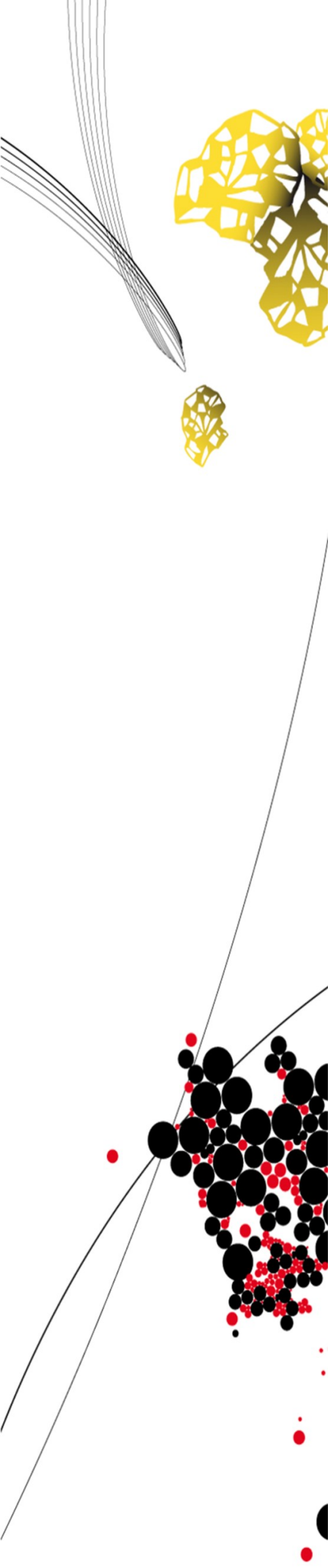

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Faculty of Behavioural, Management & Social Sciences (BMS)

Master Thesis Psychology

Choosing for Others over Oneself when Being Kind

- A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Acts of Kindness

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Abstract

Background: The current study focuses on two aspects while analysing an intervention on acts of kindness: on the one hand, it is aimed to find out which targets the participants address when engaging in kind activities and how they reflect on these acts. On the other hand, it is of interest to compare the participants' different levels of mental health, flourishing and languishing, while executing and reflecting on these kind activities.

Methods: 156 reflections of 15 flourishers and 15 non-flourishers were analysed on content. Also, the differences in engaging in kind activities, reflecting on them and in the increases of the individual's well-being throughout the intervention were analysed and compared between flourishers and non-flourishers.

Results: Based on the data two different coding schemes were established – one applying the six different targets of acts of kindness that were found and another one considering the motives, experiences and emotions of the participant when reflecting. Furthermore, the comparison of flourishers and non-flourishers revealed that (1) they did not differ in addressed targets when engaging in kind acts, (2) flourishers experienced greater self-esteem than non-flourishers, (3) no significant difference was found in displaying emotions, (4) both groups' increase in well-being was related to the addressed target 'for others', and the non-flourishers' increase in well-being was related to reporting trivial information when reflecting.

Conclusion: The evolved coding schemes prove a high intern reliability and therefore are applicable to further analyses of acts of kindness. Additionally, flourishers and non-flourishers mostly did not significantly differ in their addressed targets of kind acts and the reflection about these activities. Both groups seemed happier when addressing strangers over kin, and they neglected the possibility to be kind towards themselves and instead focused on others. Nevertheless, the results of this study should be interpreted carefully as both moderately healthy and languishing participants represented the group non-flourishers.

Keywords: positive psychology - acts of kindness – mental well-being – flourishing – reflections

Abstract

Achtergrond: De huidige studie concentreert zich op twee aspecten bij het analyseren van een interventie op vriendelijke daden: aan de ene kant is het gericht op het achterhalen van de ontvanger die de deelnemers aanspreken bij het uitvoeren van vriendelijke activiteiten en hoe zij reflecteren op deze daden. Aan de andere kant is het van belang om de verschillende niveaus van mentale gezondheid, floreren en niet-floreren, te vergelijken terwijl ze deze vriendelijke activiteiten uitvoeren en erop reflecteren.

Methoden: 156 reflecties van 15 deelnemers die floreren en 15 die niet floreren werden op inhoud geanalyseerd. Ook werden de verschillen in het omgaan met aardige activiteiten, het reflecteren op hen en in de toenamen van het welzijn van het individu gedurende de interventie geanalyseerd en vergeleken tussen deelnemers die floreren en deze die niet floreren.

Resultaten: Op basis van de gegevens werden twee verschillende coderingsschema's vastgesteld: de ene omvatte zes verschillende ontvanger van vriendelijke activiteiten die werden gevonden en de andere de motieven, ervaringen en emoties van de deelnemer bij het reflecteren. Bovendien onthulde de vergelijking van deelnemers die floreren en deze die niet floreren dat (1) ze niet verschilden in geadresseerde ontvanger, (2) deelnemers die floreren meer eigenwaarde ervoeren dan deze die niet floreren, (3) er geen significant verschil werd gevonden bij het tonen van emoties (4) de toename van het welzijn van beide groepen gerelateerd was aan de ontvangers ‘voor anderen’, en de toename van het welbevinden van de deelnemers die niet floreren was gerelateerd aan het rapporteren van triviale informatie bij het reflecteren.

Conclusie: De vastgestelde coderingsschema's bewijzen een hoge interne betrouwbaarheid en zijn daarom van toepassing op verdere analyses van vriendelijke daden. Bovendien verschilden deelnemers die floreren en deze die het niet doen meestal niet significant in hun geadresseerde ontvangers van vriendelijke daden en de reflectie over deze activiteiten. Beide groepen leken veel gelukkiger bij het toespreken van vreemden dan familieleden, en ze verzuimden de mogelijkheid om aardig voor zichzelf te zijn en in plaats daarvan waren ze gericht op anderen. Desalniettemin moeten de resultaten van deze studie zorgvuldig worden geïnterpreteerd, omdat zowel gematigd gezonde als ongezonde deelnemers de groep van deelnemers die niet florereerden vertegenwoordigden.

