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The Psychology of Giving and Receiving Compliments

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Abstract

The effects of giving and receiving compliments have not received much attention by psychological researchers. Two investigations were carried out to explore responses to compliments. In Study 1 participants ($n = 57$) were asked to give and record compliments each day for two weeks and to provide ratings of life satisfaction at baseline, and at 1 and 2 week intervals. Their ratings were compared to those of the control group ($n = 52$) who provided life satisfaction ratings over three weeks but who were not asked to give or record compliments. Results did not show any difference in the life satisfaction ratings between the two groups.

In Study 2, 208 participants described the most meaningful compliment they had ever received. Compliments were classified into 5 categories by independent judges – appearance, skill, possession, personality, and other. The majority of the participants reported that compliments having to do with personality or character were reported as the most meaningful. These results help to shed light on the findings from Study 1 where it was shown that participants gave daily compliments based on appearance. Perhaps if participants had been asked to give compliments having to do with personality or character the intervention may have had stronger effects. The effects of giving compliments on both givers and receivers remains a question to explore in future research.

Objectives

1. Determine if giving daily compliments increases overall life satisfaction.
2. Determine what types of compliments are considered the most meaningful.

Introduction

Research has shown that everyday acts of kindness can increase an individual's sense of well-being and life satisfaction (Layous, Nelson, Kurtz & Lyubomirsky, 2017). Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson (2006) reported that the subjective happiness of college students was increased when keeping track of their kind behavior every day for one week. Moreover, the students who experienced the largest increase in feelings of subjective happiness reported engaging in more kind behavior than those who showed lower levels. The current investigation explored the hypothesis that conscious attention to giving compliments can increase an individual's sense of well-being and life satisfaction. The types of compliments individuals see as most meaningful was also

Study 1

Method

Participants (50 females and 7 males) in an introductory psychology course were asked to give and record compliments everyday for two weeks. Life satisfaction ratings on 9 dependent measures were obtained at baseline, and then again at one and two weeks. The control group ($n = 52$) also provided life satisfaction ratings but were not asked to give or record compliments.

Results

MANOVA analysis of the 9 measures showed that there was no difference between the experimental and control group on life satisfaction ratings, $F(1, 58) = 1.63, p = .206$, but the findings were limited by incomplete data. The compliments recorded by participants in their diaries ($n = 358$) were classified into 5 categories (Cohen's kappa = .73) – Appearance, Personality, Possessions, Skill, and Other. Z-tests showed that participants reported giving significantly more compliments about Appearance (50.4%) than the other categories, $p < .0001$.

Study 2

Method

Participants (129 females and 79 males) ranging between 17 and 55 years of age responded to a Survey Monkey questionnaire about the best, most meaningful compliment they ever received.

Results

Compliments were categorized by independent judges into five categories (Cohen's kappa = .81). Z-test analyses showed that both males and females reported compliments about Personality as most meaningful in comparison to all the other categories, $p < .0001$.

Table 1

Percentage of Meaningful Compliments by Type Reported by Male and Female Participants

Compliment Type	Male ($n = 79$)	Female ($n = 129$)
Appearance	17.7% ($n = 14$)	15.5% ($n = 20$)
Skill	17.7% ($n = 14$)	7.7% ($n = 10$)
Possession	0% ($n = 0$)	0% ($n = 0$)
Personality	55.6% ($n = 44$)	72.1% ($n = 93$)
Other	8.8% ($n = 7$)	4.6% ($n = 6$)

Meaningful Compliments

Appearance

I was told that no matter what weight or hair cut I would ever have I had a face to pull off anything.

One of the greatest compliments I have ever received was when I was in third grade and we would go to church and when I brought the gifts down the altar with my family the priest looked at me and said "of all the brides I see coming down the aisle, you are prettier than all of them."

Skill

I think some of the most important compliments I have received are when I am told I am good at something. This is fairly general but when someone tells me I am good at a certain subject in school I find it very meaningful since I have always struggled with school.

When people say I'm a really good dancer when I come off stage

Personality

The most meaningful compliment I've ever received was when someone complimented my radiance and my energy. It was the presence I brought to the room and it meant a lot to me because it had nothing to do with my looks, my capabilities, or my talents, but just the fact that I was there, simply existing, and someone not only noticed, but brought my attention to it.

People will forever want to work with you, maybe some day for you, people trust your work ethic and abilities. As they should. You're amazing at what you do."

The best compliment I ever received was when my boyfriend told me I was the most intelligent and kind-hearted woman he had met in his entire life, and that I was important.

A former employee sent me a letter years after she stopped working for me that I was a role model to her on making decisions that were sometimes difficult but were ethical.

You always know and say exactly what I need to hear. Its amazing how considerate you are.

Conclusion

While the results of Study 1 did not show any difference in the life satisfaction ratings between the experimental and control group, the findings were limited by incomplete data. Further research is thus necessary to test whether or not a *compliment intervention*, giving compliments and recording them in diaries, may affect life satisfaction and well-being. Compliments, after all, may be considered an act of kindness that has the potential to make us feel good about ourselves – whether we are the giver or the receiver of the compliment!

Results of Study 2 showed that the majority of the participants (79 males and 129 females) reported that compliments having to do with personality or character were reported as the most meaningful (males – 55.6%, females – 72.1%). These results help to shed light on the findings from Study 1 where it was shown that participants gave daily compliments based on appearance. This may have diluted the effects of the compliment intervention for both the giver and the receiver. Perhaps if participants had been asked to give compliments having to do with personality or character the intervention may have had stronger effects. The effects of giving compliments on both givers and receivers thus remains a question to explore in future research.

References

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