, M=.51) than the two intervention groups (positive memories, M=.20; gratitude, M=1.66).

As noted earlier, there are concerns over self-selection and placebo effects in positive psychology research. Self-selection and knowledge of hypotheses may effect many factors such as, time, effort put forth, and the expectations of the participant.

• Two questions were tested with a series of hierarchical regressions. First, would a participant’s locus of control predict control scores on the CESD at time 2 (post-intervention) for both experiments? Second, would an individual’s central tendency completion add positive power after accounting for LOC (step 1) and CESD scores at time 1? The answers seem to depend on which experiment is being analyzed.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Baseline CESD</th>
<th>Intervention CESD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Memory</td>
<td>R2 = .26, p = .142</td>
<td>ΔR2 = .13, p = .005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiographical Memory</td>
<td>R2 = .20, p = .162</td>
<td>ΔR2 = .06, p = .25</td>
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• We also ran the regressions after removing participants in the control condition. As can be seen in Table 2, this did not alter results much, but p values increased due to the loss of power.

Table 2

<table>
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It is interesting to note that the LOC subscales contributing to predictive power differed across experiment. As one would expect, internal LOC was negatively related to CESD scores (β = .4) for the Positive Psychology group. In contrast, for the Autobiographical Memory group external LOC was the strongest predictor of CESD scores (β = .56).

An additional question we had was how much the changes in scores were simply due to regression to the mean.

Figure 1

Figure 2