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Using positive psychology interventions to strengthen family happiness: A family systems approach

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ABSTRACT

A randomized wait-list control study examined the effects of two positive psychology interventions (PPIs) on 300 families across six countries. A systems approach was used to design the PPIs and to interpret the impact of these upon family happiness. A system is an interconnected set of elements (e.g., the people, practices, rituals, and resources of a family) that are coherently organized around a common purpose (e.g., family functioning). System approaches recognize that individuals are influenced by the environments within which they are situated and as such move beyond interventions that target individual change to look at triggering relational change. Families who undertook the PPIs were significantly happier at post-test compared to pre-intervention levels and compared to the wait-list control families. This study suggests that introducing positive practices (e.g., strength spotting) into a family may act to change the system elements and, thus, change family outcomes. System theory and Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory are used to explain the results.

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The call for positive family interventions

In their foundational paper, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for positive psychology interventions (PPIs) to promote flourishing families. Two decades later, this call has not been sufficiently heeded and the bulk of research into families still focuses on how to decrease negative outcomes (e.g., stress, violence, conflict) rather than on how to enhance family assets and positive outcomes (Conoley et al., 2015; Kirby, 2016; Waters et al., 2019). Sheridan and Burt (2009) and Sheridan et al. (2004) argue that problem-focused family interventions may help in a crisis but fail to help family members build the skills and resources used to support and sustain positive family functioning in the long term. Similarly, Henry et al. (2015) call for family researchers to extend beyond clinically oriented settings and move forward to the design of studies that identify the 'promotive processes' that facilitate positive functioning in every day families.

For researchers to respond to the calls of the authors above and develop positive psychology interventions for families (FPPIs), we need to be clear about the differences between deficit-based and positively oriented interventions. I argue that there are three key elements that can be used to contrast a deficit-based family intervention to a FPPI¹:

- (1) The skill or capacity being developed in the intervention (e.g., teaching the skills for active-constructive communication and empathy in contrast to the skills for conflict reduction and anger management).
- (2) The degree to which the program aims to promote positive outcomes or reduce negative outcomes for families (e.g., an increase in life satisfaction or positive emotions in contrast to a reduction of psychopathology).
- (3) The type of families targeted for intervention (e.g., mainstream families sourced from the community with mentally healthy members and typically developing children as opposed to disadvantaged families, 'at risk' families or families with members who have addiction or mental illness).

A FPPI *develops positive skills and capacities* (e.g., building up strengths, mindfulness, compassion, and gratitude in families); is designed to *increase positive outcomes* (e.g., happiness, love, family cooperation); and can be delivered to *all types of families including mainstream families*. While a FPPI can include a deficit-oriented focus (e.g., developing skills to reduce unwanted outcomes) the focus of the intervention is first and foremost on building up positive capacities to

create positive outcomes rather than ‘fixing’ what is wrong.

A review of the literature reveals that it is element 1, the skill set to be developed, where the greatest shift towards positive family interventions has occurred. For example, interventions now exist that teach family members the skills of savoring (Ho et al., 2016); gratitude (Amaro, 2017); strengths use (Sheely-Moore & Bratton, 2010); forgiveness (DiBlasio, 1998); mindfulness (Bögels et al., 2014); and self-compassion (Psychogiou et al., 2016).

However, when it comes to element 2 – the outcomes targeted by the intervention – most still focus on how the intervention reduces negative outcomes. According to Calam (2016), ‘It is one of the great paradoxes of the parenting literature that while programs are often described and promoted as promoting well-being for children and caregivers, outcome measures almost invariably address reductions in unwanted behaviors and negative emotions’ (p. 161). To demonstrate this point, the ‘positive’ interventions outlined above that taught self-compassion, mindfulness, and strength-use focused on outcomes such as the reduction of criticism, distress, internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and problematic behaviors (Bögels et al., 2014; Psychogiou et al., 2016). Another example of the presence of element 1 but absence of element 2 is seen in the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), which has been utilized in families with children who have behavioral, emotional, and/or developmental problems (Bor et al., 2002). The meta-analysis by De Graaf et al. (2008) found that the Triple P parenting program successfully reduces disruptive behaviors in children. Hence, while these interventions targeted the development of a positive skill (element 1) they did not aim to create positive outcomes (element 2).

