

# **Big Project Paper**

Akash Selvam

Department of Psychology

University of California Merced

PSY 158: 34501

Dr. Carroll

20 November 2020

## Introduction:

For the past couple of months, I conducted a case study on myself in which I performed several positive psychology exercises and recorded the experience. According to Peterson's book *A Primer in Positive Psychology*, positive psychology is "the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between" (Peterson, 2006, p. 4). I measured my P.E.R.M.A flourishing scores, approaches to happiness scores, and compassion love scale scores before and after conducting a series of positive psychology exercises. According to Bank, the author of *201 Positive Psychology Applications*, P.E.R.M.A is the acronym for "positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment" (Bannink, 2017, p. 6). I got these measurements from the questionnaires I took from the Authentic Happiness website at the University of Pennsylvania (*Authentic Happiness*, 2020). There are several positive psychology exercises I performed within two months. I performed the "have a good day exercise" (Peterson, 2006, p. 43), in which I journal about what goes right or wrong in my day for a week and plan a good day based on my journal entries. I also performed the gratitude journaling exercise in which I journaled about three things that went right for me. Finally, I used 3 of my character strengths in 3 different ways which I have not done before, and I wrote a gratitude letter. These exercises specifically examined my mood. For example, in the gratitude journaling and the gratitude letter, I measured how I felt when I was journaling and how my friend felt when he read the gratitude letter I sent him.

My case study is vital because these positive psychology exercises have the potential to increase the well-being of others. In Peterson's book, he goes over the World Health Organization's definition of health, "Health is the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. (Peterson, 2006, p. 224). This quote means treating mental illness is not enough to be healthy - health requires optimizing one's life. This does not mean we should not focus on mental illness; we should also focus on what we can do to make life better and healthier for people.

## **Methods:**

### **Participant:**

I am Akash Selvam, a 21-year-old Indian male and a fourth-year college student who will be the only participant in this study. I am not biased against positive psychology interventions because I am a relatively optimistic person and believe that if you work hard enough, good things will come to you. The most significant factor that might have affected my observation is the COVID-19 quarantine because it limited what I could do. For example, I could not go outside as frequently as I wanted or spend quality time with my friends in person, which could have limited the strength of the good emotions I felt. My case study is vital for people in my demographic of college students because college students typically face a lot of stress and homesickness, which can impede their studies.

### **Measures:**

I collected both qualitative and quantitative measurements for my case study. The data collected from good daily exercise, gratitude journaling, and the questionnaires from the Authentic Happiness website and the VIA Survey of Character website are quantitative since they use numeric scores to indicate how you feel. I collected a score from a scoring system of 1-10, representing how I felt about how my day went for both an excellent daily exercise and a gratitude journaling exercise. 1 indicates I had a terrible day, while 10 indicates I had a perfect day. I collected this data from 8/31/20 to 9/27/20. I took several tests on the authentic happiness website regarding how I was doing in terms of my mood, my self-image, and my perception of the world. I specifically took the authentic happiness inventory test, which measures overall happiness; the optimism test, which measures optimism; P.E.R.M.A flourishing test, which measures flourishing; the approach to happiness test, which measures overall happiness and life satisfaction; and the compassionate love scale test which measures the tendency to support, help, and understand other people. To be even more particular, the P.E.R.M.A. flourishing test measured positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment, negative

affect, health, loneliness, and happiness. The approach to happiness test measured a pleasant life, good life, and meaningful life. The optimism test measured the perception of hopefulness, the pervasiveness of good and bad events, and the permanence of good and bad events (*Authentic Happiness*, 2020). For the strength exercise, I measured how I felt during and after I had done an activity corresponding to one of my character strengths. (*The VIA Character Strengths Survey*, 2020).

My qualitative measurements are the data I collected regarding my specific feelings and reaction to the gratitude letter and using my top 3 character strengths in a new way. I also measured my response and my friend's response to him reading the gratitude letter I wrote for the gratitude letter exercise. I recorded my feelings during and after I performed three activities involving me using my top three character strengths in a new way that I had not done before.

In the “have a good day” and the gratitude journaling exercise of recording, I needed to remember to write down what I did for a particular day, so I had to use memory to retrieve information. This information retrieval needed to be accurate, so that it could have slightly biased the results. The results could be somewhat biased because it would be just a one-day length that I would forget to record.

