

Insights into flourishing enhancing activities

A qualitative approach

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Abstract

Psychology has come to acknowledge the fundamental importance of positive mental health. Flourishing is a key-concept in the field of positive psychology; flourishers are those individuals with high levels on emotional, psychological and social well-being (Keyes, 2002). Flourishers function fully as individuals as well as in the society. Most of the existing literature examining the concept of flourishing is of quantitative base. Little attention has been paid to qualitative data on daily activity patterns in everyday life that promote flourishing. This study uses a qualitative narrative study design, to examine the everyday activities of laypeople who try to obtain or maintain flourishing mental health. This study used data from 17 narratives of European citizens to examine the most common and important activities that promote flourishing. This study also investigated gender differences regarding those activities. Results found four main categories, indicating that social activities, cognitive activities, leisure activities and goal pursuit and achievements are important aspects of flourishing described by laypersons. Marginal significant difference in frequency was found between males and females, in regard to social activities. Further no significant differences in the frequency of those mentioned flourishing activities were found. Overall, it appeared that social activities were the most important for promoting flourishing. However, more qualitative research on the topic of intentional activities is needed.

Introduction

In the past, psychology has been mostly preoccupied with mental illness rather than mental 'wellness' (Nettle, 2005). However during the past recent years, psychology has come to acknowledge the fundamental importance of positive mental health and feelings of happiness. (Pflug, 2009). This resulted in a recently new established perspective, namely positive psychology, specifically addressing the study of well-being, quality of life, strengths and resources (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). More people start to realize that there is more to mental health than just the absence of mental illness. Being at the positive end of the mental well-being spectrum is also described as flourishing. Corey Keyes was the first one to introduce the concept of flourishing, using the positive mental health framework of Keyes (2002,2005). He defined flourishers as those individuals with high levels of emotional, social and psychological wellbeing.

Emotional well-being is determined by satisfaction with life and positive feelings, such as happiness, cheerfulness and enjoyment. At the psychological level, Ryff (1989) discovered six dimensions psychological well-being: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery and autonomy. Lastly, the social wellbeing dimension consists of social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance and social contribution (Keyes, 2002). In sum, flourishing persons are filled with positive emotions and function fully as an individual as well as within society (Keyes & Simoes, 2012).

The importance of flourishing

Examining the prevalence rates of flourishing people, Keyes (2007) found that less than 20% of the US population is flourishing. Keyes also showed that 17% of people were languishing and around 65% of people have a moderate mental health. Languishing is the

opposite of flourishing, experiencing life as ‘hollow’ or ‘empty’ (Keyes, 2002). According to Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2015), around 36.5% of the Dutch population are flourishers and 1.6% are languishers, which differs from the results of Keyes. Overall, these numbers indicate that there is room for improvement, since still relatively few people actually flourish in the general population.

Increasing the rate of flourishing people is of great importance due to several reasons. Flourishers seem to have excellent mental and physical health and are more resilient to vulnerabilities and challenges in life than non-flourishers (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al, 2015; Veenhoven, 2008). Flourishing even results in better work performance, productivity and less missed workdays (Keyes & Grzywacz, 2005). Flourishing also reduces the risk of developing mental illnesses (Keyes & Simoes, 2012) and facilitates the recovery of mental illnesses, such as mood or anxiety disorders (Schotanus-Dijkstra, Keyes, Graaf & ten Have, 2019). Additionally, the study of Keyes & Simoes (2012) showed that the absence of positive mental health (flourishing) increased the probability of all-cause mortality by 62% for men and women, at all ages. By preventing physical and mental diseases, for example depression, which has the highest societal costs in the Netherlands of all diseases (GGZ, 2013), lower health care costs might be possible.

