

Enjoyment and usefulness of learning about one's highest and lowest character strengths

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(488 words in the body of the abstract)

Introduction

Research suggests that practicing one's highest or lowest strengths can be useful. For example, Rust et al. (2009) found that a semester-long intervention that randomly assigned participants to practice either two of their highest strengths or one of their highest and one of their lowest strengths found similar benefits of the two conditions on subjective well-being. Additionally, Proyer, Gander, Wellenzohn, and Ruch (2015) found that in a long-term intervention study that randomly assigned participants to practice their highest versus lowest strengths (without telling them that they were highest or lowest strengths) found similar benefits of the two conditions relative to a control condition. These studies did not assess participants' reactions to learning about their highest or lowest strengths while informing them that these were their highest or lowest strengths. Do participants respond differently to instructions that explicitly focus them only on their highest versus lowest strengths?

If people assume that their lowest strengths are relative weaknesses, then they may assume that learning about their lowest strengths would be less enjoyable than learning about their highest strengths. They may also find writing about how to use their lowest strengths in new ways to be less enjoyable than writing about how to use their highest strengths in new ways. We tested these hypotheses in the current research.

Method

Participants were 91 Ithaca College students who the study randomly assigned a highest-strengths condition versus a lowest-strengths condition. Participants reported their anticipated enjoyment (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) and anticipated usefulness (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$) of learning about their assigned type of strengths. Then they took the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2005) and received a rank ordering of their strengths to use when writing about how to use strengths in new ways. Next they reported their enjoyment of the writing task (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$) and usefulness of the writing task (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). All self-reports were on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Results

The analyses were four independent-samples t-tests, and we made a Bonferoni adjustment for assessing significance of $p < .0125$, two-tailed. We adjusted degrees of freedom for heterogeneity of variance where necessary. Two of the t-tests reached significance: anticipated enjoyment of learning about and enjoyment of writing about their assigned type of strengths. Specifically, participants anticipated enjoying learning about their strengths more in the highest-strengths condition than in the lowest-strengths condition, $t(72.54) = 6.26, p < .001$. Additionally, participants reported enjoying writing about new ways to use their strengths more in the highest-strengths condition than in the lowest-strengths condition, $t(89) = 2.88, p = .005$.

Discussion

These findings suggest that, while there may be value in encouraging people to learn about and practice their lowest strengths, learning about lowest strengths may not seem as enjoyable. Future research should examine which is a more important predictor of benefits from long-term lowest strengths interventions: enjoyment or perceived usefulness.

References

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