In relation to element 3, a review of the literature shows that positive interventions for mainstream families are limited (Calam, 2016; Kirby, 2016; Waters et al., 2019; Waters & Sun, 2016) and the bulk of ‘positively oriented’ interventions are implemented with families who are in poverty (Mejia et al., 2012); families with parents or children who have psychopathology (Bögels et al., 2014); families in therapy (Conoley et al., 2015); families who face challenges from children on the spectrum (Benn et al., 2012; Ferraioli & Harris, 2013; Hwang et al., 2015); families who have children with social-emotional/behavioral dysfunction (Sanders et al., 2014); or families who are deprived or disadvantaged in some way (Ho et al., 2016).

Currently, there is a dearth of research on FPPIs that utilize all three positive elements, with the result that many interventions labeled as positive (because they

contain one element) are still, in actuality, deficit focused, thus leaving Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) call for the application of positive psychology to promote flourishing families unmet. The current study fills this gap by designing two new FPPIs that teach positive skills (element 1), enhance positive outcomes (element 2), with a community-based sample (element 3).

Family-level outcomes and family systems

In addition to a lack of positive interventions being delivered to families, a further gap is seen in that the outcomes of existing PPIs are typically measured at the individual level rather than the family level. Interventions have focused on increasing positive emotions, self-efficacy, mindfulness, and compassion in parents (Coatsworth et al., 2010; Kirby & Baldwin, 2018; Waters & Sun, 2016) or social responsiveness and quality of life in children (De Bruin et al., 2015). Yet, few studies have moved beyond individual-level outcomes to include a relational, or family-level, outcome. To date, only three exceptions to this could be found. Coatsworth et al.'s (2010) mother–teen dyad study had mothers complete a measure of parent–youth relationship quality; Hwang et al.'s (2015) mindfulness intervention had mothers complete a measure of family quality of life scale and Ho et al.'s (2016) intervention had family members rate levels of positive family communication.

The study of how PPIs might impact collective, family-level outcomes is important given the repeated criticism of positive psychology as being overly focused on intrapersonal outcomes (Ciarrochi et al., 2016) and given the recent call from Kern et al. (2019) for a ‘Systems Informed Positive Psychology’ (SIPP) which recognizes that well-being is influenced by the systems that people belong to, not only by the individual themselves.

Although the adoption of a systems approach is relatively new to positive psychology (Kern et al., 2019), family researchers have long recognized families as relational systems that have a purpose, elements (people, routines, practices, resources), and interaction patterns that regulate day-to-day life and shape family outcomes (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). From a positive psychology perspective, Sheridan et al. (2004) posit that when family strengths are intentionally built into the family system, this creates growth for the family unit as a whole. According to Black and Lobo (2008), families’ strengths include ‘positive outlook, spirituality, family member accord, flexibility, communication, financial management, time together, mutual recreational interests, routines and rituals, and social support’ (p. 37).

Henry et al. (2015) identified two important sub-systems that regulate family functioning: emotion and meaning. The emotion sub-system regulates the family's emotional climate through shaping communication patterns and interaction patterns. This sub-system includes interactions among family members that are supportive and encouraging and those that foster emotion coaching and happiness. The meaning sub-system governs a family's identity and shapes the family's understanding of their resilience and how/where their family fits in terms of resilience into the broader scheme of life and relative to other families. The meaning sub-system shapes, and is shaped by, the way a family collectively defines and interfaces with adversity over time.

Anderson and Sabatelli (2011) put forward one aspect of family meaning, *family identity*, and suggest that it provides the 'organizing principles of family life' (p. 12) and is shaped by shared values, expectations, and practices. According to Henry et al. (2015), family meaning and identity are influenced by 'legacies from families of origin or earlier generations that are integrated into families and may represent values' (p. 35).

