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HAPPY PEOPLE BECOME HAPPIER THROUGH KINDNESS: A COUNTING KINDNESSES INTERVENTION

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Abstract

We examined the relationship between the character strength of kindness and subjective happiness (Study 1), and the effects of a counting kindnesses intervention on subjective happiness (Study 2). In Study 1, participants were 175 Japanese undergraduate students and in Study 2, participants were 119 Japanese women (71 in the intervention group and 48 in the control group). Results showed that: (a) Happy people scored higher on their motivation to perform, and their recognition and enactment of kind behaviors. (b) Happy people have more happy memories in daily life in terms of both quantity and quality. (c) Subjective happiness was increased simply by counting one's own acts of kindness for one week. (d) Happy people became more kind and grateful through the counting kindnesses intervention. Discussion centers on the importance of kindness in producing subjective happiness.

Keywords

gratitude; intervention; kindness; positive psychology; subjective happiness

INTRODUCTION

One of the central topics of concern to positive psychology is happiness (Seligman, 2003; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Recent research on happy people has demonstrated several important findings. Compared with less happy people, happy people have better social relationships and more pleasant everyday lives. For example, Diener and Seligman (2002) showed that very happy people have highly satisfying relationships with friends, romantic partners, and family members and that, compared to their less happy peers, they report more positive events and emotions in their daily lives relative to negative ones. They also found that very happy people are more extraverted, more agreeable, and less neurotic and that they score lower on several measure of psychopathology. Other studies have shown that subjective happiness is one of the key factors in subjective well-being and overall satisfaction with life (Buss, 2000; Diener, 2000; Strack et al., 1991; Suh et al., 1998).

Gratitude is an important human strengths that contributes to subjective happiness (Emmons and Crumpler, 2000; McCullough et al., 2002; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). McCullough et

al. (2001) showed that grateful individuals were especially appreciative of the contribution of others to their happiness. Watkins et al. (2003) suggested that grateful persons would further be characterized by the appreciation of life's simple pleasures. These results imply reciprocal relationships among gratitude, subjective happiness, and good social relationships. Consequently, compared with unhappy people, happy people report close and satisfying relationships and feel more gratitude in their lives (Park et al., 2004). Whereas gratitude results when people receive kindness *from* other people, kindness entails enacting kind behavior *toward* other people. We expected that in addition to the strength of gratitude, the strength of kindness would also play an important role in increasing subjective happiness.

Few researchers have focused on the strength of kindness *per se* among happy people. It has been reported that women respond more positively when observing a random act of kindness than do men, suggesting that women may be more attuned to kindnesses (Baskerville et al., 2000). Therefore, in the current studies we focus on women. We postulated that, as a strength, kindness has three components: (a) the motivation to be kind to others; (b) the recognition of kindness in others; and (c) the enactment of kind behavior in one's daily life.

We also explored possible mechanisms that might link kindness to subjective happiness. We assumed that various emotional, motivational and cognitive processes influence the recognition and enactment of kind behaviors and thereby might affect subjective happiness. For example, Lyubomirsky et al. (2001) showed in laboratory studies that unhappy people are more inclined than happy people to rely on passive social comparisons at both the group and individual level. They suggested that unhappy participants responded more negatively to the information of evaluating themselves (e.g., "team failure") than did happy participants because their self-concepts were less stable, less clear, and less certain. In other studies, they reported that happy people perceived, interpreted, and subsequently thought about life events and their life circumstances in more positive ways than did unhappy people (Lyubomirsky and Tucker, 1998). Lyubomirsky (2001) addressed why some people are happier than others, and suggested that it is important to understand individual differences in cognitive and motivational processes, such as social comparison, self-evaluation, self-reflection, and person perception.

Positive emotions also contribute to judgments of life satisfaction, well-being, and happiness in daily life (Diener and Larsen, 1993), and they are proposed to trigger upward spirals toward improved emotional well-being and happiness (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). Fredrickson (1998, 2001) offered the *broaden-and-build theory* of positive emotions to describe how positive emotions broaden people's thought-action repertoires, and by doing so build their enduring personal resources, including physical, intellectual, social, and psychological assets. To the extent, then, that happy people have more positive experiences in daily life, they may also gain more personal and social resources relative to their less happy peers.

