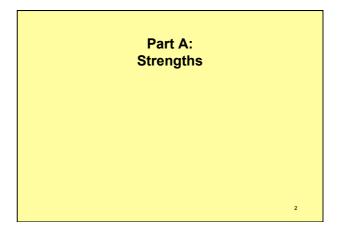## Session 3:

Strengths
Bad drives out Good
Simplifying your life
Burden of choice

L4 Positive psychology
Steve Draper

30 Jan 2014

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Part A:
Strengths

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Strengths

Wiki page on it: http://fims.moodle.gla.ac.uk/mod/wiki/view.php?id=10200&groupid=90&page=Wiki

Homework for next time:
www.viacharacter.org   VIA website

Starter ref. if you're keen:

Mitchell, J., Stanimirovic, R., Klein, B. and Vella-Brodrick, D. (2009). A randomised controlled trial of a self-guided internet intervention promoting well-being. *Computers in Human Behaviour 25*, no.3 749-760.

Linley & Harrington (2006)   The Psychologist vol.19 no.2 p.86

The idea

The basic idea is to focus NOT on remedying your weaknesses;
(i.e. focus on the positive, not negative, in your psychology)

BUT to align your activities with aspects of your character that are good: "strengths".

This will both make you more effective, and make you enjoy life more.

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OU intervention

One example was trialled by the Open University by phoning up students before they started their programme, and discussing with them what they felt their strengths were that would help them as a student.
Reduced dropouts by 5% with that one scripted phone call.

This then tacitly addressed their fears of inadequacy, not by changing them or giving them false reassurance, but by shifting their focus to positive true things about themselves.

The questionnaire

Did you take the test?
(URL on last week's handout)

My supposed top character strengths were:
• Judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness
• Fairness, equity, justice
• Humour and playfulness
• Curiosity and interest in the world

Love of learning
(And my worst: spirtuality, and diligence)

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List of strengths

- Curiosity, Interest in the world
- Love of Learning
- Judgement, Critical Thinking, Open Mindedness
- Ingenuity, Originality, Practical Intelligence
- Social and Emotional Intelligence
- Perspective

- Valour, Bravery
- Perseverance, Diligence, Industry
- Integrity, Honesty

- Kindness, Generosity
- Loving, Being Loved
- Citizenship, Loyalty, Teamwork
- Fairness, Equity
- Leadership

- Self-Control
- Discretion, Caution, Prudence
- Modesty, Humility

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence
- Gratitude
- Hope, Optimism
- Spirituality, Faith, Sense of purpose
- Forgiveness, Mercy
- Playfulness, Humour
- Passion, Enthusiasm

Discuss

Does this make any sense?

Do you have any relevant experiences?

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Strengths (2)

But is there any good evidence? -- ask Lisa Forte

Skimming journals gives me the impression that the published studies are correlational: suggesting explanations in terms of strengths, but not showing that active interventions are effective

Yet Dweck claims that US schools have in effect implemented a policy based on it …. [this is not exactly correct]

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What do I myself think?

Thinking about one's strengths is a different kind of mindset than thinking of one's defects. It had different effects, and different kinds of benefits.

Negative focus: leads to quick improvement; is necessary especially for social discipline, and for getting better at any skill.
You feel depressed, lack energy and motivation, and lack creative ideas for solving problems.

Positive focus: Good for generating ideas and solutions. Cheers you up Is widely implicitly supported in the whole idea of specialisation at school and at work: all of which is about doing what you are good at. Cf. the grandmother effect / role

xxx

Hope and optimism in holocaust survivors.
In some accident survivors (Manchester air crash fire)

BUT: optimism leads to not having insurance, not making contingency plans, ...

In other words, rationally if not psychologically, one would expect that both positive and negative perspectives, optimism and pessimism, to be valuable; and that a balance, employing both not only one, would be best.
Psychologically, perhaps the phenomenon is that we find it hard to do both at once, so might be best to deliberately consult each in turn.

Positive vs. negative

- There is a theme here.

- PosPsy defined itself in contrast or opposition to standard academic psychology, by focussing on healthy mental functioning, not on abnormal function.

- Strengths get a person to focus on what they are good at, not on what needs to be remediated in their abilities and behaviour.