### **Procedure:**

I performed a series of positive psychology exercises for about two months for this case study. From 8/31/20 to 9/13/20, I performed the “have a good day” exercise in which I wrote about the good and bad things that happened on a given day, and then I would score that day to indicate how I felt overall and how that day went. From 9/14/20 to 9/27/20, I performed the gratitude journaling exercise in which I still scored how my days went, but this time, instead of writing about how my days went, I wrote about three good things that happened on those days. In addition to writing about the three good things that happened, I either explained how this is a good thing, how this good thing happened, or how I can have more of this good thing. (Bannink, 2017, p. 56). On 9/26/20, I planned

to have a good day based on the information I had gathered from the good daily exercise journal entries I wrote earlier. I described what happened on this day and compared how this went to my plan for this. I also wrote about the three good things that occurred on this day and gave a score.

I performed the gratitude letter exercise from Peterson's book, in which I wrote a gratitude letter to my best friend and emailed that letter to him. (Peterson, 2006, p. 31). We then went on Discord, in which he read that letter and told me how he felt from reading that letter.

Then I recorded his feelings about the letter and my feelings from his feelings from reading that letter. I took a questionnaire from the VIA Survey of Character Strengths to find my top 5 character strengths. I chose 3 out of my top 5 character strengths, honesty, kindness, and teamwork, to perform this next activity. I did three activities in which I had to use each of my top character strengths differently. For honesty, I told my friend he was annoying me with his texts; for kindness, I helped my mom cook lunch for the family. For teamwork, I prepared myself for the discussion section activity the day before the discussion so I could better help my group finish the group assignment. After accomplishing these three activities, I recorded my feelings during and after I performed these activities. Finally, I retok the same five tests from the Authentic Happiness websites and compared the results before and after the positive psychology activities I performed.

The independent variables in this case study are the activities I performed for the past couple of months, such as writing a gratitude letter, performing tasks that correspond with my character strengths, and writing about my day and the things I accomplish. The dependent variables are my mood score (1-10), how I feel during an activity, my character strengths score, and my results from the happiness center tests.

## Results:

**Figure 1**



The Graph appears to trend downwards. The valley between 9/13/20 and 9/25/20 was when my progress of improvement stopped because I relapsed on sugar. This caused me to stop exercising, meditating, coloring and reading. I felt down and was upset at myself for relapsing in this time period. My average for the first two weeks is around 5.9, while my average for the last two weeks is around 4.8. My average changed downward, unfortunately, because I was going through some rough times, but I think doing this activity made it more bearable. In other words, my average rating could have been lower without doing this activity. My plan on 9/26/20 included meditating in the morning, watching a video on Andrewsarchus and taking notes, going to Coyote Hill Regional Park with my dad, hanging out with my friends, playing Super Mario Sunshine with my brother, reading an animal article, and working on my world-building project. I could not watch the video on Andrewsarchus, work on my world-building project, or read an animal article. Even though I could not do everything to my plan, I still felt like I had a fantastic day on that day.

After my best friend read the gratitude letter I wrote to him, he told me he started remembering all the good times we shared, which made him feel happy. His response also reaffirmed my perception of how meaningful our relationship is, which in turn also made

me happy. I felt like our bond strengthened after I realized we have a mutual understanding of how much we value each other as friends.

After I took the VIA Survey of Character Strengths, I found out my top 5 character strengths are kindness, honesty, humility, and love. After I told my friend how his constant texting annoyed me and made me feel drained, he stopped constantly texting me, which made me feel relieved and calm. After helping my mom cook lunch for the family, I felt less like a burden to my mom instead of a helper. After working with my bio discussion group member, I felt like a champion.

