

IMPROVING POSITIVE AFFECT BASED ON SELF-COMPASSION THROUGH LIFE GOALS EXPRESSIVE WRITING: BASIS FOR AN EGO IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG STUDENTS

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Abstract

The act of written emotional disclosure has been widely studied for the past several decades. Yet, in spite of this, there are limited studies which examine the interplay of expressive writing, self-compassion and positive affect, along with its potential to augment ego identity among students. Using repeated measures experimental design, the present research explored the efficacy of expressive writing in improving levels of positive affect among university students ageing 18-25 ($M = 19.23$; $SD = 1.21$). Participants were tested in groups and wrote either about life goals ($n = 46$), positive experiences ($n = 49$) or a control topic ($n = 46$). Two separate three-way ANOVA were carried out to investigate whether writing about life goals has an impact on the students' positive affect. It further examined how students could benefit according to their self-compassion levels. Regardless of the form of expressive writing, students did not significantly differ on the levels of positive affect. The results of this study are aimed at designing intervention for students to help them develop their ego identity. Future studies employing randomised, controlled designs are warranted.

Keywords: expressive writing, positive affect, self-compassion.

Introduction

Expressive writing, sometimes called written emotional disclosure, essentially involves expressing oneself through writing. This form of therapy was introduced by James Pennebaker and Sandra Klihr Beall (1986). Their pioneering work involved asking participants to write about a 'past trauma', as a way of conveying their deepest feelings and thoughts. In contrast, control groups were told to write about neutral topics like writing about their plans for the day, which consequently prevent them from revealing their hidden emotions. Both groups were requested to do this for 15 minutes each day for four consecutive days. Since its introduction, expressive writing (EW) has been increasingly used in a variety of ways to improve wellness, ranging from raising the self-concept of adolescents (Facchin, Margola, Molgora, & Revenson, 2014) to helping people with traumatic injury (Bugg, Turpin, Mason, & Scholes, 2009), as well as improving the regulation of emotion-related experiences, physiological responses and behaviours (Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, & Smyth, 2002).

Owing to the capacity of expressive writing to improve well-being, the present study would like to investigate whether expressive writing can deliver the same effect to improving positive affect (PA). Ultimately, the research aims to assess whether this intervention could be employed to improved ego identity among students.

As an important aspect of personality, PA needs to be augmented among students. It has been observed that PA develops creative thinking among students. For instance, in one study (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007), it was reported that non-traditional students reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning than did traditional students. Intrinsic motivation correlated with positive affect more strongly for non-traditional than for traditional students. For all students, interest and age emerged as significant predictors of intrinsic motivation to learn, and both interest and intrinsic motivation significantly predicted positive affect. Other findings indicated that participants in the high flow condition reported higher increases in PA and flow than those in the low flow condition, and that change in flow mediated the relationship between group and change in PA (Rogatko, 2009).

PA is an important aspect of emotion, especially among adolescents. Numerous studies show that happy individuals are successful across multiple life domains, including marriage, friendship, income, work performance, and health. A conceptual model has been suggested to account for these findings, arguing that the happiness-success link exists not only because success makes people happy, but also because positive affect engenders success. Three classes of evidence (cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental) are documented to test their model. Relevant studies are described and their effect sizes combined meta-analytically. The results reveal that happiness is associated with and precedes numerous successful outcomes, as well as behaviours paralleling success. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that positive affect, the hallmark of well-being, may be the cause of many of the desirable characteristics, resources, and successes correlated with happiness (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Although research on coping over the past 30 years has produced convergent evidence about the functions of coping and the factors that influence it, psychologists still have a great deal to learn about how coping mechanisms affect diverse outcomes. One of the reasons more progress has not been made is the almost exclusive focus on negative outcomes in the stress process. Coping theory and research need to consider positive outcomes as well. The study (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) focused on one such outcome, positive affect, and review findings about the co-occurrence of positive affect with negative affect during chronic stress, the adaptive functions of positive affect during chronic stress, and a special class of meaning-based coping processes that support positive affect during chronic stress.