- Frederickson has provided evidence that positive emotions play a different and contrasting function from negative emotions. (see earlier years' wiki on positive emotions)

- Seligman's learned optimism (ABCDE) is to counteract a predisposition to pessimism rather than optimism.

- My next lecture segment is on whether we focus on bad rather than good things and events. Bad drives out good

Part B:
Bad vs. Good

Any references are in the Baumeister et al. 2001 review:

Baumeister, R.F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K.D. (2001)
"Bad Is Stronger than Good"
Review of General Psychology vol.5 no.4 pp.323-370

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Discuss

Write down the one (or two) news items that first come to mind.

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Baumeister's Bad vs. Good review

This review fits right in with the manifesto of Positive Psychology.
It argues that bad (negative) things (events, …) have a much bigger impact on people's views, attitudes, emotions, than good ones do.
[So we need PosPsy to correct this awful tendency to disproportionate gloom]

It is very convincing to almost everyone.

I've made students do CRs on it; but still they were basically convinced by it. Even Paddy is basically convinced.

I, unlike everyone else, think it's horribly mistaken.

I will now try to convince you ……
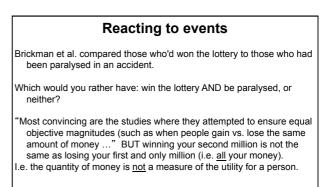
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Areas

The review covers these topics, and claims research in all these areas supports their bad > good thesis.
- •Impression formation
- •Reacting to events (hedonic treadmill adaptation)
- •Relationships
- •Emotion words
- •Learning
- •Neurology
- •Child Development
- •Social support
- •Information processing
- •Memory
- •Stereotypes
- •Self
- •Feedback
- •Health

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Relationships (Gottman)

For established married couples, he showed that negative behaviours e.g. disparagement, had about 5 times as much effect as a positive one in predicting breakups.

But take people who've just met: a single oblique compliment can be given much more significance than a pile of negative banter.

Actually many of us know people / circles of friends where politeness is the norm; and other circles where rudeness / insults are the norm. The impact of good/bad there is relative to our expectations of that context; not anything absolute.

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Reacting to events

Brickman et al. compared those who'd won the lottery to those who had been paralysed in an accident.

Which would you rather have: win the lottery AND be paralysed, or neither?

"Most convincing are the studies where they attempted to ensure equal objective magnitudes (such as when people gain vs. lose the same amount of money …" BUT winning your second million is not the same as losing your first and only million (i.e. all your money).
I.e. the quantity of money is not a measure of the utility for a person.

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Emotion

The claim is: people recall and use more words for -ve emotion than for +ve.

Two counter-questions.
1) Emotions are responses to unexpected changes to the status of our life goals. If we are all in basically good shape we have more to lose than we have to gain. So for us, because of our privileged life, much more likely to have a good life damaged, than to suddenly find a solution to having no good expectations for some goal.

2) In <u>our</u> culture do we have more to gain from sharing bad experiences or from sharing good ones?
Aren't we more likely to be laughed at (say) for describing how well off we are, or how badly off we are? E.g. if I discuss my teaching with colleagues, … *[Co-rumination]*

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Child development

Child IQ depends on both heredity and parents' educational level.
They say that parents' low educational level overrides IQ heredity, but high level does not, and that therefore bad is stronger than good.
But the same evidence could be redescribed as low IQ overrides parents' education I.e. bad IQ is stronger than good parenting.

In fact, high IQ depends on having both good genes and good family environment: missing either one matters. This is a vitamin model: you need a minimum level of all of them: any deficiency overrides sufficiency in all the others. Calling this "bad is stronger than good" presupposes wrongly a model of additive forces where some might be stronger than others: in fact all are equally necessary.

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Stereotypes

The issue I'd raise here is what we use stereotypes for: usually, for people we don't need. We can afford to have distorted thinking when there are few negative consequences in being over-cautious.
When you are in a minority, or need friends: this type of thinking isn't useful; otherwise it may hurt or disadvantage them, but not immediately yourself.

Ditto for "impression formation": used to judge people we don't need.
Does a baby use this on their mother?
Does a new employee use it on their boss?

To study impression formation is to study people considering those they don't need: where the main issue is risk, and few if any rewards are in prospect.