Trefwoorden: positieve psychologie – vriendelijke activiteiten – mentaal wellbevinden – floreren - reflecties

Table of Content

Introduction

Mental Well-being

In 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) published the European Mental Health Action Plan explaining that "*in a time of economic challenges and increased unemployment in many countries, as well as ageing populations, attention has to focus on efficient ways of preserving and maximizing well-being across the lifespan"* (WHO, 2015). It addresses the change within mental health care from solely treating an illness to also promoting one's well-being. This transition was introduced in the 21st century by Seligman who presented positive psychology as a new science emphasizing the individual's positive personality aspects and its mental well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Mental wellbeing is defined as followed: it is a condition in which one realizes the own abilities, copes with daily stress, works productively and contributes to the own community (WHO, 2018). Additionally, it can be understood in the light of its three constructs: (1) emotional, (2) psychological and (3) social well-being (Keyes, 2007). The emotional part focuses on the subjective perception of experienced positive emotions; psychological well-being stresses the positive functioning affected by, for example, self-acceptance; and social well-being defines the positive functioning in terms of, for example, social acceptance. Furthermore, mental well-being can be explained in the context of two different research streams, the hedonic and the eudaimonia approach (Keyes, 2006). Whereas the hedonic stream associates mental well-being with experiencing positive emotions, the eudaimonia approach relates it to the individual's potential of positively functioning in life. Thus, an optimal level of both hedonic and eudaimonia mental well-being defines a healthy mental state. According to Keyes (2002) this optimal balance of the two, as well as high scores on all of the three constructs of mental well-being, can be described as flourishing, whereas the absence of mental health is called languishing/non-flourishing (see also Schotanus-Dijkstra, ten Have, Lamers, de Graaf & Bohlmeijer, 2017). To complement this, Keyes (2002) found flourishing adults to report "[…] the best emotional health, the fewest days of work loss, and the fewest days of work cutbacks". In contrast, languishing adults reported a poor mental health and a great extent of limitations in their everyday lives, such as loss and reduction of working hours. Therefore, the promotion of a flourishing mental health is not only a huge contribution to the individual's well-being and daily functioning, but to society and economy suffering from decreasing productivity.

This state of optimal mental well-being and happiness is associated with important effects besides the individual just feeling well. Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005) examined numerous studies supporting their conceptual model which suggests that the link between

happiness and success is bilateral. They found, for example, that mental well-being and happiness (1) foster resources, skills and behaviours, such as altruism, sociability, and effective conflict resolution skills; (2) lead to superior mental and physical health and satisfying relationships; (3) are associated with desirable characteristics, such as prosocial behaviour, high immune functioning and efficiently coping with stress; and (4) lead to greater success at work, health and relationships. As this bilateral link between the individual's happiness and success can affect various areas of the individual's life, it is of high importance to enhance the level of mental well-being.

Accordingly, especially researchers of positive psychology are diligently exploring the factors promoting mental well-being. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005) found three components directly affecting the individual's level of well-being. First, the individual's level of mental well-being is determined up to 50% by its genes. Second, circumstantial aspects, such as demographics, personal history, marital status, income and health, account for 10% for the level of mental well-being. Third, well-being can be promoted up to 40% by performing intentional activities, like behavioural (e.g. being kind to others), cognitive (e.g. counting one's blessings) and volitional activities (e.g. aiming for personal goals).

Positive Psychology Interventions

The component of intentional activities is the only one that can be actively changed, thus it is the most interesting one for researchers designing interventions promoting the individual's well-being. These interventions are mainly developed by researchers of the field of Positive Psychology making them the so-called Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs). As already mentioned, Seligman initiated positive psychology with the turn of the millennium. He intended it to be a change in psychology, including the promotion of one's qualities/health/talents in addition to former main research areas of repairing only the individual's worst things/illnesses/weaknesses in life (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Therefore, PPIs include intentional activities and treatment methods aimed at cultivating positive cognitions, feelings or behaviours (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). It is proven that activities, like intentionally thinking optimistically, expressing appreciation toward others and focussing on positive emotions increase the individual's level of well-being in nonclinical samples (Ruini, Belaise, Brombin, Caffo, & Fava, 2006; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011). In addition, the meta-analyses of Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) and of Bolier et al. (2013) found that PPIs significantly promote well-being and at the same time effectively treat the symptoms of depression. Accordingly, a closer examination of the PPIs' effective factors could greatly contribute to the promotion of well-being.

One example of such an examination of the working mechanisms behind a PPI, is the one conducted by Schotanus-Dijkstra, Pieterse, Drossaert, Walburg and Bohlmeijer (2017). They analysed the efficacy of a multicomponent PPI that included email guidance throughout a self-help course on six core well-being processes (positive emotions, use of strengths, optimism, self-compassion, resilience and positive relations) and their role of mediation on depressive symptoms, anxiety and mental well-being. The results revealed that every single one of the well-being processes promotes the individual's well-being. However, the most effective mechanisms were self-compassion and positive relations. According to Wispe, the concept of self-compassion serves as a healthy relationship to oneself and "[…] involves being touched by and open to one's own suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to alleviate one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness" (as cited in Neff, 2003, p. 86-87). Consequently, Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2017) recommend for future PPIs implementing parts of both stimulation of the individual's level of self-compassion and of his or her social bonds. For example, self-compassion could be increased by self-compassionate letter writing. This includes the reflection of a current stressful situation from a third-perspective. The reflector is instructed to react just like he or she would have reacted to and supported a friend in the same situation. Opposed to this, positive relations could, for example, be promoted by including active communication parts into the PPI asking the participant to interact with his or her direct environment. In the following, the focus is on the stimulation of positive relations as the current study concentrates on a PPI mainly promoting these relations.

Acts of Kindness

As previously mentioned, implementing active communication and interaction parts into a PPI promotes positive relations. This can be accomplished by including acts of kindness into an intervention. These activities often vary in their execution, often instructing the participants to consciously perform kind activities benefiting or making others happy, mostly at one's own cost (as cited in Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). Literature reveals that researchers seem to be more interested in the possible effects of these activities than in closer examining the different targets of kind activities (see for example Pressmann, Kraft & Cross, 2005; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Nevertheless, Alden and Trew (2013) categorized these receivers of acts of kindness into different groups, like family, romantic partners, friends, or strangers.

It is found that performing kind activities and doing something good for others has positive effects on the giver's health and mental well-being (Jenkinsons et al., 2013; Aknin, Dunn & Norton, 2012; Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Lyubomirksy, 2012; Anik,

Aknin, Norton & Dunn, 2009; Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2008). According to Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, individuals are more likely to consider themselves as happy when indicating an increased interest in (1) helping others, (2) acting in a prosocial manner, or (3) performing altruistic behaviours (as cited in Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). In conclusion, researchers often add acts of kindness to their PPIs when trying to maximize the participant's level of well-being. The Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) of Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohlmeijer (in Revision) provides an example of how to design such a PPI. The participants of their study received weekly emails with the instruction for the next day to execute five kind activities for either themselves, others or the world in general. Additionally, Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohmeijer (in Revision) examined the possible strengthening effect of the participant's personal reflection on these acts of kindness. Therefore, they formed three conditions: one with participants first executing the tasks and reflecting on them afterwards, another condition with participants who solely execute the acts of kindness without any reflection and one active control condition that received weekly emails with the instruction to summarize their activities of the last week. It is expected that the condition completing the acts of kindness and actively reflecting on their experiences, achieves a greater increase in mental well-being than the others.

