

Promoting the Health, Well-being and Achievement of New Students using Positive Psychology

Professor Ann Macaskill & Andrew Denovan
Psychology, Sheffield Hallam University



Sheffield
Hallam University

SHARPENS YOUR THINKING

Three Pillars of Positive Psychology



1. Positive experiences and emotions
2. Positive traits like talents, passions and strengths of character
3. Positive institutions

This research focuses on aspects of the first two, positive emotions and positive traits or strengths that students bring with them to assist in their transition to university.

Positive Psychology research is aiming to identify what makes life most worth living.

Positive Traits: Strengths of Character



1. Ubiquitous: found cross-culturally
2. Fulfilling: contributes to happiness & satisfaction
3. Morally valued
4. Does not diminish others- produces admiration not envy
5. Has a negative opposite
6. Like a personality trait
7. Can be measured
8. Are distinctive
9. Paragons- is strikingly embodied by some individuals
10. Present in some children
11. Selective absence- Missing in some people
12. Institutions- some attempt to cultivate it₃

Organisation of Strengths



24 Character Strengths identified, organised into 6 core human virtues as follows:

- 1. Wisdom & knowledge**
- 2. Courage-** emotional strengths that involve applying willpower to achieve goals
- 3. Humanity-** strengths of tending & befriending others
- 4. Justice –** Civic strengths underlying community life
- 5. Temperance-** strengths that protect against excess-
e.g. forgiveness, self-regulation
- 6. Transcendence-** provide meaning to life & help find value in life & cope with adversity.

Background to Present Study



- All individuals have these psychological strengths that they may not immediately be able to identify, but which can be utilized to improve their functioning and quality of life
- Transition to university is demanding, requires greater levels of initiative, independence, and confidence and more autonomous approaches to learning (Bryde & Milburn, 1990; Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001)
- Aim to explore some of the psychological strengths that students bring to the task

Aims of University Experience



1. Happiness

- Foster well-being
- Increase satisfaction with life

2. with 1 = good mental health

- Foster positive thinking (can do culture)
- +ve self-esteem

3. Desire to Learn & belief in own ability to learn

Core requirements fostered by 1 & 2

Confidence in own ability is crucial for Learning.



*Positive psychology is about recognising what makes individuals happy and satisfied with their lives & **Creating A "can do" culture***

3 elements to the project:

1. Measuring strengths & feeding these back to students in a report
2. Implementation of strengths
3. Evaluation of impact & effectiveness on well-being and learning

Use of Strengths



In study skills module:

Entered in personal development portfolio

Discussed nature and opportunities to implement
in university and in work

Inclusion in their emergent CV.

Employability agenda

Multi-nationals using strength based approaches

E. g. Ernst & Young using strengths profiles for
graduate recruitment in the UK

Strengths as Predictors of Health and Well-being



For **Mental Health**, hope is the strongest predictor of mental health, followed by gratitude, - model accounting for 15.2% of the variance in mental health ($F(7, 198) = 5.08, p < .001$).

For **Positive affectivity** Hope is strongest predictor followed by gratitude, then exploratory curiosity,- model accounting for 45% of the variance in positive affectivity ($F(9, 193) = 17.40, p < .001$).

Strengths as Predictors of Health and Well-being (cont)

For **Life Satisfaction** gratitude is strongest predictor, followed by hope with the model accounting for 22% of the variance ($F(7, 197) = 7.83, p < .001$).

For Self-esteem, Hope agency is strongest predictor followed by hope pathways, then exploratory curiosity, gratitude, and absorption curiosity, the latter being a negative predictor - model accounted for 41% of the variance ($F(8, 196) = 16.67, p < .001$).

Autonomous learning: 2 subscales



- 1. Independence of Learning:** Higher levels associated with higher scores on exploratory curiosity, gratitude, optimism, hope pathways and agency, and course self-efficacy at entry.
- 2. Study Habits:** Higher levels associated with higher scores on hope.

Entry grades were not significantly associated with any health and well-being or learning measures at entry point.

Autonomous learning



Hope, gratitude, and curiosity are all associated with **Autonomous learning**

Predictors: Hope is the most statistically significant predictor followed by **gratitude**, the model accounting for 17.60% of the variance in autonomous learning.