Characteristics of flourishers

Why does one individual flourish while another languishes? With the aim of promoting flourishing in life, it needs to be clear what factors contribute to flourishing. A substantial body of research suggests that socio-demographics, such as gender, higher income, higher education, living with a partner and paid employment are positively related to subjective well-being (Schotanus et al, 2015; Diener et al, 1999). However, Sheldon, Lyubomirsky and Schkade

(2005), argue that such factors account for only 10% of the variation in people's happiness. A larger contributor to happiness is the genetically determined set point such as personality traits. The theory of chronic happiness (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005) states that there is a stable genetic happiness set point that is unlikely to change, which has been estimated to contribute 50% to variances in long-term happiness, although later studies show a lower influence of genetic variance (e.g. Bartels et al 2015). Extraversion and neuroticism are one of the most studied personality traits, which are found to have the strongest relationship with emotional and psychological well-being separately (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Diener & Seligman 2002). However, believing that well-being and happiness are pure genetics and unchangeable would be disheartening, trying to become happier may be doomed to failure and perhaps even leading to unnecessary unhappiness (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). Still, demographics and genetics do not explain all variance in happiness, thus, intentional activities seem also to play an important role

Intentional activities

Researchers have theorized that much of people's happiness is in fact under their control (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). The remaining 40% of the variance must be accounted by what people do: their intentional activities. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) describes intentional activity as 'discrete actions or practices that people can choose to do'. The study of Thayer, Newman & McCain (1994) used open-ended questionnaires to catalogue activities that people use to get themselves out of a bad mood, such as seeking out friends, exercising and hobbies. However the focus of this study has been on decreasing negative moods instead promotion of positive moods. Further, a meta-analysis study of Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009),

based on results from 51 randomized controlled interventions, found that people who engaged in positive intentional activities (e.g. thinking gratefully, optimistically, or mindfully) became significantly happier. Another meta-analysis of Boaler et al. (2013) also found that positive psychology interventions such as, counting your blessings, reactivating kindness, setting personal goals and expressing gratitude, can be effective for enhancing subjective and psychological well-being. The most recent meta-analysis concluded small effects, multicomponent positive psychology interventions, on subjective wellbeing and depression, and a small to moderate effect on psychological well-being (Hendriks, Schotanus-Dijkstra, Hassankhan, de Jong & Bohlmeijer, 2019). Further, a recent experience sampling study suggested that everyday creative activity also leads to increased well-being (Conner, DeYoung & Silvia, 2018). Based on a daily diary method, cross-day effects of creative behavior onto well-being were found. Meaning that people felt more flourishing following days when they were more creative. According to Conner et al. (2018) creative activities vary from coming up with novel ideas, expressing oneself in an original way and doing artistic activities (art, music, writing, etc.). However, they measured only the extent of creative activity (e.g., ‘how creative were you today?’), exact descriptions of such creative activities was not collected.

While there are studies showing that intentional activities are somehow related to well-being, most of this research has been correlational (Lyubomirsky, 2001). There appears to be a lack of qualitative based research, especially regarding flourishing. A qualitative interview study of Lu & Shih (2010) examined the sources of happiness of the Taiwan population, finding 9 sources of happiness in total. Another interview study examined the dimensions of happiness, finding positive relationships, achievements, accentuating the positive and a balanced lifestyle being important (Manusov, Carr, Rowane, Beatty & Nadeau, 1995). However, both studies

measured the state of happiness or well-being, not flourishing. Little is known about how people actually flourish in everyday life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), and the influence of gender. It is expected that women will value social oriented activities more than men, social theorists argue that women are more nurturing and relationship oriented than men are (Parsons & Bales, 1995). For example, Warner and Vroman (2011) found that men and women indeed tend to rely on different happiness inducing behaviors, women reported more engagement in relationships compared to men, and men reported more experiences of flow compared to women. Others found that Physical activity and socializing appeared to be important for males, while female happiness were more affected by physical attractiveness and family factors (Argyle, 2001). Therefore, it is expected that men on the other hand will value more practical activities and casual social interactions. Thus, research should also be conducted on gender differences in flourishing, not simply on flourishing promoting activities alone.

Present study

Overall, the science of flourishing is still in its infancy (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al, 2015). Especially regarding the remaining 40% of the variance of individual happiness and flourishing, that is not accounted by circumstances or dispositions and may be linked to intentional activities and behaviors (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). It is important to get a better understanding of this phenomenon since, opposite to the genetic disposition perspective, people actually may have an influence on their state of wellbeing. Therefore, the first aim of this current study is to examine/explore which activities in everyday life people describe to maintain or obtain flourishing mental health. Since flourishing seems to be subjective, the use of narratives can shed more light on the everyday activities of lay persons. The second aim is to examine gender differences within the description of flourishing promoting activities. It is expected that men will

write more often about active activities such as exercising and socializing and being with friends, while women will write more about nurturing relationships and family.