Reflection

This expectation is based on the practice of reflection in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). The aim of CBT is to stimulate the psychotherapist to keep on continuously reflecting as reflection is the prerequisite for professional development, learning and competence (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Furthermore, literature reveals that through reflecting on one's behaviour, key interpersonal skills (e.g. empathy) can be trained (Davis, Thwaites, Freeston & Bennett-Levy, 2015). When developing and applying these interpersonal skills, positive psychological experiences, such as happiness and life satisfaction, increase (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). The more participants reflect on their intrinsic values, the more their well-being increases, as found by Lekes, Hope, Gouveia, Koestner and Philippe (2012). Therefore, it is to assume that a greater reflection might lead to an increase in mental well-being. Thus, it is of the utmost interest to investigate the participants' reflections of the acts of kindness-intervention in more detail, for example the number of words used and the reflected topics, as their depth eventually contributes to the individual's level of mental well-being.

Emotions

The level of mental well-being, among other things can be measured by detecting the displayed emotions. Frijda explained that these emotions act as the individual's response to a specific event of importance to him or her (as cited in Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann & Wood,

2013). He furthermore added that due to the individual interpretation to an event X, it will always be a subjective experience. Thus, while person A might experience pleasure in response to event X, person B might get irritated by X. In fact, it is found that these two emotions, happiness and anger, are the most frequent experienced emotions occurring during a day (Scherer, Wranik, Sangsue, Tran & Scherer, 2004). Still, empirical research on positive emotions seems small compared to the one on negative emotions. Fredrickson and Levenson (1998) explained this by the association of emotions with specific action tendencies (e.g. anger generates the impulse to attack) which seems challenging when working with positive emotions, as for example contentment is often associated with inactivity. Consequently, as action tendency models serve the closer examination of negative emotions, they might not fit in describing the workings of positive emotions.

Subsequently, researchers have investigated positive emotions from other points of view. Fredrickson (2001), for example, found that positive emotions both indicate and generate flourishing which is the optimum functioning and well-being. According to the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions are able to (1) broaden the individual's momentary thought-action repertoires and (2) build the individual's personal resources possibly ranging from physical to intellectual to social resources (Fredrickson, 1998). This for example can be experienced when a person's joy triggers the desire to play: he or she gets a certain broadened mindset allowing the encounter of flexible, innovative and new ways of thinking. By broadening the perspectives and actions, the person learns to build important physical, intellectual, psychological and social resources, as for example, coordination, problem-solving skills, resilience and solid bonds. Furthermore, the expression of positive emotions is linked to longevity. Danner, Snowdon and Friesen (2001) found a strong association between the two when content-analysing positive and negative emotions in handwritten autobiographies from Catholic nuns at the mean age of 22 years. Their results showed that positive emotional content is strongly associated with living a long life even six decades later. As longevity in turn is correlated with subjective well-being (Diener & Chan, 2011), it is expected that positive emotions and well-being are linked. Therefore, it can be concluded that the analysis of displayed emotions and their effects on the individual's mental well-being is another key to happiness.

Current study

The current study focuses on two aspects: on the one hand, it is aimed to find out the different addressed targets of acts of kindness and how the participants reflect on these activities. On the other hand, it is of interest to compare the different levels of mental health, flourishing and languishing, while executing kind activities and in the depth of reflecting.

Consequently, the following aspects will be examined more closely: (1) the type of performed acts of kindness (e.g. for friends or family), (2) the level of reflection (e.g. topics, word count, number of reflections), (3) the expressed positive and negative emotions during the reflection on these activities and (4) the possible relation between reflected topics, displayed emotions and the level of well-being. The following research questions are derived from the defined focus areas:

1. What are the types of acts of kindness being performed and to what extent do flourishing and languishing participants differ in their execution?
2. How do the participants reflect on their performed acts of kindness and to what extent do flourishing and languishing participants differ in their level of reflection?
3. To what extent do flourishing and languishing participants differ in their expressed positive and negative emotions during reflecting on their performed acts of kindness?
4. What is the relation between the increased level of well-being of flourishing and languishing participants, and their topics and emotions when reflecting on the performed acts of kindness?

It is expected that (1) the targets of the acts of kindness belong to the categories either ‘oneself’, ‘families’, ‘friends’ or ‘world’, and flourishers might engage in more acts of kindness than languishers, (2) different topics arise when reflecting, and that flourishers reflect in greater depth than languishers, (3) languishers use negative emotions more often than positive ones compared to flourishers and vice versa, and (4) the participant’s positively associated emotions, topics and experiences displayed in their reflections are positively linked to his or her level of well-being despite the level of flourishing.

Methods

Design

The current study made use of the data obtained from the acts of kindness-intervention implemented in the RCT by Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohlmeijer (in Revision). A qualitative content analysis of the participant's reflections on the performed acts of kindness was carried out to examine the possible different types of acts of kindness and the participant's way of reflecting. Additionally, a quantitative analysis was completed to explore the differences between flourishers and languishers in the kind activities they engaged in, their ways of reflecting, their displayed positive and negative emotions, and the possible relation between all these components and the level of increased well-being.

Setting

The participants of the RCT were recruited by placing advertisements in national Dutch newspaper and in the newsfeed from 'Psychologie Magazine'. The advertisement was asking them whether they want to experience more well-being and sustainable happiness by performing happiness exercises for a committed and meaningful life. In order to take part in the study, the participant had to 1) be aged 18 or older, 2) experience a low or medium level of well-being, 3) have a working internet connection and an email address, 4) be willing to weekly execute activities for one day and to reflect on them the day after, 5) master the Dutch language, and 6) give permission to participate in the study by signing the informed consent. In total, 423 people participated in the RCT, of which 84 got allocated to the condition 'acts of kindness with reflection'.

In total, the participants have been assessed to five different points in time. These assessments included the completion of a variety of questionnaires aimed at assessing, for example, their levels of mental well-being, depressive symptoms, anxiety, positive and negative emotions, positive relations. The first assessment took place as a screening before the intervention started (SC), the second one was the baseline assessment right before the intervention started (T0), the third assessment was right after the intervention was completed (T3), the fourth 3 months after the intervention started (T4), and the last one 12 months after the initial start (T5).

The participants followed a six-week intervention holding two tasks per week. On Wednesdays, they received an email with the instruction to consciously perform five kind activities for either themselves, others or the world in general on the following day. The day after executing them, they obtained another email instructing them to reflect on their experiences by indicating how they felt about carrying out these acts of kindness, with whom

or for whom they performed them and what it emerged in himself/herself and the receiver. This process was repeated for six weeks into the intervention.

Participants

As already mentioned, prior to the intervention a screening was conducted in order to assess the current level of flourishing of the 84 participants. Based on these results, they were classified into three categories, namely languishing, moderately mentally healthy and flourishing. The group of languishers comprised 8 participants, 56 participants were part of the moderately mentally healthy section, and the group of flourishers consisted of 20 participants. As a group of 8 participants is scientifically not considered large enough to provide valid study results, it was decided to distinguish between flourishers and non-flourishers in general which accounted for moderately mentally healthy and languishers together. Subsequently, it was controlled whether these 84 participants had completed the well-being questionnaires of both the screening and the post-test. Accordingly, the sample was reduced to 66 participants. Out of these 66 participants, 30 randomly chosen individuals formed the stratified sample of 15 flourishers and 15 non-flourishers of the current study. Their ages ranged from 36 to 70 years with an average age of 51.3 years (SD 9.06). The sample consisted of 27 women and 3 men. Most of the participants were higher educated, married or in a registered civil partnership and in paid employment. It is important to notice that there are no significant differences found between the two groups. Accordingly, the results of the current study are not attributed to the differences in demographics. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the current sample's two groups.