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The counter-argument [A1]

Picture a man or woman who has everything.

How could they see anything as good? Any change is either neutral (makes no difference to them) or is bad (they lose something they had). For them, bad must outweigh good. But this isn't a human psych. characteristic, but a characteristic of that person's situation in life.

In fact, it <u>is</u> hard to find a present to please many affluent people: they have everything they want.

Are 10 meals 10 times as good as 1 meal to a hungry man?

Going a day without food: what equally strong +ve is there?

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The counter-argument [A2]

My suggestion is that every one of the experimental situations is in fact asymmetric between good and bad. Take needy people, and a different pattern emerges. Give them 4 job rejections and 1 job offer, which will make the impression?

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Counter-argument [A3]

A lot of the findings may really be about whether and how much the person had to change in response to the event; not whether it was good or bad. I.e. it is mental effort that determines the impact.

We win £50 and it doesn't make us change what we do;
We lose £50 and we may feel we have to do something if only to check anxiously whether we have enough money to cover our regular spending.

Win the lottery: requires less life change than losing a limb.

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However: vitamin model [B]

However wherever many things must all be sufficient or the whole breaks down, then "bad is stronger": one bad apple, one pinhole in the dam, one murderous attack and a thousand kind actions is still enough to make that woman a bad one to marry. When we need to rely on someone, average behaviour isn't what matters.

This is absolutely true. I.e. an objective fact about many situations (not about human psychology), that success depends on ALL the factors being present and the single bad one ruins the whole.

But it may additionally seem to apply for people with essentially happy lives: the single faulty aspect will get more attention than the well-running aspects because if you have/expect perfection, then overall value depends on the weakest link / aspect.

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However: warehouse stores model [B2]

Conversely, in some situations good outweighs bad objectively: when any one of the factors considered will solve the problem.

E.g. getting one job offer outweighs 99 rejections; finding one uneaten food packet outweighs 99 empty wrappers when you need the energy to walk off the mountain; one road out of a flood outweighs all the blocked ones.

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Summary of my arguments

So really I have 3 arguments against Baumeister et al.

A. We are very close to fully satisfied: we can lose but not gain.
So in none of the studies are the good and bad of equal strength.

B. Vitamin model: when you need every one of a set of things to be satisfied, bad is worse than good.
(If you have all then lose one is bad, gain one is no value;
If you have only a few of what's needed, your situation is bad but gaining one back doesn't make you well.)

C. It is the mental effort not the material changes that affect us.

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Part C:

Simplifying your Life

Boniwell, I., and Zimbardo, P (2003). "Time to find the right balance"
The psychologist   Vol.16   pp.129 – 131

Ben-Shahar, T (2007)
Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfilment
(Mcgraw Hill)

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Simplifying your life

The proposition
The idea is, that to be happier we should simplify our lives.
Too often people are goods-rich and money-rich, but time poor.
This diagnosis doesn't apply to all people in all times and places; but seems to apply to very many people here and now.

Symptoms
Feeling rushed the whole time
Don't have time to stop and talk to people
Don't have time for catching our breath, let alone reflecting
You pass spectacular scenery, but can't watch it;
Hear an interesting remark, but can't start a conversation and see where it leads.
When something unexpectedly good happens, you don't have time to experience it.
No time to taste your food, only to swallow it while hurrying
No time to talk to your family, ….

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Remedy

Suggested Remedy
Cut out / give up large chunks of your planned activities; leaving plenty of time for the more important ones
I.e. decide your priorities, then be generous with time allocated to them.
Including time for the unexpected (good and bad)
Time for just musing …

Stop filling every minute of your time in advance.
(Flow means having no sense of how long things are taking.
Over-filling means planning in a way that prevents flow.)

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Why do we so often over-fill our lives?

To avoid boredom. (One of the two dangers when not in flow)
  Childhood; your adulthood; driven professional life.

Over-focus on "hygene" goals
… on avoiding bad things and not enough focus on positive goals
  (meaningful things)

Because we think we must have a plan; and then that we most only do
  what we have planned. (But this presupposes perfect fore-
  knowledge.)

Gratitude is in part about acknowledging we are not in control of
  everything important to us.
Over-planning and over-filling our time is acting as if we were in total
  control.