In this article, we have two purposes. One is to assess the relationship between kindness and subjective happiness, and the other is to explore possible mechanisms linking them. The specific purpose of Study 1 is to investigate whether happy people have more frequent and more intense positive experiences in daily life, and also to investigate whether happy people are more kind than less happy people with respect to the three components of the strength of kindness (i.e., motivation, recognition, and behavior). We hypothesize that, relative to less happy people, happy people will report more of each of the three kindness components and more positive experiences in daily life. The specific purpose of Study 2 is to explore how an intervention that asks people simply to keep track of the kind acts they perform affects their feelings of happiness.

STUDY 1

Method

Research participants—Participants were 175 (20 males and 155 females) Japanese undergraduate students at Kobe College and Kwansai Gakuin University (M age=19.1 years and $SD=1.1$). They answered a self-report questionnaire administered in their psychology classes in exchange for course credit.

Measures—Measures included the Japanese version of Subjective Happiness Scale (JSHS), a kindness scale measuring its three components, and reports of daily happy and unhappy experiences. The JSHS was developed as a Japanese version of Lyubomirsky and Lepper's (1999) Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and has been investigated for internal consistency, test-retest reliability, factorial validity, convergent validity, and discriminate validity (Shimai et al., 2004). The JSHS consists of four items. The first item asks participants to characterize themselves using absolute ratings from 1 (= not a very happy person) to 7 (= a very happy person). The second item asks participants to characterize themselves relative to their peers from 1 (= less happy) to 7 (= more happy). The third item provides a general description of happy people (“Some people are generally very happy, and they enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything”), and asks participants to rate how well this characterization describes them, from 1 (= not at all) to 7 (= a great deal). Finally, the fourth item is reverse-worded, and similarly asks participants to what extent an unhappy characterization (“some people are generally not very happy, although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be”) fits them, ranging from 1 to 7. Answers to all four items were combined and averaged into single JSHS composite score, with higher scores reflecting more subjective happiness. The JSHS has satisfactory internal reliability ($\alpha = .82$), and a high test-retest correlation over 5 weeks ($r = .88$).

The questionnaire on the components of the strength of kindness consisted of three items (i.e., motivation, recognition, and behavior), and participants were asked how much they displayed each component. The *motivation* item asked participants to what extent the statement “I am always thinking that I wish to be kind and help other people in daily life” characterized them, from 1 (= not at all) to 5 (= a great deal). The *recognition* item asked participants to what extent the statement “I recognize that I always do kind behavior and help other people in daily life,” characterized them on the same 1–5 scale. The *behavior* item asked participants to what extent the statement “I do kind things and help others everyday” characterized them, again rated from 1 to 5. Higher scores reflect greater motivation, recognition, and behavior, respectively.

Daily experiences of happiness and unhappiness were measured by asking participants to describe events they experienced during the past three weeks that produced strong emotions. As many as five happy and five unhappy events could be described, and they subsequently rated each event from 1 (= very weak) to 6 (= very strong).

Results and Discussion

We used a median-split to divide participants into happy people ($n = 81$) and less happy people ($n = 94$) based on their total scores on the JSHS. The mean JSHS score for the happy group was 5.77 ($SD=0.53$), and that for the less happy group was 4.00 ($SD=0.65$).

The mean number and rated intensity of daily happy and unhappy experiences for happy and less happy people are presented in Table I. Happy people reported a greater number of daily experiences of feeling happy during the past three weeks than did less happy people. However, there was no significant difference in the number of unhappy experiences reported across the

two groups. Similarly, the happy group rated their happy experiences as more intense than did those in less happy group, whereas there was no significant difference between the groups on the rated intensity of their unhappy experiences. So, the differences between happy people and less happy people were not found in unhappy experiences but instead in happy experiences, which were both more frequent and more intense.

