
The Growth Of Positive Psychology And Effect Of Mindfulness On Wellbeing

Introduction

This essay looks into the becoming of Positive Psychology in the 21st Century and its significance in enhancing wellbeing. It then proceeds to explore Mindfulness; one of the research areas of Positive Psychology and its effect on wellbeing by analyzing two different studies in that area.

The Takeoff of Positive Psychology

During World War Two when there was all but disaster and distress, there stood few who kept their calm in the storm (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Surprisingly, they weren't the people you would classify as elite, this raised the question - what strengths did they possess to cultivate this attitude at such hard times? (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). When looking into the study of psychology in the 20th century, it was deficient in studying the attitude and methodology behind human behavior. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). After World War 2, more funds were being poured into research on mental illness and other problems facilitating returning veterans (Seligman, 2002).

Nearing the end of the 20th century, psychology inputted a lot of depression, racism, violence and all other notions of adversity but less on character strengths, virtues, and conditions that led to higher levels of happiness (Gable & Haidt, 2005). When Rand and Snyder (2003) examined the ratio of positive to negative subjects of psychology publications from 1872 onwards in the PsycINFO database, it produced a ratio of around two negative publications for each positive one.

Working mainly on individual weakness and flawed brains over the years, labeled science as poorly equipped to effectively prevent illness. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi,

2000). Upon the realization of this inequality the movement of Positive Psychology was born (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive Psychology is the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001). Individuals were no longer viewed as a passive being responding to stimuli but as decision-makers with choices (Bandura, 1986; Seligman, 1992).

The field of positive psychology is about valued individual experiences in terms of having well-being, contentment, and satisfaction in the past; hope and optimism for the future and flow and happiness in the present (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggest that by recognizing virtues such as courage, optimism, hope, honesty and perseverance we can learn how to nurture these virtues in young people through interventions.

This movement followed with more research, grants to facilitate research, related new courses in universities and collaborative research across countries (Gable & Haidt, 2005) A google

scholar search of “Positive Psychology” from 1999 to 2016 produces over 36000 results (Warren & Donaldson, 2017), showing the increasing value and significance positive psychology has been having in the research community. Its research has also expanded through many disciplines such as education, sociology, philosophy, political science, medicine and law to name a few (Warren & Donaldson, 2017).

Positive psychology has always been around but was integrated with other fields of psychology (Linley et al., 2006). Stepping into the 21st century it's been looked like an independent field and psychologists have continued to learn, research and find out ways to build qualities in individuals and communities to not just experience life events and survive but to know what makes life worth living and flourish. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000 & Linley et al., 2006).

Positive Psychology Research area: Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to direct attention to the present moment, while being open-mindedly curious and compliant (Bishop et al., 2004). The concept of mindfulness comes from eastern spiritual traditions and relates to a form of attentional control built through meditative practices (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness has proven to improve wellbeing through the health, psychological, cognitive and social benefits it possesses (Kuyken et al., 2013). Specifically, its psychological benefit of reducing stress and enhancing mental health among adults and youth (Meiklejohn et al., 2012) has encouraged psychologists to continue research on its impact on wellbeing.

Study one: Effectiveness of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme

To evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness among young people in enhancing mental health and wellbeing, Kuyken et al. (2013) conducted a non-randomized controlled feasibility study. A total of 522 young people aged 12-16 in 12 secondary schools were included in the study. They either participated in the MISP (Mindfulness in Schools Programme) or were part of the control group. The MISP curriculum included nine lessons, to enhance wellbeing, mental health and teach social and emotional competence (Kuyken et al; 2013). The study collected data; at pre-intervention, post-intervention and a follow up three months later. The results are summarised in the following tables:

Note. From 'Effectiveness of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme: non-randomized controlled feasibility study' by Kuyken, W et al; 2013, The Journal of Psychiatry, 203, 126-13. 2013 by BIPsych.