Methods

Study design

A narrative design was used with an open-ended online questionnaire to obtain the qualitative data. All participants received the same open questions. The data was collected within a time period of three weeks in April 2019 in The Netherlands.

Participants

For recruiting participants, a convenience sampling strategy was applied. Participants were reached through online platforms, such as Facebook and Whatsapp. Secondly, the snowball sampling strategy was applied. Participants who agreed to participate in the study were asked whether they knew other persons that would also be interested in the study, such as friends, colleagues or family. The first inclusion criteria for participating in the study was being at least 18 years old. Secondly, participants should be European citizens and comprehend either the Dutch or English language. All the participants received an information letter regarding the study and signed the online informed consent. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Twente.

In total, 39 participants were recruited, of which 19 completed the narratives (48%) and were included in the current study. However, two participants described only factors reducing their anxiety instead of prompting flourishing, leading to a final sample of 17 participants. The

average age of the sample was 42.8 years old (SD = 19.6), with an age range of 18 – 80. The sample consisted of 9 females and 8 males. The average age of the female participants was 38.2 years (SD = 17.5) and for male participants 47.8 years (SD = 21.8). There was no significant difference in age between the two groups [$F(1, 15) = 0.03, p = 0.327$]. Most of the participants had a low (n = 6) or average (n = 6) school degree and 5 participants were higher educated. In total 8 people had a flourishing mental health, which was equally distributed among males (50%) and females (50%), the remaining half had moderate mental health. The mental health state of flourishing was assessed by the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes, 2009).

The 14-item MHC-SF measures the three dimensions of emotional ('In the past month, how often did you feel happy?'), psychological ('how often did you feel that our society is becoming a better place for people?') and social well-being ('how often did you feel confident to think or express you own ideas and opinions?') (Keyes, 2009). To be diagnosed with flourishing mental health, individuals must experience 'every day' (4) or 'almost every day' (5) at least one of the three items of hedonic (emotional well-being) and at least six of the eleven items of positive functioning during the past four weeks (Keyes, 2009). People who are not flourishing neither languishing, are classified as having moderate mental health (Keyes, 2002, 2007). A Cronbach's Alpha of .91 was found at baseline, indicating excellent reliability.

Procedure

The baseline survey and the qualitative questions were presented to the respondents via the online platform Qualtrics. Qualtrics is a web-based survey tool to conduct survey research, evaluations and other data collection activities. If the participants provided informed consent they were automatically redirected to the baseline survey. Participants first answered questions

regarding some basic demographics, followed by the MHC-SF. One week after baseline, the participants received writing instructions for the qualitative part of the study. Participants were asked to write about how and when they flourish, using 150 to 600 words. They were instructed as follows: Please describe one or more situations wherein you flourish: What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think? When you describe such situations, try to think about how you function as a person, how you function as a person in relation to others and /or how you function as a person in relation to society.

Analyses

Qualitative analyses. The data was made anonymous before analysis, participants were referred to only by participant numbers. The program ATLAS.ti. 8.0 were used for analyzing the content. The analysis of the qualitative data was based on the content analysis approach. Specifically, a conventional content analysis, because existing theory or literature about everyday activities for improving flourishing is still limited. Meaning that the coding schema was derived from the text (inductive coding) rather than using theory or already existing codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data analysis started with reading all the texts to obtain a sense of the whole, as one would read a novel (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Tesch, 1990). Then the data was read single handedly word by word to obtain a draft version of the coding scheme. Codes were then sorted into categories to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This draft version was tested on other text, adjusted and then tested again. This process was repeated until no new codes were found (saturation). Each narrative could contain multiple codes, but each code could only be assigned once per narrative of one participant. Codes were assigned per

fragment, which could be a few words, one sentence or a few sentences. The final coding scheme including examples is presented in Table 1.

Quantitative analyses. To examine the differences in descriptions of flourishing enhancing behaviors between women and men, analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. The ANOVA's tested whether certain codes were mentioned significantly more often by males or females, with a significance level of .05. The test was only conducted regarding the main categories because due to the low sample size. Statistical analyses were conducted using the program IBM SPSS statistics 24.

Table 1.