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Why do we do it? (2)

Plans, if you really want to be professional about planning your life,
  should include contingency allowances of time;
Contingency time to recover from unforeseen problems.
  How not to be late all the time? …
Contingency time to appreciate and exploit unforeseen good things.
Come to see plans as a structure for organising activity until something
  important happens; not as a prescription excluding all other actions.

Time for planning itself
Before that, time for evaluating what happened so you don't just go on
  planning the say old way with the same defects.
Time for thinking, in other words

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Learning may depend on open time

When someone (a student, say) is struggling to get started with
  something (a new kind of task; understanding a new concept) they
  are unable to articulate the right question, even.

Early-stage learning depends either on a teacher personally directing
  the learning, and monitoring it without the learner saying anything;
Or on there being a situation where the learner can hang out, pick up
  the answer without asking for it, babble without feeling it's wasting
  the other person's time, …

The more a student (or patient?) is in trouble, the less they feel able to
  make an appointment, push for the right service, articulate the
  specific question.

The importance of open doors, ….

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So is this about? ...

Doing each high priority thing properly, not skimping AND abandoning
  lower priority activities.

You need time for meditation, reflection, mindfulness, ... mental
  processing as well as for the actual action.

Discuss

Take 2 mins. to jot down your personal answers to these questions;
  Then discuss them with neighbours.

1. To what extent do you over-fill your life?

2. Do you over-plan or under-plan your time (your life)?

3. How afraid of boredom are you? Do you do perhaps silly things to
    avoid it?

4. How much time do you spend doing nothing, listening to nothing (but
    your thoughts)?

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Part D:

The burden of choice

Schwartz B, Ward A, Monterosso J, Lyubomirsky S, White K, and
Lehman,D.R. (2002)
 "Maximizing Versus Satisficing: Happiness Is a Matter of Choice"
Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
  Vol.83 No.5   pp.1178–1197

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The burden of choice

Claim 1: Having more choice can make people less happy

Claim 2: There are two types of decision procedure anyone might use
(but there are individual differences in which one s/he most often uses)
a) Maximiser: work on the choice until you are sure you have identified and selected the optimal choice
b) "Satisficer": have an internal threshold of goodness for the decision and pick any choice (e.g. the first) that meets it.

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Why is this a problem (1)

The other problem (than boredom) when you don't have flow is too much choice, and you don't know how to make it.

Flow is the sweet ~~spot~~ line between having no choice and being stuck (zero options you can see), and having to choose without knowing which is best (more than one option AND no certain decision procedure).

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Why is this a problem? (2)

Making a decision costs significant time and effort.

If we try to maximise (make the optimum choice) but there are a lot of alternatives, this is a lot of work.
And we may not have confidence we were able to pick the best and so remain dissatisfied with our task of deciding.

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Remedy 1

Make the decision carefully, then use it again and again.
(Brand loyalty)

Many people like to make a choice once and stick to it (a favourite brand, partner, degree subject, holiday destination, …).

This saves major mental work, but puts even more stress on getting the original decision right; <u>and</u> is depressing when the favourite is withdrawn from the market thus destroying the intellectual (and affection) capital invested.

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Remedy 2

<u>Satisfice, don't maximise</u>
Abandon getting it right, just get it good enough

<u>Remedy 3: realise that satisficing is best</u> (!)
It saves mental effort. If you added in the cost of the decision time, that would change the one you picked.
Choosing costs mental effort. (Supermarkets make you pay for this.)

You usually don't know enough to optimise exactly anyway: satisficing is realistic about the value attainable from trying to optimise.

You make and live with many other irreversible decisions anyway; we are where we are; …… There is something irrational in continuing to be unhappy about a decision that's taken.

Learn more about the real criteria; and the real options.

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Wiki coursework reminder

Session 3, 30 Jan. Today!

Get a full draft of your wiki up.

Session 4, 6 Feb.

Critique other groups' wikis, give them the feedback receive feedback from others on your own wiki.   I'll organise this. But you must have your own wiki complete for this to work.

Session 5, 13 Feb. Exchange peer critiques.

Final editing, using the critiques you receive.

<Freeze wikis>, Thur 20 Feb.

A place to stop

http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/courses/posl4.html

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