New Perspectives in Positive Psychology Theory? The Students' Voice: Early Report on an On-going Project

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Abstract

This paper offers a brief interim report of a project reviewing student views and perspectives of positive psychology interventions contained in course assignments. Initial observation has identified three themes emerging from the analysis: "time and meaning," "happiness and…," and "strengths in context." These argue that while positive psychological interventions are appropriately evaluated by way of randomized controlled experimental studies, the practice of these activities involves a recognition of personal motivation, meaning, and particularly social context.

Introduction

Bucks New University has offered an MSc Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) programme since September 2012. At the time of writing, the programme has had four cohorts of students. The MAPP recruited 15 students the first time it ran beginning in September 2012; 19 students for its second cohort in September 2013; 22 students for its third cohort in September 2014; and 40 students for its fourth cohort in September 2015 when we offered the full MAPP programme via distance learning also. The programme has attracted students from Austria, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Qatar, and Switzerland as well as various parts of the UK. Students either commute one weekend per month to High Wycombe and Missenden Abbey to attend teaching sessions, or they can study the course via distance learning.

The course is run on certain principles. For example, we recognise that all students choose to undertake the programme for different reasons, and they each have their own goals. We ask students to articulate these goals as part of the process of applying for the course. We are a relatively small course and believe we can adjust our emphasis in the teaching to the types of goals students bring. This can be demanding, yet we see this as an important feature of the MAPP at Bucks New University, and it is something we endeavour to keep at the heart of the programme as the numbers in each student cohort continues to steadily rise. Therefore, we do not teach a "single course," but adjust and adapt it to the students.

While this approach may be a practical reflection of how we work, there is a deeper perspective behind this that represents what is effectively a "person-centred" approach to our educational work. This can be seen to draw upon the work of Carl Rogers on person-centred therapy and what he termed person-centred freedom (Lyon & Tausch, 2014). In this context, students have much greater freedom to choose their own assignment work in accordance with their own interests, passions, and goals. The tutors' role is largely to guide and support students in this process and to work from a basis of empathy, caring, congruence, and genuineness. This underlying approach means we are sensitive to what Rogers referred to as the "actualising tendency"—that each of us is on a journey of unfolding to what may be "our best" if we are in

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conditions that support this growth. We seek to offer these conditions (such as congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard) in the environment of the course.

Given the nature of the topic, and the emphasis on students applying the ideas they encounter in their own lives, we do acknowledge the parallels between the MAPP as an academic programme and how it might be seen to have therapeutic value for many students. We are mindful to highlight this distinction for students and remind them that, whilst some of the work they may choose to undertake in the context of assignments may have therapeutic benefit, the course is an academic programme at the postgraduate level. While Masters' study is academic, and draws on our logical and rational functions, we also believe that positive psychology has to be an exploration, not just theoretically but also practically and experientially. We see mastery as a process that balances the "heart" and the "head," and so we encourage students to relate to subjects emotionally as well as rationally.

To support this possibility, the underlying assessment strategy of the programme is to allow students to choose the focus of their assignment work within a particular subject of study.

They have considerable scope to pick an aspect of a subject that reflects their goals, and to take time to explore it theoretically and experientially; in other words, "to learn it from the inside out." In this regard, we are very much drawing upon the sentiments behind the words of leading positive psychology researcher, Chris Peterson, when he noted that positive psychology is not a spectator sport (Peterson, 2006). The assignment briefs typically ask students to apply an aspect of positive psychology over a period of time (e.g., approximately 8 weeks due to the length of each semester), reflect on their experience of doing this, and to link their own experience to the relevant academic literature. Students then submit either a reflective journal kept over this time, or a report presented in the more traditional research report format (introduction, method, findings, and discussion). In some modules, students are also required to give either an oral presentation or a poster presentation as a way of sharing their assignment work with the rest of the student group.

It is in the aspect of the work where students are encouraged to critically reflect on their experience and use this in their critical evaluation of published theory and research where we regularly see students challenge and go beyond the theory. This is what has generated this project. We believe that in this type of teaching and work, "teaching is a two-way street." We watch and learn from the exploration and insights of our students. In an attempt to formalise this two-way learning process further, we sought to undertake a review of assignment work from a two-year period.

Method

We plan to undertake a review of all coursework assignments submitted as part of the MSc Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) at Bucks New University over a two-year period (September 2014-September 2016). The review focuses primarily upon work that has demonstrated the quality of challenging or pushing the "edge" of a theory. In practice, this meant the focus is on work awarded marks in the "Distinction" range (awarded a mark of 70% or above). We sought, and were granted, approval to do this via the Bucks New University Ethics Committee. This paper represents an interim report of material in two first year modules, namely "Introduction to Positive Psychology: Happiness, Well-being and Flourishing" and "Strengths-based Development and Engagement."

Assignments were thematically analysed in accord with the principles advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). These can be summarised as familiarisation with the data, generating

initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Findings and Discussion

One of the early goals advocated as positive psychology set out to be established as a recognised discipline was to use established methods from mainstream psychological research in order to systematically evaluate the impact of Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) upon participants' wellbeing. Thus, a substantial part of the evidence that has been accumulated that certain practices alter behaviour for the better have been through experimental studies or randomised control studies (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005). What we witness the students doing is picking these methods and applying them to aspects of their lives of their choice. What have we seen happening in these experiences? An exploratory thematic analysis of assignment work is beginning to reveal some core themes emerging in students' reporting of these experiences: (1) time and meaning, (2) happiness and…, (3) and strengths in context.