Overview of categories, sub codes, definitions and example quotations

Categories	Sub codes	Definitions	Examples
1. Social activities		Engaging in social behaviors regarding others, interacting with one or more persons or groups.	
	Positive relationships	Having and spending time with satisfying and trusting relationships along with a capacity for empathy and intimacy	‘I flourish as a person because I have met the love of my life. With her I experience a sense of rest and equality. And she helps me learn about myself’
	Helping others	The act of contributing to the wellbeing of others	‘There are a number of situations where I feel I flourish but I think the main one is when I can help somebody in some way. This can be by sharing knowledge and skills which helps the other person, or providing physical help in some way. This does not have to be a family member or close friend it can be anybody’
	Interact/communicate	Engaging in conversations with one or more people that one perceives as enjoyable and interesting	‘I mostly flourish with my friends. When I engage in heated discussions and conversations with the ones I feel closest to’
2. Leisure activities		Activities done in one’s free time and done out of own intention with main reason being enjoyment and pleasure.	
	Hobbies/ interests	Engaging in regular activities in peruse of relaxation and pleasure, interests can be	‘I was very happy to be focused on my passion and to be sharing it with others’

perused without active participation.

	Travel	To make a journey, usually over a long distance and another country.	‘I flourish when I’m traveling, then i keep thinking; how fun. I can see so many new places and cultures. It is never annoying’
3. Cognitive activities		Engaging in (positive) mental non active behaviors to enhance one’s feeling of happiness	
	Cultivate optimism	The quality of being hopeful and emphasizing the positive aspects of a situation, in the past, present or future.	‘Flourishing for me, is that even on days where there is zero input, there is still a positive mindset. Personally I see it as partly mindset. Think positive to be positive’
	Gratitude	The ability of being thankful, show appreciation to your surrounding and aspects of life.	‘I feel happy when I walk through our garden, and see our nice house’
	Self confidence	Having trust in one’s abilities, qualities, judgment and own self-worth.	‘I flourish when I’m confident. On a day where I have low self-confidence it is much more of a struggle to complete every day tasks’
4. Goal pursuit and achievements		Having goals and working towards those with effort, skill and motivation and experiencing a sense of satisfaction when completing those valued goals.	
	Accomplishments		‘I flourish because at my 23th I achieved my title (ing), been able to get a permanent job at every employer I encountered’
	New experiences	The act of doing or seeing new things, places or people. Being open for new possibilities.	‘I also flourish when I get new insights. Insights into new cultures, countries, people. Knowledge that broadens my horizon’

Results

In total, 66 fragments were coded. The length of the introductory emails of the 17 participants varied much, from 41 words to 366 words. Participant's intentional activities of flourishing could be divided into four main categories. The category of social activities were most frequently mentioned in the narratives (40.9%), followed by cognitive activities (22.7%), leisure activities (18.2%) and goal pursuit and achievements (18.2%). See Table 2 for a complete overview.

Table 2

Frequencies and test results (p-value) of the number of allocated fragments about flourishing promoting activities (n = 66) of 17 participants who wrote narratives about flourishing.

Categories	Men (n = 8)	Women (n = 9)	P
Social activities	10 (37.7)	17 (62.3)	.093
Positive relationships	5 (41.6)	7 (58.3)	
Helping others	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)	
Interacting/communicating with others	3 (50)	3 (50)	
Cognitive activities	9 (60)	6 (40)	.610
Optimism	3 (60)	2 (40)	
Self confidence	3 (60)	2 (40)	
Gratitude	3 (60)	2 (40)	
Leisure activities	6 (50)	6 (50)	.585
Hobbies and interests	3 (42.9)	4 (57.1)	
Travel	3 (60)	2 (40)	

Goal pursuit & achievements	7 (58)	5 (42)	.334
Achieving goals	5 (62.5)	3 (37.5)	
New experiences	2 (50)	2 (50)	

Social activities

Social activities (40.9%) manifests in behaviors such as having and savoring (close) relationships, taking care of others and interacting with others. A large number of participants (88.2%) mentioned social activities in their narratives, of which 33% males and 67% females. In total, 70.6% of all participants mentioned positive relationships (18.2%) in their narratives. Important sources of positive relationships for both males and females were family, partnerships and friendships *‘I flourish when I am around friends and family, people I can trust’*. Only one participant mentioned work relationships as source of positive relationships *‘Additionally, all of my colleagues are very nice, and I feel appreciated by them’*. Positive relationships also covered the other social categories, helping others and interacting or communicating with others.