Content coding of the happy experiences reported revealed that among happy people the most frequent happy experiences involved social relations (i.e., with family, friends, and teacher) (40.3%), romantic relations (27.5%), school (14.8%), work (11.7%), and health (3.2%). Moreover, the bulk of happy events entailed other people and the kindness received from them. Accordingly, happy people have more happy memories in terms of both quantity and quality, and they also appear to experience more gratitude toward others in these memories.

Table II shows the mean scores of the three components of the strength of kindness, (i.e., motivation, recognition, and behavior) for happy people compared to less happy people. The happy group scored higher on all three components than did the less happy group. These results suggest that happy people not only desire to be kind, but they are also more attuned to the recognition of kindnesses, and more likely to behave in kind ways.

Past experiments have found that when people are induced to experience positive emotions, they report wider arrays of action urges relative to those induced to experience either neutral or negative emotions (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005 in press). We propose that subjective happiness similarly plays an important role in widening kind people's repertoires of kind thoughts and behaviors, which may in turn further increase their subjective happiness.

We further suggest that both kindness and gratitude bear close relations with subjective happiness. Emmons and McCullough (2003) investigated the intervention of counting blessings in experimental studies. They showed that, compared to a control group, a conscious focus on gratitude led to reductions in negative affect and increases in optimistic appraisals, positive affect, offering emotional support, sleep quality, and well-being.

Accordingly, if people become more conscious of their kind behavior in daily life through a counting kindnesses intervention, they may (a) increasingly wish to be kind to others, (b) more strongly recognize themselves as kind people, and/or (c) more frequently enact kind behaviors toward others. That is, this intervention may make people's motivations, thoughts, and actions more positive. Finally, we hypothesize that our counting kindnesses intervention will increase subjective happiness.

STUDY 2

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of a “counting kindnesses” intervention on people's subjective happiness. Within the context of this intervention, we also investigated the relationship between kindness and gratitude.

Method

Research Participants—Participants in the intervention group were 71 female undergraduate students (M age = 18.70 years and $SD = 0.77$) from a psychology class at Kobe College. Participants in the control group were 48 female undergraduate students (M age = 18.79 years and $SD = 0.64$) from another psychology class at the same school. We elected not to randomly assign participants from the same class across the two conditions to minimize inadvertent dissemination of the nature of the intervention in the course of students talking and working together. All participants answered self-report questionnaires administered during regular class meetings.

Measures and Procedure—The counting kindnesses intervention asked participants to become more aware of their own kind behavior toward other people every day for one week. Participants were asked to keep track of each and every act of kindness they performed and to report the daily number of these acts.

To investigate the effects of the counting kindnesses intervention on participants' subjective happiness, we administered the Japanese Subjective Happiness Scale (JSHS) one month before the 1-week intervention period (baseline), and also one month after the end of the intervention (follow-up).

The day following the 1-week intervention, participants in the experimental group were asked to rate their perceived achievement of the goal of counting kindnesses as well as how grateful they felt during the intervention week. The item tapping perceived achievement asked participants to indicate the extent to which they achieved the goal of the intervention on a scale from 1 (“I did not achieve at all”) to 5 (“I achieved a great deal”). The item on grateful experiences asked participants the extent to which they experienced gratitude during the week on a scale from 1 (“I did not experience any at all”) to 5 (I experienced a great deal). Higher scores on this item reflect more gratitude in response to receiving kindnesses from other people.

Results and Discussion

Effects of Counting Kindness Intervention on Subjective Happiness—Figure 1. shows the mean subjective happiness scores for each group at baseline and follow-up. A two-way analysis of variance, 2 (Group: intervention, control) \times 2 (Time: baseline, follow-up), revealed no main effects for Group or Time, however, the Group \times Time interaction was significant ($F(1, 117) = 4.82, p < .05$). *Post-hoc* pairwise comparisons detected a significant difference between baseline and follow-up happiness scores in the intervention group ($p < .01$), but no significant difference in the control group. Also, there was a significant difference in happiness scores between the intervention and control groups at follow-up ($p < .05$), but not at baseline. These results are consistent with the conclusion that the counting kindnesses intervention significantly increases subjective happiness.