Table 1: Authentic Happiness test result

	8/29/20	10/28/20
<b>Authentic Happiness Inventory</b>	2.04	3
<b>Optimism test</b>	Pervasiveness-Bad Events: 6 Permanence-Bad Events: 6 Permanence-Good Events: 5 Pervasiveness-Good Events: 5 Hopefulness: -2	Pervasiveness-Bad Events: 5 Permanence-Bad Events : 3 Permanence-Good Events: 5 Pervasiveness-Good Event: 2 Hopefulness: -1
<b>PERMA Measuring Flourishing</b>	N: 5.67 R: 5.33 Health: 5.33 E: 5 A: 5 P: 4.33 M: 4.33 Happy: 4 Lonely: 2	N: 6.33 R: 9.33 Health: 7.67 E: 8.33 A: 7.67 P: 7 M: 8 Happy: 8 Lonely: 7
<b>Approach to Happiness Measures Overall Happiness</b>	Meaningful Life: 4.5 Pleasant Life: 4 Good Life: 3.33	Meaningful Life: 4.67 Pleasant Life: 3.67 Good Life: 3.33
<b>Compassionate Love Scale</b>	Compassionate Love Scale: 5.86	Compassionate Love Scale: 5.86

My original happiness score increased by .96 from 8/29/20 to 10/28/20. My score for the compassionate love scale stayed the same. On 8/29/20, I scored highest in the pervasiveness bad event category and lowest in the pervasiveness good event category. In



contrast, on 10/28/20, I scored highest in permanence goodness and lowest in pervasiveness good. Also, my hopelessness decreased from -2 to -1. In the P.E.R.M.A flourishing test, I scored highest in the negative affect category and lowest in the lonely category on 8/29/30. I scored highest in the relationship category and lowest in the negative effect category on 10/28/20.

### **Discussion:**

By participating in this positive psychology case study, I could apply what I learned from class to my life. Good exercise and gratitude journaling increased my authentic happiness, positive emotion, and engagement scores and decreased my pervasiveness and permanence of bad events scores. These particular positive psych exercises increased those particular scores I mentioned because they encouraged me to have a good day in which I could do activities that I found enjoyable and meaningful such as playing video games and spending time in nature. The gratitude journaling decreased my pervasiveness and permanence of bad events scores because it diverted my attention from the bad things in my life to the good stuff. I started adopting a positive attitude by redirecting my attention to the good things in my life and appreciating them. By adopting this positive mindset, I was able to enjoy the things I do more. This relates to what Peterson said about positive thinking leading to certain benefits such as health, happiness, and success. (Peterson, 2006, p. 15). I think acquiring a positive mindset from gratitude journaling leads to increased happiness and health, which validates the reported benefits of positive thinking from Peterson's book. The gratitude letter I wrote to my best friend increased my relationship score because it made me realize how meaningful and powerful our relationship is. This led to me appreciating all my close relationships and how wonderful they are. Performing three tasks using each of my top three character traits in a unique way may have also contributed to the increase in my relationship score because my top three characteristics, kindness, honesty, and teamwork, involve me interacting with someone. The activities I performed involved interacting with different people in a way in which I could use my

character strengths, strengthening the relationships I already had. I think the increase in my relationship score may have contributed to my increased scores in happiness. I say this because, in Peterson's book, he mentions that Reis and Gable concluded that good relationships might be the most crucial source of emotional well-being and life satisfaction across ages. (Peterson, 2006, p. 261). This may suggest that my activities that improved my relationship quality may also increase my happiness. My loneliness increased, and my score on pervasive good events decreased, which seems odd considering that my relationship scores increased. My probable explanation is that I might have felt lonely on that particular day, so I could have exaggerated my answer choices when taking the test.

Since I noted that these exercises had positive effects on me, they could have similar effects on other college students. The "have a good daily exercise," gratitude journaling, and the character of strength exercise can foster an optimistic mindset. The gratitude letter and the character of strength exercise can strengthen relationships which will aid in maintaining an optimistic mindset by increasing positive emotions. People can do better in their college courses and work with a positive mindset. Although this case study focuses on me, I think it can be generalized to others, especially college students. Before generalizing these exercises to everyone, more testing is needed across various demographics such as age, gender, and income level.

## References

*Authentic happiness*. (2020). Retrieved from

<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter>

Bannink, F. (2017). *201 positive psychology applications: Promoting well-being in individuals and communities*. New York: W.W. Norton 'I&' Company.

Peterson, C. (2006). *A primer in positive psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

*The via character strengths survey*. (2020). Retrieved from

<https://www.viacharacter.org/account/register>