Table 1

Demographics of the participants (n=30)

Category	Subcategory	Flourishers		Non-flourishers		*p*-value[1] (2-sided)
		N	%	N	%	
Gender	Male	0	0	3	20	.07
	Female	15	100	12	80	
Age	36-44	5	33.3	2	13.3	.38
	45-54	5	33.3	7	46.7	
	55-64	5	33.3	4	26.7	
	65-70	0	0	2	13.3	
Native country	Netherland	15	100	14	93.3	.31
	Other	0	0	1	6.7	
Education	Low	1	6.7	1	6.7	.33
	Intermediate	4	26.7	1	6.7	
	High	10	66.7	13	86.7	
Marital status	Married or registered civil partnership	6	40	12	80	.09
	Divorced	6	40	1	6.7	
	Widowed	1	6.7	0	0	
	Never been married	2	13.3	2	13.3	
Employment status	Paid employment	7	46.7	6	40	.21
	Self-employed	6	40	3	20	
	Unpaid employment	1	6.7	4	26.7	
	Retired	0	0	2	13.3	

[1]Chi-Square test; significant at the $p<0.05$ level.

Qualitative Data

Procedure. The qualitative content analysis was conducted based on the conventional approach deriving the coding categories directly from the data, followed by a step-by-step instruction on inductive category development by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). First, it was started with repeatedly reading the data in order to acquire a general understanding of the content. Second, every word of the data was read thoroughly and the word occurring to hold the key concept was highlighted as the first deriving code. Third, the researcher again read through the data, and then made notes of her first thoughts on them. Through this process, the codes were attributed to labels holding more than one key concept. Fourth and last, the codes were grouped into categories depending on their relations. Each reflection of the participant was coded chronologically, sentence by sentence. The actual coding of passages varied in their length. While some passages were marked for more than one sentence, others comprised only

a few words or half a sentence. These marked passages were called segments. They could hold several codes simultaneously, but it was not possible to use a code multiple times within one segment. Before starting the actual coding of the data, two researchers independently coded 16 reflections of 5 participants. Afterwards, they exchanged their coded material and discussed in detail the coding scheme. Based on these findings, the coding scheme was adapted. Then, this process was repeated for 3 more rounds of coding in total 60 reflections. The final coding scheme is illustrated in Tables 2 and 4.

Analysis. The qualitative data analysis program Atlas.ti was utilized during the coding of the reflections. Firstly, the 157 reflections of the 30 participants and the coding scheme were transferred to Atlas.ti. Secondly, the reflections of each participant were coded one after the other. Thirdly, the displayed frequencies of the used codes per participant were manually assigned to the data set of Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohlmeijer (in Revision), containing the demographics and outcomes of different questionnaires for each participant. Furthermore, the reliability of the coding scheme was tested by calculating Cohen's kappa, the inter-rater reliability. Accordingly, the two researchers coded independently 26 reflections of 5 participants. For each reflection they indicated whether or not each one of the codes was used by a participant. This was indicated by applying a 0 when the code was not used at all in one reflection and a 1 when the code was applied at least once. The outcomes can be interpreted as followed by Cohen (as cited in McHugh, 2012): a value of <0 demonstrates no agreement, a value of 0.01-0.20 displays none to small agreement, values between 0.21 and 0.40 are interpreted as fair, a value of 0.41-0.60 shows a moderate agreement, values between 0.61 and 0.80 are seen as substantial, and a value of 0.81-1.00 displays an almost perfect agreement. In the current study, substantial agreement is displayed by the code 'altruism' (κ=0.72). Almost perfect agreement is shown by the residual codes: 'ineffectiveness' (κ=0.84), 'positive emotions' (κ=0.90), 'triviality' and 'difficulties' (each κ=0.92), 'routine' (κ=0.92), and 'for oneself', 'for family members', 'for friends', 'for colleagues', 'for others', 'for the world', 'prosocial reciprocity', 'necessity', 'relatedness', 'awareness', 'self-esteem', 'motivation', 'stress' and 'negative emotions' (each κ=1.00).

Quantitative Data

Measures. The participant's level of mental well-being was assessed by the Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (MHC-SF, Keyes et al., 2008). It is a questionnaire consisting of 14 items, measuring three different levels of well-being; emotional, psychological and social well-being, being translated into Dutch and being validated (Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, ten Kloster & Keyes, 2011). The first three items measure the level of satisfaction with positive

affect and life - the emotional well-being. An example item would be “How often of the time in the last 30 days did you feel happy?”. The following five items measure the degree of social acceptance, social actualization, social integration, social contribution and social coherence - the social well-being. An example item would be “How often of the time in the last 30 days did you feel like being a part of society?” The last six items measure the participant’s level of positive relations with others, self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life and autonomy - the psychological well-being. An example item would be “How often of the time in the last 30 days did you feel like appreciating most aspects of your personality?” The participants filled in the questionnaire by giving an answer on a 6-point scale which ranged from 0 (never) to 5 (almost always). The participant’s level of well-being was then assessed by a calculation of the mean score for the total scale and the three sub-scales. Based on their scores, the participants had been categorized into (1) flourishers and (2) non-flourishers. To be categorized as a flourisher, one needs to score high on at least one measure of the emotional well-being scale and high on at least six measures of the social and psychological well-being scales. The remaining ones are categorized as non-flourishing. Furthermore, the MHC-SF shows satisfying Cronbach’s alphas on the screening (α=0.82) and the post-test (α=0.90), and a moderate one on test-rest reliability (Lamers et al., 2011).

Analysis. The statistical analyses have been performed by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 24. First, the differences between flourishing and non-flourishing participants in their execution of acts of kindness were analysed by conducting a Chi-Square test, measuring the differences in frequencies between the two groups. Second, another Chi-Square test analysed the differences in reflecting between flourishers and non-flourishers. Therefore, the frequencies of occurring codes of the second coding scheme were compared. Third, the possible difference between the two groups in the display of emotions was analysed. Again, a Chi-Square test examined the frequencies of occurring emotions. Fourthly, the participant’s level of well-being as well as its change over time have been examined more closely by calculating the difference score between the screening score and the post-test. Thus, the participants’ scores on the screening was subtracted from their scores on the post-test (T3-screening). Fifthly, these difference scores for the flourishing and non-flourishing participants were compared by conducting a t-test for independent samples. Finally, the correlations between the frequency of the used codes and the difference score of the MHC-SF have been calculated by performing a Pearson correlation for the codes ‘positive emotions’ and ‘for others’, and by performing a Spearman’s rho correlation for the rest of the

codes. It was chosen for two different correlations as the Pearson's correlation analyses normally distributed variables and the Spearman's rho examines non-normal distributed data.