Across all participants in the intervention group, the mean change in subjective happiness, as measured by the JSHS, was 0.44 ($SD=0.73$). To explore our data further, we divided these participants into those who showed large increases in happiness and those who showed only small changes in happiness based on a change score of 1.17 (mean score=0.44 plus one $SD=0.73$). The large-increase group consisted of 21 participants (mean change scores on JSHS = 1.96, $SD=0.98$), whereas the small-change group consisted of 50 participants (mean change scores on JSHS = 0.18, $SD=0.72$). Needless to say, the mean of the large-increase group was high, 5.83 ± 0.45 , suggesting that they had become very happy people. By comparison, the mean of the small-change group was 4.16 ± 0.74 .

Number of Actual Kind Behavior, and Extent of Achievement and Grateful Experiences—We investigated the differences between the large-increase group ($n = 21$) and the small-change group ($n = 50$) in actual kind behavior, perceived achievement, and grateful experiences during the counting kindnesses intervention. Table III shows the relevant means and standard deviations. Results show that the large-increase group reported enacting more kind behaviors relative to the small-change group. Moreover, the large-increase group scored higher on grateful experiences than the small-change group. These differences obtained despite a lack of difference in the extent of perceived achievement across the two groups.

The results of Study 2 suggest that a 1-week intervention that simply asks people to count kindnesses may increase people's subjective happiness. In offering this conclusion, we recognize that our strategy of assigning students by class to the intervention and control groups

weakens internal validity and by consequence lessens our ability to make a firm causal claim. In subsequent internal analyses, we found that those who showed large increases in happiness, that is, those who became very happy people, became more kind and grateful in response to the intervention compared to those who showed only small changes in happiness. These results suggest that happy people perform more acts of kindness and that they feel more gratitude when on the receiving end of kindness.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The most important finding reported here is the close association between kindness and happiness in everyday life. Kind people experience more happiness and have happier memories (Study 1). Simply by counting acts of kindness for one week, people appear to have become happier and more grateful (Study 2). Thus, our results suggest that happy people are more kind in the first place and that they can become even happier, kinder and more grateful following a simple intervention.

Our research suggests that, like gratitude, kindness is an important human strength that influences subjective well-being. Kindness contributes to good social relationships and can thereby be viewed as adaptive. Our results further suggest that a reciprocal relationship may exist between kindness and happiness, as has been shown for gratitude and happiness (Emmons and McCullough, 2003).

Although we need to collect more data to pinpoint the mechanisms through which kindness increases happiness, our data implicate both motivational and cognitive processes. Emmons and McCullough (2003) suggested that gratitude might promote happiness by enhancing one's experience of positive events and one's social network. Along these lines, Fredrickson (2001) suggested in her broaden-and-build theory that positive emotions broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, a process which in turn builds intellectual, physical, social and psychological resources for the future. These social and psychological resources may in turn enhance kindness and especially subjective happiness. For example, positive emotions may lead people to make and solidify new bonds and to develop optimism and senses of identity and goal orientation. Accordingly, if people experience positive emotions and optimal social conditions as a result of their own kindness, an upward spiral may be created. That an intervention as simple as counting acts of kindness had demonstrative effects suggests that this upward spiral may be created quite easily. We conclude that our "counting kindnesses" intervention might be a useful tool for the deliberate promotion of well-being.

Moreover, we suggest that motivational and cognitive processes in daily life may create differences between happy people and less happy people, and thus may be responsible for some or many of the consequences linked to happiness. The results of the present research showed that happy people may become even happier, kinder and more grateful following our intervention relative to less happy people. Watkins (2004) showed that people who score higher on trait measures of gratitude experience greater subjective well-being and more intense positive affects (happiness, vitality, and hope) as well as fewer negative affects (depression, resentment, and envy). McCullough et al. (2004) investigated the relationship between grateful emotions and personality traits, affective traits, and daily emotional experiences through a daily survey over three weeks, finding that feelings of gratitude related as expected to other positive psychological characteristics. Moreover, Lyubomirsky (2001) found that happy people have more positive relationships compared to less happy people. Some previous studies have also reported that unhappy people are more inclined to rely on passive and negative thinking styles compared to happy people (Lyubomirsky and Ross, 1997; Seidlitz and Diener, 1993; Seidlitz et al., 1997).