Aim of Research

The aim of this research is to identify whether positive affect, based on levels of compassion, can be improved through life goals expressive writing. The overarching aim of the research is to utilise this finding to design an intervention to help students develop their ego identity.

The result of this research would be beneficial to the students themselves, teachers, parents, and to other stakeholders.

Methodology of Research

General Background

Since this research wants to implement an intervention programme for students, it has been decided that the participants for the study would also be students. The present research uses quantitative approach and the participants came from a private university in Manila, Philippines. They were briefed about the nature of the research and informed consents were obtained. Permission was also sought from the university. The study was conducted in 2016 and was limited to university students in the Philippines.

Sample Selection

A total of 141 university students ageing 18–25 ($M = 19.23$, $SD = 1.20$) were recruited to write either about life goals, positive experiences, or a review of a film they have recently seen. Participants were recruited inside the university lectures. Their participation was voluntary, and no credits or tokens were given.

Instruments and Procedures

Self-compassion was assessed using Self-compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003). The SCS is a 26-item measure tapping self-kindness, self-judgement, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over identification. Participants respond to various items such as ‘How I typically act toward myself in difficult times’ on a five-point scale, with higher total scores indicating greater self-compassion. In the current study, internal consistency is good ($\alpha = .72$).

The Types of Positive Affect Scale (TPAS; Gilbert et al., 2008) is an 18-item scale in which participants rate their feelings on a series of five-point scale to indicate how characteristic those feelings are of them. The scale measures three types of positive affect: activating positive affect (e.g., energetic, excited, active); relaxed positive affect (e.g., relaxed, peaceful, calm); and safeness/contentment positive affect (e.g., safe, secure, warm). In the current study, the internal consistency was high (baseline, $\alpha = .82$; follow-up, $\alpha = .86$) and test-retest reliability was also high ($\alpha = .80$). Using this scale, emotion words such as secure, calm, active, etc. were rated by participants on how characteristic these words were of them, at that moment.

Data Analysis

In analysing the main variables, the obtained TPAS scores were grouped into two, whereby scores of 28–48 were categorised as low positive affect and scores of 49–69 were categorised as high positive affect. Similarly, SCS were categorised as low self-compassion (27–40), and high self-compassion (41–53). In addition, the three subscales of TPAS: active positive affect, relaxed positive affect, and safe/warmth positive affect were also analysed relative to their baseline and follow-up scores.

Two separate three-way independent ANOVA were carried out to investigate whether the forms of expressive writing (life goals, positive experiences, or life goals) and self-compassion have an impact on positive affect.

Results of Research

It was explored whether there were any baseline differences between each of the experimental conditions before conducting the main analyses (refer to Table 1). This analysis revealed that participants in the life goal condition ($M = 52.11$) had greater TPAS scores compared to those in the positive experiences condition ($M = 50.16$) and the control condition ($M = 51.1$). Therefore, in order to control for these baseline differences, scores on self-compassion have been included in the succeeding analyses. Baseline scores indicate that participants have high levels of positive affect.

TPAS was further explored relative to its three subscales (refer to Table 2). The analysis revealed that active positive affect showed an increase from the baseline scores, following the writing tasks.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for positive affect at baseline and follow-up.

Life Goals		Positive Experiences				Film Review					
Baseline		Follow-up		Baseline		Follow-up		Baseline		Follow-up	
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
52.10	0.98	53.02	1.03	50.16	1.10	52.20	1.14	51.17	1.75	53.35	1.36

As can be seen from Table 1, the group who did expressive writing on life goals had higher scores compared to those who wrote about positive experiences and the control group (i.e., film review).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for subscales of TPAS.

	Baseline		Follow-up	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Active	2.98	.04	3.04	.05
Relaxed	2.63	.06	2.75	.07
Safe	2.88	.05	2.94	.02

Participants in the life goals writing tasks and control condition have lower levels of self-compassion, whereas those who did the positive experiences writing tasks have higher levels of self-compassion.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for SCS.

	Life Goals		Positive Experiences		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SCS	40.91	.78	41.40	.76	39.82	.91

As can be seen from Table 3, those who wrote about their positive experiences had higher levels of SCS compared to those who wrote about life goals and the control group.

Table 4. Analysis of variance controlling for positive affect.