Results

Acts of Kindness

Coding Scheme. The process of the qualitative analysis of the performed acts of kindness generated a coding scheme comprising different categories (see Table 2). It was found that the participants engaged in kind acts which can be divided into three main categories, namely 'self', 'others' and 'world'. The majority of the participants did engage in acts of kindness belonging to the category 'others' – mostly addressing people who aren't family, friends or colleagues to them, followed by addressing family members and friends. This category was followed by addressing the world in general, like engaging in voluntary work. Furthermore, only two acts of kindness were related to being kind towards oneself.

Comparison Flourishers and Non-flourishers. In total, the 15 flourishing participants performed 300 and the 15 non-flourishers 284 acts of kindness for themselves, others and the world in general throughout the intervention. Both in their average of executed activities throughout the intervention and their frequency of performed acts of kindness per reflection, the both groups did not significantly differ (resp. p=0.64, for the rest see Table 3). While the flourishers on average did 20.00 (SD 6.22) kind activities throughout the 6-week intervention, the non-flourishers executed on average 18.93 (SD 6.19) acts of kindness for themselves, others and the world. When closer examining the top three of the most frequently addressed targets of the acts of kindness for both groups, it is noticeable that they are the same: (1) 'for others', (2) 'for family members' and (3) 'for friends'. Furthermore, flourishers and non-flourishers resemble each other when regarding the at least frequently addressed target – both groups did contribute least to kind activities for themselves. While the non-flourishing participants did not do anything kind for themselves once, the flourishers thought of themselves twice throughout the intervention.

Table 2

Coding scheme of the performed activities and total frequency of addressed targets of the performed acts of kindness (N=584)

Category	Subcategory	Code	Definition	Example	Total use N (%)
Activities	Self	For oneself	The participant performs acts of kindness for himself/herself.	"Made myself happy by giving me some extra attention."	2 (0.34)
	Others	For family members	The participant performs acts of kindness for his/her family members.	"Cooked my son's favourite meal"	142 (24.27)
		For friends	The participant performs acts of kindness for his/her friends.	"Visited my friend who is ill"	117 (20)
		For colleagues	The participant performs acts of kindness for his/her colleagues.	"Got coffee for my colleagues"	79 (13.50)
		For others	The participant performs acts of kindness for people who aren't family, friends or colleagues to him/her.	"I kept the door open"	216 (36.92)
	World	For the world	The participant performs acts of kindness for the world in general.	"I donated today for a good cause"	29 (4.96)

Table 3

Total frequency of performed acts of kindness (n=584) throughout all reflections, average frequency of code per reflection, their ranges and the p-value for the comparison between the groups

Category	**Subcategory**	**Code**	**Flourishers**					**Non-flourishers**				***p*-value[1] (2-sided)**
			Total use N (%)	**Average use**		**Range of average use**		**Total use N (%)**	**Average use**		**Range of average use**	
				M	SD	Min	Max		M	SD	Min	Max
Activities	Self	For oneself	2 (0.7)	0.13	0.35	0	1	0 (0)	0	0	0	0	.14
	Others	For family members	77 (25.7)	5.13	5.07	0	19	65 (28.8)	4.33	5.68	0	20	.28
		For friends	59 (19.7)	3.93	3.31	0	11	58 (20.4)	3.87	3.66	1	12	.46
		For colleagues	51 (17)	3.40	3.54	0	13	28 (9.8)	1.87	2.53	0	7	.67
		For others	98 (32.7)	6.53	3.23	2	13	118 (41.4)	7.87	3.66	3	14	.39
	World	For the world	13 (4.3)	0.87	1.51	0	4	16 (5.6)	1.07	2.19	0	8	.50

[1]Chi-Square test; significant at the $p<0.05$ level.

Reflections

Coding Scheme. Furthermore, a second scheme was established dividing the participants' reflections into different categories (see Table 4). It was found that the participants' most frequently reported motive to engage in kind activities was 'altruism', followed next by 'prosocial reciprocity' and then 'necessity'. Furthermore, it was possible to categorize the participants' experiences into three different polarities; positive, negative and neutral. The most frequently reported positive experience was an increase in 'motivation' to implement new behaviours, like engaging in acts of kindness; for the negative experiences it was 'difficulties' they reported the most; and for the neutral experiences it was a 'routine' and no explicit awareness in doing acts of kindness the participants most frequently experienced. Additionally, participants displayed both positive and negative emotions when reflecting on these activities, and a last code applied to the participants often overstepping the initial task of solely reflecting on their experiences, and rather disclosing their daily experiences irrelevant to the study's focus.

Comparison Flourishers and Non-flourishers. Flourishers and non-flourishers did not differ in the total amount of written reflections (p=0.47) or in the written words per reflection (p=0.75). The closer examination of the top three most frequently used codes per reflection showed a varying result (see Table 5). Although both groups were consistent in their top one and three, they did not agree on the second most frequently used code. All 30 participants most often displayed 'positive emotions' and experienced 'difficulties' throughout their reflections. However, the flourishers more often disclosed trivial information when reflecting (e.g. "my 20-year-old daughter is living with me again, and even is sleeping in my bed "), while the non-flourishers easily reported a 'routine' in the execution of and reflecting on the performed acts of kindness (e.g. "it's normal for me to do these things, there isn't anything special about it"). Additionally, both groups differ in the at least frequently used codes. Whereas the flourishing participants reported the motive 'necessity' and the experience 'ineffectiveness' throughout their reflections least, the non-flourishing participants experienced 'self-esteem' least of all. The only significant difference between the two groups was found for the code 'self-esteem'. Thus, flourishing participants significantly more often experienced a favourable attitude towards themselves during the intervention compared to the non-flourishers.