Time and Meaning

In reviewing students' work, and in observing them work over the course of the programme, it is sometimes startling to see the variation in a perspective or window of time that is chosen for exploration, and the meaning that is attached to it. For example, we witness students taking a "whole life" perspective, and long-term goals related to vocation, meaning, and purpose, or something that is short-term, immediate, localised, here and now, such as using a positive psychology perspective to change a work-based difficulty. In either perspective, the PPI appears to have the characteristic of a "road towards" a student's goal, whether a short road, or a long one (Stofner, 2015).

Happiness and…

In choosing a PPI to explore, it would be easy to make an assumption that the experience might be "positive." However, one theme that is emerging is that the experience is rarely just "positive." We see the positive experiences or steps coinciding with challenges, such as anxiety (Harris, 2015). As such, we believe that the students are finding themselves immersed in questions now being explored more deeply in what is being referred to as "Second Wave Positive Psychology" (PP 2.0; e.g., Ivtzan, Lomas, Hefferon, & Worth, 2015; Wong, 2011) ahead of the discipline as a whole acknowledging its place more widely.

Strengths in Context

The advocacy of recognising, accepting, and using our strengths appears to be oriented to individuals and an individual perspective and journey (e.g., Linley, 2008; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). What emerges from our students' work is the extent to which strengths and their use are "systemic." What follows are several examples.
        While strengths-spotting may be considered a skill, reliant on the language and will to use it when actively undertaken, we are, in reality, looking for and at the best in others. As such, strengths-spotting has a capacity to be profoundly relational, and when adopted may influence the nature and quality of our relationships with those around us (Collinson, 2014; Linley, 2008). A debate does take place about the extent to which "strengths" may be visible in very young

children. Our students' experience suggests they are identifiable, and that when this is mirrored to a child, they respond and growth of those strengths occurs (Skinner, 2015).

There appears to be a trend in literature that our strengths are innate and reflect the best core of who we are as individuals. However, this view risks underestimating the extent that a sense of our "strengths" or the best of what we offer is shaped by social learning and social context. There is a strong likelihood that our strengths profile is also a profile, to some extent, of learned behaviours. The presence of these learned behaviours is worthy of respect and how we allow for them theoretically needs adjustment. For example, if positive psychology does advocate that strengths are most likely to be innate, then how do we allow for learned behaviours and their use? One suggestion emerging from the review of students' work is that learned behaviours may be paired with innate strengths to be seen or managed at a more accurate "best" (Herbert, 2015).

Finally, in story after story from students, we learn that strengths exist in context and relationships. There has been the argument that we cannot help being and showing who we are, yet strengths sensitively deployed and used might be adjusted metaphorically in the same way that a "mixing deck" adjusts and adds nuances to the nature of sound (Douglas, 2015).

Further, recognising the influence of cultures and social context, it may actually be the social use of our strengths that allows us to see their nature, and how they may shape and grow in our lives (Skinner, 2015).

Initial Conclusions

We seek to draw some tentative conclusions based upon this initial and exploratory review of students' work. The analysis is beginning to reveal that when individuals, as part of assignment work, choose activities based around what are now commonly called PPIs, there are broader contextual issues at play that are often overlooked in the literature. For example, we bring ourselves to the choice of these activities, through what might be called the "best fit" for us (Lyubomirsky, 2008). As we do this, we bring the "why," our motive, to the "what" and the "how." The "why" is affected by our "learning history" over time (Snyder 2002), a history that may be hard to overcome, or may take time to do so.

Positive psychology may often argue that we, at our best, will display innate qualities and characteristics (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, we live and grow in a social context and "mirror," so we advocate that learned behaviours must also be an important aspect of who we are, and are worthy of perhaps more respect than has been shown.

Edwards (2015) and Worth (2010) both highlight an inner dynamic in this process of moving towards greater "positive" in our lives: that we give ourselves "permission" to change and engage in different experiences that affect the quality of who we are, and our life. In witnessing this dynamic in students, we suggest that the randomised control studies that comprise the evidence base for PPIs can often overlook or underestimate social context and culture in their performance, and a deeper acknowledgement of this would enhance our understanding of their operation and potential.

Our impression in watching students work is that many aspects of positive psychology, such as emotions, strengths, hope, and mindset, are systemic and exist in a social rather than individual context. As such, when we have these positive experiences, we suggest that any one of them may have a "broaden and build" effect, not solely positive emotions, the context in which the "broaden and build theory" was originally developed (e.g., Fredrickson 1998).

Having the privilege of working with large numbers of students choosing, applying, writing, and talking about their experiences of PPIs, we believe that the PPI is an anchor or a starting point of the experience. It is the beginning, not the whole, nor the end. Students who consciously decide to test the limits, edges, and content of theory have been finding "new" dynamics which we infer are influenced and driven by the relationship with the social context. This paper is intended as an early illustration of what these explorations point us towards.

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