We suggest that kindness can cause happiness. However, it is still unclear what the exact pathways of this effect might be. Peterson and Seligman (2004) placed the strength of kindness in the superordinate virtue category of humanity, whereas they placed the strength of gratitude in the category of transcendence. The empirical links we observed in the present studies raise the possibility that kindness and gratitude might belong together. In future research, we will investigate the mechanisms through which acts of kindness promote subjective happiness, as well as the relationship between the intertwined strengths of kindness and gratitude.

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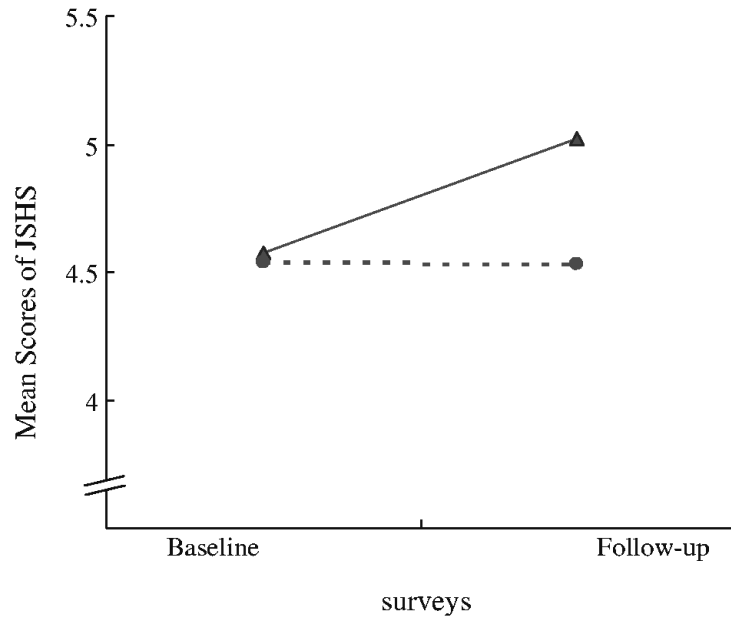


Figure 1. Mean happiness scores at baseline and follow-up (Study 2). JSHS = Japanese version of Subjective Happiness Scale.

TABLE I

Mean (standard deviation) number and extent of daily experiences of happy and less happy people (Study 1)

Variable	Happy people	Less happy people	<i>t</i> (173)
Number of happy experiences	4.64 (1.14)	3.68 (1.50)	2.28*
Number of unhappy experiences	3.58 (1.46)	3.77 (1.48)	n.s.
Extent of happy experiences	5.29 (0.53)	4.66 (0.68)	5.66**
Extent of unhappy experiences	4.68 (0.62)	4.77 (0.75)	n.s.

*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .001$.

TABLE II

Mean (standard deviation) scores of kindness components of happy and less happy people (Study 1)

Kindness strengths	Happy people	Less happy people	<i>t</i> (173)
Motivation	3.69 (0.99)	3.15 (0.97)	2.33*
Recognition	3.08 (0.71)	2.15 (0.70)	3.10*
Behavior	1.98 (0.50)	1.26 (0.44)	3.14*

* $p < .001$.

TABLE III

Mean numbers of kindness behavior, and mean extent of perceived achievement and grateful experiences in the counting kindnesses intervention for the large-increase group and the small-change group.

Variable	Large-increase group	Small-change group	<i>t</i> (69)
Number of actual kind behavior	3.38 (0.92)	1.16 (0.57)	3.01 *
Extent of perceived achievement	3.61 (0.54)	3.32 (0.71)	n.s.
Extent of grateful experiences	3.86 (0.67)	2.01 (0.92)	2.84 *

* $p < 0.01$.