	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	η	<i>p</i>
Writing tasks	2	.76	.46	.01
Self-compassion	1	.41	.52	.05
Writing tasks X self-compassion	2	.34	.71	.05
Error	128			

A three-way independent ANOVA was carried out to determine if writing tasks and self-compassion have main effect on positive affect, with follow-up scores on TPAS as the dependent variable. Data analysis revealed that there was no significant main effect between the independent variables on positive affect. Furthermore, there was no significant main effect between writing tasks and positive affect, $F(2, 128) = 0.76, p = .01$; and self-compassion and positive affect $F(1, 128) = .41, p = .05$.

Discussion

The present research examined the effect of specific forms of EW i.e. life goals EW and positive experiences EW on positive affect. In addition, it also investigated whether the effect of EW is moderated by levels of self-compassion. Previous findings (e.g. Troop et al., 2013) reveal that EW shows promise as a means by which people may decrease their self-criticism.

One study (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003) examined both dispositional and situational influences of self-critical (SC) perfectionism on stress and coping, which explain its association with high negative affect and low positive affect. Participants completed questionnaires at the end of the day for seven consecutive days. Structural equation modelling indicated that the relation between SC

perfectionism and daily affect could be explained by several maladaptive tendencies associated with SC perfectionism (e.g., hassles, avoidant coping, low perceived social support). Multilevel modelling indicated that SC perfectionists were emotionally reactive to stressors that imply possible failure, loss of control, and criticism from others. As well, certain coping strategies (e.g., problem-focused coping) were ineffective for high-SC perfectionists relative to low-SC perfectionists.

This study reveals no beneficial effects of EW (whether writing about life goals or positive experiences) on positive affect. This is a novel finding as it indicates that the positive effects of EW may, initially at least, be achieved depending on how it has been delivered and considering the nature of the sample. For instance, are the participants predisposed to be influenced by writing tasks? This is not the first study however to have observed that EW may not generate beneficial effects. For instance, O'Connor and colleagues (2011) reported absence of beneficial effects of EW, specifically writing about success stories on the self-reported measures of body image, self-esteem and psychological well-being. Similarly, another study (Fernández & Páez, 2008) found no effects by EW were found on positive affect, probably because the study had only one writing session of brief duration. Stronger feelings of joy, use of positive words, and low use of negative words in the narratives predicted low emotional activation at follow-up.

Results are contrary to previous studies whereby EW resulted in significant positive outcomes (e.g. Smyth, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2008; Kirk, Schutte, & Hine, 2011; Lafont, 2011; Arigo & Smyth, 2012), and a number of factors may account for this inconsistency. First participants spent 15 minutes of writing about their designated topic and no other writing tasks followed. This is contrary to previous studies (e.g. O'Connor et al., 2011) where participants are usually invited again to continue the writing tasks. Therefore, this could be a mechanism whereby EW conditions may not have been powerful or lengthy enough to affect positive changes in any of the outcome variables. However, it is interesting to note that on some occasions that EW was administered one-off task (e.g. Kuiken, Dunn, & LoVerso, 2008) such as writing about dreams that follow trauma and loss and they have shown effects. But it should be underscored that the present work examined immediate short-term impact on positive affect.

Lafont and Oberle (2014) investigated the effects of expressive writing on body image of women varying in eating disorder symptomatology. Ninety-two female undergraduates were randomly assigned to the writing topic conditions: traumatic events, body image, and room description. At three times (before, immediately after, and one month after the two-week intervention), participants selected from among nine figures (a) the figure deemed closest to their current figure, (b) the figure deemed closest to the ideal figure, and (c) the figure deemed closest to the figure that men prefer. The current figure ratings decreased after the writing intervention for the high-symptom group but not the low-symptom group. The ideal and male-preferred figure ratings were not affected by the intervention and did not differ between the symptom level groups. Based on the first finding, writing may improve body image perceptions in women with an already distorted body image.

Furthermore, given that participants were not selected on the basis of their levels of self-compassion, the absence of significant effect may then be attributable to the sample being relatively 'healthy'. Lastly, given that this is the first study to explore EW on a Filipino population, it remains unknown whether asking participants to write on their native language has the capacity to influence the results. This is an interesting area that needs to be addressed in the future.