Helping others (13.6%) is defined by selfless behaviors intended to benefit others, without expecting something in return. *‘People who are close to me are doing well, is a reason to be happy’*. Behaviors mentioned were making others happy by doing simple good deeds, such as preparing a dinner or event *‘Or when I organize an event for my friends and see that they are having a good time’*, providing emotional and physical help or by attentive listening. The act of helping was mentioned in both regard to close relationships, *‘I feel happy if I could do something for my family’* and *‘Cooking for my parents. Recently they had a hard time, so I feel happy if I am able to help them in someway’*, and unrelated people. Helping others on a societal level was mentioned only once by a female participant, *‘I have a feeling that I contribute to society, the*

greater good. I focus on legal problems and try to stand up for those that can't do it on their own'. Percentages show that woman mentioned social activities marginally significantly more often than men [$F(1, 15) = 4.94, p = .093$]. The difference seems most pronounced within helping others, indicating that women find helping others an important characteristic of flourishing in comparison to men.

Cognitive activities

Cognitive activities (22.7%) are defined by positive emotions or thoughts such as looking at the bright side, appreciating someone or something and feeling good about one self. Out of all participants, 60% mentioned this category. Self-confidence (7.5%) was described as a cause to flourish '*I flourish when I am confident in myself*', but also as an effect of flourishing '*I flourish when I am feeling light, after times of drowning in sorrow or fears. I feel confident. I feel optimistic. I feel powerful, intelligent and capable*'. No significant differences were found between males and females in this category [$F(1, 15) = 0.311, p = 0.585$].

Leisure time

Leisure time (18.2%) is time free from work or other commitments and done solely out of own intention. Leisure time appears to be an important source of flourishing when participants did not engage in social interactions, '*Sometimes I find I can flourish without any interaction at all*' and '*Besides, I can also be happy when I'm sitting alone on the couch, with a cup of tea and my laptop*' (passive leisure). Females mentioned enjoying more creative activities, '*I enjoy my hobby of making jewelry. This provides me with peace and provides me with a creative outlet*', while men enjoyed more practical hobbies such as repairing something '*I feel greatly satisfied to repair something that is damaged*'. Surprisingly, exercising and physical activity was mentioned

once out of all narratives, *'being active also makes me flourish, it does not matter what: cycling, exercising, walking or dancing. Then I feel good and alive'*. No significant differences between women and men were found [$F(1, 15) = 0.311, p = 0.585$].

When assigning codes travel (7.5%) and new experiences (6%) were often coded in the same fragment. Opposite to new experiences, traveling was often mentioned in regard of company of close ones *'I like to travel with my wife', 'I am planning a holiday with some friends, which is another reason to be happy'*. Seeing new countries/cultures is another reason for finding traveling flourishing *'I flourish when I go on a trip, then I can see so many new places and explore new cultures'*, which is similar to new experiences. The distinction between the two might be the actual feelings experienced during new experiences *'Flourishing for me is equal to not feeling bored, but being curious and enthusiastic makes me happy'*.

Goal pursuit and achievements

In total 70.6% of total participants mentioned the category goal pursuit and achievements. The most common descriptions of goal pursuit and achievements (18.2%) were career related, *'It is important for me to be successful in my daily work'* and *'Second situation were I flourish; I will finish a difficult project at work this week. Which is important for the customer and the company I work for. The complete task was lasting about a month and it's nice to have it ready'*. Younger participants described more academic related goals, *'I gain much satisfaction from passing exams'*. Surprisingly, none of the participants described goals in pursuing personal development, e.g., learning about and improving oneself.

New experiences appeared to be somewhat connected to the category interacting or communicating with others. Participants described engaging in new experiences as a means to interact with new people *'I like meeting new people, then I feel I am a new experience richer', 'I*

also flourish when I get new insights, insights into [...] new people'. By meeting new people, participants get the chance to establish new (positive) relationships. Relationships enable us not only to cope with stress, but also to learn and grow as a person (Feeney, 2014). Which in result can lead to feelings of flourishing, *'While the time I was meeting and getting to know more people around and having common interests which helped me to grow and learn and that makes me flourish in a way i think'*. Even though men described goal pursuit and achievements slightly more than women, no significant difference was found [$F(1,15) = 0.645, p = 0.334$].