Table 4

Coding scheme of the reflections

Category	Subcategory	Code	Definition	Example
Motives		Altruism	The participant displays concern for the wellbeing of others.	"It's just so nice to do something kind for others. They always get so happy"
		Prosocial reciprocity	The participant's behaviour is grounded in the expectation that others will return the act of kindness.	"[…], but I hope that he is going to return this act of kindness to another person"
		Necessity	The participant performs the acts of kindness as it is part of the study.	"I signed up for the study, so I have to do 5 of these activities"
Experiences	Positive experiences	Relatedness	The participant experiences a deeper connection with and a caring for others in his/her environment.	"The people are always so grateful, and that is so nice because you just feel that you mean something to them"
		Awareness	The participant experiences a greater awareness for the small things in life and is able to actively stand still more easily during these moments.	"[…], but now that I am doing it in full awareness the effect is even greater"
		Self-esteem	The participant experiences an increase in a favourable attitude toward himself/herself.	"It felt as if I eventually was standing in my own power."
		Motivation	The participant experiences an increased level of motivation and willingness to implement new behaviours.	"I am going to try to do these acts of kindness more often"
	Negative experiences	Stress	The participant experiences an increased level of stress.	"It's starting to stress me out to thinking about 5 friendly activities on 1 day"
		Difficulties	The participant experiences difficulties in doing the acts of kindness or throughout his/her daily experiences in general.	"Doing something for my neighbours doesn't cost me much energy, but it costs me a lot to do something for people I do not know at all"
	Neutral experiences	Ineffectiveness	The participant experiences no effect in performing the acts of kindness.	"I don't get the feeling that these activities add anything to my wellbeing"
		Routine	The participant experiences a routine and no explicit awareness in doing acts of kindness.	"It wasn't something special for me to do it. If I did not participate in this study, I would have done the same"
Displayed emotions		Positive emotions	The participant displays positive emotions, like joy, gratitude, love, contentment.	"It feels good to do something kind for others"
		Negative emotions	The participant displays negative emotions, like guilt, frustration, sadness, anxiety, anger.	"I made some coffee for building workers at the street. Now I lost 3 cups, a coffee pot, sugar and milk. I am disappointed…"
Others		Triviality	The participant is sharing his/her daily experiences in general instead of reflecting on the performed acts of kindness.	"My daughter is living with us again. She has some kind of psychosis and is clinging to me"

Table 5

Total frequency of used codes throughout all reflections (n=156), average frequency of code per reflection, their ranges and the p-value for the comparison between the groups

Category	**Subcategory**	**Code**	**Flourishers**					**Non-flourishers**					***p*-value[1]**
			Total use N (%)	**Average use**		**Range of average use**		**Total use N (%)**	**Average use**		**Range of average use**		**(2-sided)**
				M	SD	Min	Max		M	SD	Min	Max	
Motives		Altruism	24 (6.8)	1.60	1.96	0	7	28 (7.6)	1.87	1.89	0	6	.71
		Prosocial reciprocity	11 (3.1)	0.73	0.74	0	2	22 (6.0)	1.47	1.41	0	5	.41
		Necessity	5 (1.4)	0.33	0.62	0	2	9 (2.5)	0.60	0.99	0	3	.66
Experiences	Positive experiences	Relatedness	25 (7.1)	1.67	1.99	0	5	21 (5.7)	1.40	1.64	0	5	.10
		Awareness	27 (7.7)	1.80	1.52	0	4	21 (5.7)	1.40	1.60	0	5	.38
		Self-esteem	7 (2.0)	0.47	0.52	0	1	1 (0.3)	0.07	0.26	0	1	**.01**
		Motivation	30 (8.5)	2	2.04	0	7	26 (7.1)	1.73	2.25	0	7	.72
	Negative experiences	Stress	7 (2.0)	0.47	0.74	0	2	10 (2.7)	0.67	1.11	0	3	.47
		Difficulties	35 (9.9)	2.33	2.19	0	9	33 (9.0)	2.20	2.18	0	8	.54
	Neutral experiences	Ineffectiveness	5 (1.4)	0.33	0.82	0	3	21 (5.7)	1.40	1.55	0	5	.15
		Routine	20 (5.7)	1.33	1.11	0	3	36 (9.8)	2.40	2.26	0	8	.13
Displayed emotions		Positive emotions	93 (26.4)	6.20	3.41	1	13	88 (24.0)	5.87	4.24	1	17	.89
		Negative emotions	27 (7.7)	1.80	2.11	0	6	29 (7.9)	1.93	2.05	0	8	.38
Others		Triviality	36 (10.2)	2.40	2.69	0	8	22 (6.0)	1.47	1.85	0	6	.72

[1]Chi-Square test; significant at the $p<0.05$ level.

Displayed Emotions

Table 5 also shows the frequency of displayed emotions of flourishers and non-flourishers. Overall, the flourishing participants displayed more positive than negative emotions when reflecting on their performed acts of kindness. This applies to the non-flourishing participants, as well. Although the flourishers' frequency of displayed positive emotions is greater and the frequency of displayed negative emotions is smaller compared to the frequencies of the non-flourishing participants, these differences are not significant. Accordingly, the two groups did not significantly differ in their disclosure of emotions throughout their reflections.

Well-being

Comparing the difference scores for the MHC-SF (T3-SC), the average increase of the flourishing participants (M=-0.19, SD 0.71) was lower than the one of the non-flourishers (M=0.37, SD 0.52). Additionally, a t-test for an unpaired sample stated, the two groups significantly differed in their growth of well-being (p=0.02). Thus, the non-flourishing participants did increase more in their levels of well-being throughout the intervention than the flourishers. Furthermore, table 6 indicates the possible relations between these difference scores and the codes of the two schemes. In total, three significant correlations have been found. According to a Pearson's correlation, the execution of acts of kindness 'for others' is related to the participant's increase in well-being throughout the intervention for both groups. Therefore, the more a flourishing or non-flourishing participant performed a kind act for others in general, the more he or she experienced an increase in well-being. Moreover, according to a Spearman's rho correlation, another significant relation was found between the code 'triviality' and the non-flourishing participant's increase in well-being. This implies that the more a non-flourisher disclosed trivial information during reflecting, the more he or she experienced an increase in well-being throughout the intervention.

Table 6

The Spearman's rho correlation between the codes and the difference scores on well-being (T3-SC)

Category	**Subcategory**	**Code**	**Flourishers**		**Non-flourishers**	
			Δ Well-being (MHC-SF)		**Δ Well-being (MHC-SF)**	
			Correlation	*p*-value	Correlation	*p*-value
Activities	Self	For oneself	0.41[1]	0.13	/	/
	Other	For family members	0.16[1]	0.57	0.11[1]	0.71
		For friends	0.06[1]	0.84	0.18[1]	0.53
		For colleagues	0.03[1]	0.92	-0.41[1]	0.13
		For others	0.59[2]	**0.02**	0.66[2]	**0.008**
	World	For the world	0.06[1]	0.82	-0.1[1]	0.62
Motives		Altruism	0.27[1]	0.34	-0.22[1]	0.44
		Prosocial reciprocity	0.34[1]	0.22	-0.16[1]	0.57
		Necessity	0.20[1]	0.47	-0.26[1]	0.35
Experiences	Positive experiences	Relatedness	0.22[1]	0.43	0.36[1]	0.18
		Awareness	-0.16[1]	0.58	0.22[1]	0.44
		Self-esteem	0.12[1]	0.66	0.25[1]	0.37
		Motivation	-0.17[1]	0.55	0.07[1]	0.80
	Negative experiences	Stress	-0.34[1]	0.22	0.06[1]	0.82
		Difficulties	-0.15[1]	0.59	-0.18[1]	0.53
	Neutral experiences	Ineffectiveness	-0.14[1]	0.62	-0.34[1]	0.22
		Routine	0.20[1]	0.48	-0.47[1]	0.08
Displayed emotions		Positive emotions	0.17[2]	0.55	0.02[2]	0.94
		Negative emotions	-0.004[1]	0.99	-0.47[1]	0.08
Others		Triviality	0.23[1]	0.40	-0.61[1]	**0.02**

[1]Spearman's rho; significant at the p<0.05 level. [2]Pearson; significant at the p<0.05 level.