Drawing from the baseline scores on SCS, it should be considered though that the participants' levels of self-compassion were not dramatically low to begin with i.e. it could be postulated that there were no factors about which EW have to protect against.

The present study provides insight into several boundary conditions of EW by examining whether it would be as effective if it will just be given on a single occasion. It also explored available findings from a non-Western population. This may also serve as a framework for longitudinally-designed studies following the effects on positive affect, self-compassion and ego identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

It is recognised that the current study has a number of shortcomings and limitations that require further comment. First, using a sample of convenience will undoubtedly influence the

generalizability of this study, aside from the fact that the experiment was carried out in groups, which may limit the effectiveness of EW. However, EW has been done in groups in the past (e.g. Klein & Boals, 2001) albeit it has shown positive outcomes.

The study also relied on self-report measures to assess the results of the experiments, but then previous studies also relied on self-reported measures. Finally, the investigator is mindful that this is the first study to employ a Filipino sample; therefore, future studies ought to attempt to replicate the current findings.

Implications

Notwithstanding the limitations described above, the implications of this study are threefold. First, although the present study reveals that EW does not have significant beneficial effects, its results could still contribute to current literatures on EW as an intervention tool, as well as on the available literatures on the roles of self-compassion on positive affect; and as a potential intervention to improve ego identity among students. It will also compare the results with other existing literatures which is important to avoid 'hegemony' as pointed out in an earlier study (Relojo, 2017) whereby the ruling class values and norms have become naturalised within the scientific research and knowledge-production on mental illness.

Second, the effectiveness of EW has been well-established on Western population. There were a few studies that explored it on non-English speakers (e.g., Lu, Zheng, Young, Kagawa-Singer, & Loh, 2012), but with a relatively small sample. To date, this was the first study to investigate EW as an intervention tool on a Filipino population. Although the present study did not reveal the anticipated beneficial results of EW, its findings will lead to comparison on future studies that will examine the effects of EW on Southeast Asian population.

Lastly, the result of this study will best serve as a pilot for future studies that will evaluate the efficacy of EW as an intervention tool relative to form of EW (i.e. writing about life goals and writing about positive experiences), and relative to how it is administered (i.e. whether to administer it individually or in groups, and whether to administer it on a single instance or for a consecutive number of periods) to better ascertain its effects. Future works that intend to explore the effects of EW relative to positive affect should further consider different kinds of positive emotions such as active positive affect, relaxed positive affect, safe/warmth positive affect as it may yield interesting insights in this area.

This study could also benefit adolescence. For instance, one investigation focused on the relative contribution of subscales of cognitive distortion (self-criticism, self-blame, helplessness, and preoccupation with danger) and the dimensions of parent-child relationship (mother care, mother overprotection, father care, and father overprotection). However, there are many other variables that might contribute towards adolescent depression which might be studied in the future. This finding calls for the improvement of access to adolescent mental health services.

Conclusions

The formation of an ego identity is a major event in the development of personality. Occurring during late adolescence, the consolidation of identity marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Given that ego identity is such an integral aspect among adolescents, it is vital to help them achieve its optimum development. One of the goals of this study is to discover new and effective interventions to address this.

In light of the results of this study, two robust conclusions have emerged. First, drawing from a host of literatures, it has been identified that EW may result to a host of health benefits. However, there is no assurance that it will work all the time. Results of this study offers insights as to what factors contribute to ensure the efficacy of EW as an intervention tool. This may be attributable to the fact that EW affects people on a number of aspects: biological, cognitive, emotional and social; making a single explanatory theory unlikely. Second, a variety of mechanisms can be posited to ensure its efficacy. Needless to say, future research should further explore its boundary conditions.

In addition to addressing theory-relevant questions, researchers and therapists must now address how, when and with whom this form of therapy is most beneficial and, at the same time, further evaluate how and why this intervention produces positive outcomes. This pilot study should pave the way to further research examining the efficacy of EW to ascertain the difference against Western population. Future studies employing randomised, controlled trial designs are warranted.

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