Discussion

This study aimed to get more insight on intentional activities in everyday life that laypersons strive for in order to flourish. The results are based on narratives from flourishers and non-flourishers (moderate mental health). Four main categories were found: social activities (40.9%), cognitive activities (22.7%), leisure activities (18.2%) and goal pursuit and achievements (18.2%). Most of the participants (88.2%) mentioned social activities when describing what they do to flourish in their everyday life, showing that social activities seems to be of utmost importance in promoting flourishing. This finding is supported by several studies, an experience sampling study of Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter (2003) showed that people are happier while in the presence of others. In addition, the study of Tkach et al. (2006) found that social affiliation, characterized by action such as helping others and communicating with others, showed a strong positive relationship with happiness.

Further, it was expected to find differences in frequencies between men and women because men and women handle their emotions in different ways (Thayer et al, 1994). Specifically, it was expected that women would mention social activities more often than men, which was indeed

marginal significant ($p = .093$). This is in line with existing findings, for example, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) found that women tended to use social affiliation (focusing on maintaining relationships), more often than men did. No other significant gender differences were found in descriptions of flourishing enhancing activities.

Main findings

According to the flourishing framework of Keyes (2007), social-wellbeing is a necessity for individuals to flourish. When comparing with Keyes's framework, the descriptions of social activities in this study relate more to the psychological well-being dimension rather than the social-wellbeing. Positive relationships is part of psychological well-being, which is the most important strategy described in the narratives. Besides, the activities helping and interacting were both described in relation to positive relationships (e.g. family, friends and partners) or just random individuals. Only one participant out of all described the act of helping on a social contribution level. These results indicate that lay people value having good social relationships more than being part of society in order to flourish. Interestingly, in contrast to Keyes' framework, social well-being seems less important for lay people to describe/define flourishing.

Differences in perceived community wellbeing per country might explain the contradictory finding. Community wellbeing concerns the individual's feelings regarding the community they live in, such as trust in other people, feeling supported by members of the community and experiencing a sense of neighborliness (ESS, 2012). According to the European social survey, the Netherlands scored an average score, on the low side, of 0.04 and the United Kingdom -0.02 on the community wellbeing survey. Indicating that residents don't feel very connected with the community they live in and don't perceive them as very trustful. It is possible

that due to lack of trust and feeling dissociated with own community; people don't value social coherence, contribution or integration as much. Meaning, that individuals either don't feel the need or don't gain joy from activities related to the social well-being dimensions.

Further, it was found that active leisure activities (e.g. exercise) was not an important activity for flourishing. This is in contrast with existing literature. Exercise or being active seemed to be important for flourishing since exercise is related to lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Salmon, 2000), and improved mood (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Rejeski et al., 1995). Additionally, Tkach et al, (2006) found active leisure (e.g. 'exercise', 'maintain health and fitness' and 'work on hobbies') to be a strong predictor of happiness. However, the results of this study indicate that exercise as an active leisure activity is not as important for all people to flourish. A reason for this contradictory finding can be explained by the theory of hedonic adaptation.

The reason that some happiness promoting attempts fail, even though proven to be effective, is because of hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). People are overall very good at adjusting to their circumstances, thus that what was originally a source of joy becomes part of the norm and loses its effect (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). For example, after one year, lottery winners were no happier than people who did not win. Effect levels wear of and return to a stable baseline of happiness (Brickman, Coates & Janoff-Bulman, 1978). Variation can counter the effect of hedonic adaptation, for example by simply altering running to swimming. It is therefore possible that the participants in this study did not alter their exercise regime often enough.

While goal pursuit and achievements seem relatively more important, the described types of goals differ with existing literature. Intentional activities such as goal progress or attainment

consistently predicted increased well-being (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). Happiness and satisfaction are enhanced especially when people's goals are intrinsic, have emotional intimacy and focused on personal growth (Lyubomirsky et al, 2005; Kasser & Ryan, 1993) and congruent with one's motives, interests and one's needs. The described goals in the narratives differ from this information, descriptions concerned external regulation (e.g. work, education) not intrinsic (e.g. self-acceptance, growth, health). Therefore, if these goals and achievements really promote flourishing is uncertain. However, the reason for the prominent work theme might be experience of engagement. Lay people might experience engagement with their work, explaining the prominent work theme. Engagement in the organizational domain involves concentration, focus, absorption, vigor and dedication (Butler & Kern, 2016). The PERMA model of Seligman (2011) is another flourishing framework and consists of 5 different dimensions: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. According the PERMA Model, engagement contributes to flourishing mental health. Engagement in work could make one's work feel fulfilling which can result in feelings of flourishing. Engagement can also occur in engaging in hobbies and interests.