Discussion

In the current study, the different addressed targets of acts of kindness, as well as the way of reflecting on them, were analysed on content and subsequently compared between flourishing and non-flourishing participants. The results showed that (1) two coding schemes evolved – one displaying six different targets of acts of kindness and the other one containing the different motives, experiences and emotions the participants reported when reflecting on these acts, (2) flourishing and non-flourishing participants did not significantly differ in addressing a target, (3) the two groups significantly differed in the reporting of 'self-esteem' during their reflections, (4) flourishers and non-flourishers did not significantly vary in displaying their emotions, (5) significant correlations were found between the both groups' increases in well-being and the kind act 'for others', and between the non-flourishers increases in well-being and the disclosing of 'triviality'.

Most relevant findings

Acts of Kindness.

The qualitative analysis of the performed acts of kindness revealed that the participants addressed targets which can be sorted into one of the following categories: (1) for oneself, (2) for family members, (3) for friends, (4) for colleagues, (5) for others, and (6) for the world; whereas most frequently others in general were addressed. Although until today little attention has been paid to the closer examination of possible key variables, like whether the target of these activities is an acquaintance, a stranger or a close one (Parks & Biswas-Diener, in press), Alden and Trew (2013) further explored this in their study where the participants engaged in kind activities for four weeks. It was found that they mostly directed kind acts towards strangers (35%) and friends (32.8%), whereas family members (10.3%) and acquaintances (9.5%) less often formed their target. This is to some extent relatable to the results of the current study. Flourishing and non-flourishing participants most frequently addressed their acts of kindness to 'others'. This might be related to the easy access of doing something good for others randomly crossing one's way (e.g. helping the neighbour carrying bags upstairs in the hallway), but it might also be related to more egoistic concerns, as Maner and Gailliot (2006) suggested. They explained that helping a close one might be motivated by empathy and a desire to promote the well-being of the other person, while these motives are less likely to occur when helping or doing something kind for a stranger. Thus, possibly participants who engaged in kind activities for strangers had more self-centred concerns in mind than altruistic motives, like being perceived as a hero. However, as their second most frequently addressed targets were family

members, they had altruistic motives as well. Accordingly, a person can be driven by many different motives when doing something good for others.

Besides analysing the most frequently addressed targets of the acts of kindness, it is also interesting to further examine the at least frequently addressed target which was for both flourishing and non-flourishing participants the kind act 'for oneself'. Even though researchers do not emphasize the possibility of doing something kind for oneself (see for example Alden & Trew, 2013; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005), Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohlmeijer. (in Revision) included it into the weekly instructions of the acts of kindness-intervention as Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2017) recommended to include both a self-compassion and a positive relation part into a PPI. Thus, the participants of the current study obviously had the chance to either do something for themselves, others or the world in general. However, only two out of 584 performed acts of kindness were addressed towards oneself. This might be explained by the assumption that doing something kind for oneself does not lead to increasingly feel positive emotions instead of negative ones as "[..] hedonic benefits are short-lived and/or neutralized by hedonic costs (like guilt)" (Nelson, Layous, Cole & Lyubomirsky, 2016). Accordingly, flourishing and non-flourishing participants might have been focusing more on performing acts of kindness for others as they possibly experienced more happiness in doing so. Nevertheless, Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2017) found that the promotion of both self-compassionate acts and social interaction contributes to the individual's well-being. For this reason, it is assumed that if flourishing and non-flourishing participants had more frequently been engaged in kind acts for oneself, they would probably have experienced a greater increase in well-being. In consequence, this study offers several implications for future research. First, future research on acts of kindness can rely on this study's categorization of the addressed targets and re-use it when further analysing the relation between motives and targets. Second, future research designing PPIs should further examine and implement the combination of tasks on self-compassionate behaviour and kind activities for others as it might contribute to the overall effectiveness of interventions, like the act of kindness-one. Third, the found differences in addressed targets can be used for future acts of kindness-interventions directly instructing the participant to address different targets and therefore allowing for variation. Thus, participants could be directly instructed to foster variation in targeting kind activities instead of leaving it up to himself/herself possibly choosing the same target several times.

Reflections.

The qualitative analysis of the reflection part revealed that the participants reflected on four different categories; namely (1) motives, (2) experiences, (3) displayed emotions and (4)

others. Regarding the motives, one code was about doing kind acts for others as it would promote the participants' well-being, and another two codes included self-related intentions, such as expecting the other one to return a favour. These findings get in line with previous literature supposing the motives for behaviours, like prosocial acts, to be self- and/or other-centred (Crocker, Canevello & Brown, 2017; Wiwad & Aknin, 2017). Furthermore, the participants reported different experiences applying to either positive, negative or neutral associations. Until today, researchers predominantly examined the possible positive effects of acts of kindness, such as a higher degree of relatedness, life satisfaction or well-being (see for example Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm & Sheldon, 2011; Buchanan & Bardi, 2010). However, the current study was able to identify negative and neutral experiences associated with acts of kindness, as well. For example, participants often faced difficulties when engaging in kind activities, like being stuck at home and not seeing anyone, or they reported to feel no effect at all as they got fatigued by weekly receiving the same instruction of engaging in five acts of kindness. Thus, when designing future PPIs it should also be of interest to construct an attractive and interest-retaining intervention as it is of highest priority to catch people's interest (Glanz & Bishop, 2010). Besides the motives and experiences, the participants displayed their emotions when reflecting, too. However, they mostly reported their emotions in a superficial way only allowing for two categories, namely positive and negative emotions, to occur - instead of many different facets of emotions. It is assumed that this is related to a general instruction to reflect on the performed acts of kindness, instead of asking to describe different emotions related to the activities. The last category for the reflection coding scheme comprises a code irrelevant to the actual exercise of conducting kind acts. It was found that participants in addition engaged in self-disclosing behaviour when reflecting. Literature reveals that this is grounded in a feeling of private self-awareness when taking part in online and computer-mediated communication (Joinson, 2001). Thus, a weekly opportunity of online reflection offers the individual a different understanding of self-awareness compared to daily reflecting situations, therefore resulting in self-disclosing behaviours. Accordingly, this revealed added value of PPIs might be helpful for future interventions.