The range for the wellbeing score was from 14-70 (Kuyken et al., 2013), the mean after intervention seems to have gone up by 1.5. Similarly, with stress, the highest score that could be obtained was 40 (Kuyken et al., 2013) and at baseline, it was 17.5 and had gone down by .1 after the intervention. The intervention seems to have had the highest effect on the depression mean score, going down by 0.8. When comparing the stress scores of the follow up during exam times (a period of high stress), the mean stress score was less by 0.6 for the intervention sample compared to the controlled sample. The results, therefore, provide clear evidence of its effectiveness in reducing stress, depressive symptoms and enhancing well-being (Kuyken et al., 2013).

The study was effective in terms of choosing schools which matched key variables, conducting

self-reports at good measurement points of time, selecting teachers who had gone through training for the MISP program and having a result of around 80% who had used the practices at different levels after the completion of the course (Kuyken et al., 2013).

Contrarily, data was obtained through self-reporting by the students using an online portal or by paper (Kuyken et al., 2013). While this method is an easy form of data collection, there are loopholes for psychological biases. If the students had discussed their answers with friends, it could influence their answer to be similar, known as reference group bias. Confirmation bias could have occurred since students are aware of the aim of the MISP program, they may answer in favor of an increase in well-being even if it's untrue.

The majority of the sample's ethnicity was white, 74.9% in intervention and 68.8% in the control group (Kuyken et al., 2013). This creates a sampling bias, as they may have similar characteristics in terms of culture, economic background, and values. It, therefore, cannot be relied on to make generalized statements about MISP's effectiveness. The schools were not chosen randomly and those chosen had expressed an interest in MISP (Kuyken et al., 2013), therefore lacking diversity, adding on to the chance of bias in results obtained.

More studies that incorporate and resolve the issues outlined must be conducted to testify the generalisability of the intervention and its effect on enhancing the well-being of the youth. On the other hand, MISP has proven to be effective in terms of its acceptability among schools and its positive effect on students (Kuyken et al., 2013), justifying its potential to be incorporated in other schools as well.

Study two: Effects on stress in health-care professionals due to mindfulness meditation

Work Stress has been a common issue among health-care professionals along with effects such as burnout and diminished empathy (Galantino et al., 2005). Meeting continuous high demand builds stress and makes it hard to rightfully feel or show empathy to patients (Baime, 1999). Galantino et al. (2005) used MM (Mindfulness meditation), a commonly used strategy for dealing with stress, to evaluate its effectiveness in reducing stress among health-care professionals. The salivary cortisol level of employees was used as an indicator of stress.

The intervention was conducted with a sample of 84 employees from a university hospital. The MM program consisted of 8 weekly two hour classes and the content and techniques taught were made relevant to scenarios faced in their occupation and towards attaining wellbeing, for instance addressing work-life balance (Galantino et al., 2005).

Salivary cortisol level was measured at the baseline and 8 weeks after intervention and the same for completing three different questionnaires. The questionnaires; POMS, IRI, and MBI contained questions that measure mood, empathy and burnout respectively (Galantino et al., 2005). At the end of the MM program subjects did report an improvement in mood and emotional exhaustion, the POMS total score had a reduction from baseline (Galantino et al., 2005) including a decrease in different moods such as anger, tension, and confusion suggesting an increase in well-being. However, there was no significant correlation between salivary cortisol levels (stress indicator) and questionnaire results (Galantino et al., 2005).

While the salivary cortisol sampling was non-invasive and easy to obtain, its results may have been affected by the ethnicity of the sample, collection time and testing parameters (Galantino

et al., 2005). For instance, there is no guarantee that the employees followed conditions such as not eating at least 1 hour before testing (Galantino et al., 2005). Possibly also the cause for lack of correlation between mood and exhaustion changes to salivary cortisol levels. People in the program led busy lives, so many weren't able to follow the schedule which might devalue their experience of wellbeing (Galantino et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Mindfulness does play an important part in improving one's wellbeing as shown by both the study's results and the settings in which they were presented. However, when carefully evaluating methods used to obtain results, conclusions cannot be drawn with full reliability. The extent to which outcomes can be generalized regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation and economical background is questionable because these studies didn't incorporate random sampling. Positive psychology as discussed earlier is about valuing individual experiences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and the attainment of wellbeing through mindfulness may be subjective to some.