Lastly, optimism had a relatively low frequency. Studies that study effective intentional strategies, consistently find that optimism positively related to happiness and flourishing (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Interestingly, a fellow student (Allanah, 2019) who examined narratives where participants describe another person of whom they think is flourishing, found that optimism was the most mentioned code. Participants described the skill of being optimistic, as the most important characteristic of flourishing people. This indicates that while optimism had one of the lowest frequencies in the current study, cultivating optimism is still a very valuable

activity to promote flourishing. Participants may simply not have acquired the skill of being optimistic most of the time.

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of this study is the qualitative nature. In contrast to quantitative studies, it opened the possibility to give detailed and varying answers without the restriction of only closed questions. This study provided a more honest and deeper insight into the activities people strive for to obtain and maintain flourishing mental health.

There are also limitations of the study that need to be considered. The main limitation in this study is the sample size. Only 17 narratives were used, so the qualitative results of this study are based on only 8 male and 9 female participants, which are small samples for testing between-group differences. Therefore the reliability of the results is questionable. Low reliability can cause inconsistent results over time. Thus, conducting the same study with a bigger or different sample size can produce additional or different information, resulting in different results. The small sample size also limits the generalizability of the results. Therefore, the results of this study should be interpreted carefully.

On top of that, the length of the qualitative answers varied largely. So, more talkative participants had relatively larger contribution to the overall fragment frequency. Short narratives sometimes described only one factor, while longer ones covered multiple. To balance this at some part, each code could only be assigned once to each narrative. However, this resulted in a lower number of codes in total, which influences the quantitative analyses. For example, the sub codes of the cognitive activities category had a total of only 5, which resulted in small differences. Smaller sample sizes with less data decrease statistical power, making it harder to

detect any significant differences (Morgan, 2017). With a larger sample, differences might be more prominent.

Another limitation is the formulation of the qualitative question for participants. When participants were asked to describe what makes them flourish, the formulation of flourishing emphasized the part ‘in relation to others and society’. This might have directed the participants in describing more social directed activities. They might have felt that they needed to describe situations specifically in relation to others. As a result, explaining the high frequency of the category positive relationships. However, society is also mentioned in the narratives, but far less often than positive relationships, indicating that social activities are important for laypeople regardless of the question formulation.

Future research

Future research should continue examining what intentional activities lay people strive for in their everyday life. At this moment, intentional activities seem the most promising route for individuals to pursue their flourishing mental health. Research on intentional activities and the differences between men and women need further examination using a larger sample. It is possible that the current study, due to the small sample size, did not cover all possible intentional activities. Therefore, a larger sample is needed to ensure saturation in data. Small differences between women and men found in the current study could become more prominent in a larger sample. Further, a deductive coding method based on grounded theory, for example the PERMA model, is recommended to facilitate the coding process and to minimize interpretation bias. Besides, it is interesting to see whether theoretical models are in line with lay people's concepts of flourishing. Further, rather than only broad questions, more specific and closed questions

needs also to be used when examining intentional activities. In order to find out the specific features of such activities such as, circumstances, timing, variety and frequency of flourishing promoting activities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings illustrate that out of all activity categories, lay people consider social activities of highest importance when striving for a flourishing mental health. Social activities scored higher than cognitive activities, leisure activities and goal pursuit and achievements. However, results showed that social-wellbeing is of less importance for laypeople, which contradicts with Keyes' (2002) flourishing framework. A marginal significant difference was found between males and females, indicating that women value social activities in their everyday life more than men, especially in helping others. No other significant differences were found between males and females in describing flourishing enhancing activities. By using a narrative design, this study contributed to the existing research gap of qualitative research regarding flourishing in everyday life. However, more research is needed in order to gain deeper understanding about the nature and effectiveness of different activities on flourishing.

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