Apart from the qualitative analysis of the reflections, it is of interest to compare the differences between flourishing and non-flourishing participants when reflecting, as well. They did not significantly differ in their reported motives for the engagement in acts of kindness. Both groups most frequently indicated 'altruism' as their motivation. However, it was expected to find flourishers more often displaying altruistic motives than non-flourishers, as altruistic behaviours are related to an increased level of mental health (Post, 2005). This is possibly

related to the increase in mental well-being of the non-flourishing participants throughout the intervention, also leading to an increase in altruistic concerns. Furthermore, flourishers and non-flourishers did significantly disagree in their reported positive experience with an increase of self-esteem due to the acts of kindness. Flourishers experienced a greater increase in a favourable attitude toward himself/herself than non-flourishers did. Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger and Vohs (2003) support this finding indicating that self-esteem indeed is strongly related to happiness and mental well-being. Accordingly, individuals being in a healthy mental state experience greater self-esteem and thus a more favourable attitude toward oneself than (moderately) mentally (un)healthy others. Regarding the participant's positive experiences, both groups most frequently reported 'motivation' to keep on engaging in these kind activities. Thus, the positive effect of increased motivation to implement new behaviours was not determined by the participant's level of well-being. Nevertheless, this finding is not congruent with the assumption of flourishers reporting higher levels of psychosocial functioning, e.g. high levels of functional goals and low levels of perceived helplessness (Keyes, 2007). In contrast, it was expected to find non-flourishers more frequently reporting negative experiences, like feeling stressed out due to the kind activities, but there was no significant difference found between the two groups. Again, this might be related to the increase of well-being during the intervention for the non-flourishing participants.

Displayed Emotions.

As mentioned before, Keyes and Annas (2009) counted' feeling good about life' as one of the main characteristics of flourishers. Nevertheless, the results of this study indicated no increased feeling of positive emotions for flourishers compared to non-flourishers. Additionally, both groups reported the same amount of negative emotions, although languishers were expected to experience them to an increased amount. These strikingly different findings of the current study compared to literature might be related to the combination of both moderately mentally healthy and languishing participants. Therefore, the moderately mentally healthy participants might raise the results of the pure languishers. This will be further discussed in the section of strengths and limitations.

Well-being.

Throughout the acts of kindness-intervention, the non-flourishing participants' levels of well-being significantly increased compared to the one of the flourishers. This is different to Catalino and Fredrickson (2011) reporting that flourishers (1) responded more positively to pleasant activities and (2) experienced a greater positive emotional boost when engaging in helping behaviours compared to non-flourishers. Indeed, the flourishers' levels even decreased

a little over time. Thus, while the execution of kind activities promotes the non-flourisher's well-being, it rather retains the flourisher's one. One possible explanation could be the small room for further increase within flourishers. Thus, they have already attained an optimum level of mental well-being leading to limited possibilities for further improvement.

Aside from that, a positive link was found between the non-flourishers' behaviour of disclosing trivial information and their increase of well-being throughout the intervention. This finding is contrary to the assumption that non-flourishing and languishing individuals are characterized by "emptiness and stagnation" (Keyes, 2002, p. 210). Thus, it is questionable how participants of non-flourishing nature readily and openly engage in disclosing trivial and private information to such an extent that it positively affects their level of well-being. Possibly, this effect is attributable to the general effect of reflecting on one's behaviour. Accordingly, it is accountable that this effect is not represented by flourishers as they are self-accepting and promoting their personal growth by nature (Keyes, 2002), and therefore probably have already engaged in reflecting and self-disclosing behaviour even before the intervention.

Furthermore, the results indicated for both flourishers and non-flourishers a significant relation between their increased levels of well-being and their execution of kind acts 'for others'. Thus, the more they engaged in acts of kindness 'for others', the happier and better they felt. In general, this finding is in line with literature stating that helping others promotes the individual's mental health (Schwartz, Meisenhelder, Ma & Reed, 2003). However, while Schwartz et al. (2003) did not declare others as strangers or acquaintances, the current study did. Therefore, it remains uncertain why the engagement in kind acts in particular for strangers promotes well-being over performing acts of kindness for family or friends. It is assumed that the vague separation between complete strangers and acquaintances for the code 'for others' might have had impacted the results. Accordingly, it is possible that the participants did not engage that often in kind acts for complete strangers. Further analysis of the effects between the individual's well-being and his or her relation to the one receiving the kind activities is required, as it might greatly contribute to the effectiveness of interventions like this one.

Strengths and limitations

The current study clearly profits from the strong inter-rater reliability covering values from substantial to almost perfect agreement. Accordingly, the applied coding scheme reached substantial results to be interpreted and future research can rely on the scheme by re-using it when analysing the content of reflections on acts of kindness. Furthermore, the topic of the study is noticeably relevant and current as it brought out (1) the different targets of acts of kindness, (2) a coding scheme for analysing reflections about the performance of kind activities,

(3) the possible differences between flourishing and non-flourishing participants and (2) the effects of acts of kindness on individuals. Thus, the current study adds to this relatively new and still small field in psychology.

Nevertheless, the results of the current study are to some extent limited as it was not possible to make a clear distinction between flourishers and languishers. Therefore, the group of non-flourishers comprised both mentally unhealthy and moderately mentally healthy individuals. Thus, the results might be clouded in a sense that they do not exactly reflect the effects of acts of kindness on purely languishing individuals. This is leading to another limitation of the study. Possibly the recruitment of the participants was more appealing to and therefore more directed at flourishing instead of languishing individuals. Accordingly, the one-sided advertisement for the intervention might have contributed to the uneven distribution of flourishing and languishing participants. In conclusion, future recruitments should design different advertisements – one containing more positive and active parts as flourishers are more open to positive elements of pleasant activities (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011), and another one consisting of less positive and more inactive content appealing to languishers. Additionally, another limitation of the current study is the fact that although Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2017) recommended to implement both self-compassionate parts and others fostering positive relations into a PPI, Schotanus-Dijkstra and Bohlmeijer (in Revision) did not actively combine these elements into their acts of kindness-intervention. Thus, this lead to participants unevenly engaging in the two parts and eventually missing out on the self-compassionate part although it greatly contributes to one's well-being. Accordingly, future PPIs should incorporate an evenly distribution of self-compassion and engaging in positive relations-parts by instructing individuals to change the focus between the two factors every other week.

Conclusion

The current study examined the different targets of individuals engaging in acts of kindness. People seemed happier when addressing strangers, acquaintances and neighbours over family and friends. However, other researchers gained opposing results. Therefore, future studies should focus on the different effects between individuals helping or doing something good for strangers and kin. Aside from that, the positive link between one's self-esteem and level of happiness was emphasized. While mentally healthy and happy participants reported a favourable attitude towards themselves, mentally unhealthy and more unhappy participants did not show such a degree of self-esteem. This implies the importance of promoting one's favourable attitude toward oneself throughout interventions aimed at stimulating the individual's level of well-being as obviously these two constructs go hand in hand.

Furthermore, it was striking that individuals consciously chose to ignore the opportunity of doing something kind for themselves and instead focused on others. However, the practice of self-compassion and being open to one's own suffering clearly adds to one's well-being, as Neff (2011) said: "(…) happiness stems from loving ourselves and our lives exactly as they are, knowing that joy and pain, strength and weakness, glory and failure are all essential to the full human experience".

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