Evaluation: Strengths



Over 60% did not recognise having the strengths

However: 76% on reflection recognised using them

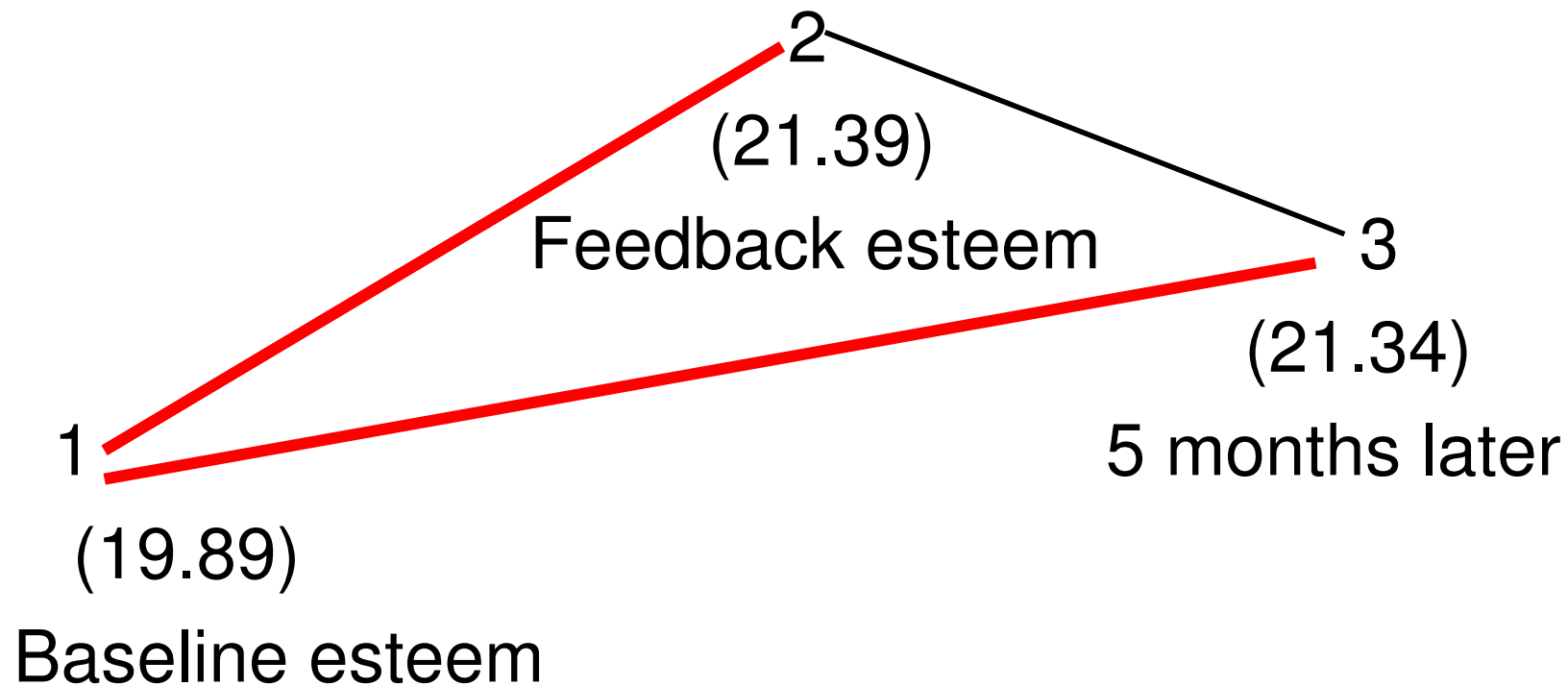
With 55% immediate thought was about the strengths that were not their top 3 (a proxy measure of negative thinking)

Significant increase in self-esteem after personal feedback on psychological strengths

Baseline measure ($M = 19.93$, $SD = 4.43$) and the post report measure ($M = 21.34$, $SD = 4.02$),

$t(204) = 6.55$, $p < .001$

Increases in Self-esteem Maintained over 5 months





Final Outcome Measure: First year Average Grade Achieved

Entry grade points, level of autonomous learning, **gratitude** and **course efficacy** are all positively associated with the **Grade achieved** for the year by students.

Entry grade points are the most significant predictor of first year Average Grade, followed by level of autonomous learning.

Does Autonomous learning improve in year 1?

Entry AL = 29.01 (6.94) Year end AL = 30.30 (6.45)

$t(151) = 2.23, p = .02$

Concluding Comments

All skills measured can be developed.

Ran workshops in semester 2 to develop skills.

Following up currently to see if changes are maintained.

Autonomous learning scale is in press *Studies in Higher Education*

Thanks for support to SHU Autonomy CETL & to all the students for their time.

Thanks for listening