Study aims

The current study evaluates two new systems-based FPPIs that were designed to boost family-level happiness. Both FPPIs incorporate Black and Lobo (2008) aspects of positive outlook, communication, time together, routines, and rituals. Combining Lyubomirsky's (2008) definition of individual-level happiness with Barsade and Knight's (2015) research on group-level affect, family happiness is defined as the shared experience of joy, contentment, and well-being spread across a family, combined with a sense that family life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile. It is hypothesized that families who undertake the FPPIs will show improvements in family happiness post the intervention.

Method

Sample and procedure

Three hundred families from Canada, the United States, Hong Kong, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand took part in this study (family constellation = 52% nuclear, 30% blended, 18% single parent). The number of family members ranged from two to six, parent ages ranged from 30 to 57, and children's ages ranged from 10 to 19.

Following the method of recruiting participants via a positive psychology website (Seligman et al., 2005), an invitation was sent to parents who had subscribed to the

Strength Switch,² website, a site that focuses on strength-based parenting. Families who registered their willingness were emailed details about the study and a link to the online survey put together by the researcher that contained the adapted Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and demographic questions for families to complete. The recruitment site was kept open until 300 families had been recruited.

Each family member completed the online survey and the SHS scores were totaled to calculate the average group happiness score for each family. Families were then randomly allocated into one of three groups: control group ($n = 100$), Strengths Family Contract (SFC) intervention ($n = 100$) or Strong Ancestry-Strong Family (SASF) intervention ($n = 100$).³ Families in the intervention groups were sent instructions for their specific two-week activities. Post-testing occurred six weeks after pre-test for all three groups, which means that both intervention groups completed the post-test survey one month after FPPI completion. The one-month time frame for post-testing follows that of other studies testing the effects of PPIs (see Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Mongrain & Alsemo-Matthews, 2012; Sergeant & Mongrain, 2011; Wellenzohn et al., 2016).

Seventy-four families did not complete the post-test survey ($n = 30$ from the control group; $n = 23$ from the SFC group; $n = 21$ from the SASF group). Chi-square analysis found no significant differences in the non-completion of post-test rates across the three groups: chi-square = 2.40(2), $p > .100$. Moreover, statistical testing revealed no differences in family demographics (e.g., family constellation, family member size, and age of parents; $p > .100$) or baseline levels of happiness ($p > .100$) between the families who completed the full study and those who dropped out. However, there was a difference in age of children, with families of teens more likely to drop out. The major reason given for families who dropped out was being too busy/competing time commitments.

Interventions

Strengths Family Contract (SFC)

The SFC intervention is a strength-based, goal-setting exercise conducted over a two-week time frame that focuses on using strengths to create family happiness. The SFC intervention was designed around the family's emotion sub-system by instructing families to set goals on 'what makes us happy' and by fostering conversations about emotions over the two-week period. The SFC emphasizes approach goals (e.g., increase cooperation) rather than avoidance goals (e.g., reduce conflict) given

that approach goals promote motivation and persistence (Elliot, 2008).

This intervention takes families through the following five steps:

- (1) A group discussion about what makes their family happy.
- (2) Use of the points raised in step 1 to set two goals for how they can be a happier family.
- (3) A discussion of how each family member can use their individual strengths to support the family's goals.
- (4) Family members spotting strengths in others over the course of the week.
- (5) A weekly conversation to reflect on the progress made towards the goal and the strengths used by each family member towards the goals.

Families in this intervention group received pre-made handout sheets for each of these four steps (sent via email). The goals were written on the handout and families were encouraged to place this where family members would regularly see it (e.g., the refrigerator or the inside of the front door). At the end of week one and week two, families completed step 4 with pre-made reflection handouts that allowed them to discuss their goals and the strengths contributions of each family member.

Strong Ancestry-Strong Family (SASF). The SASF intervention is an appreciative inquiry exercise (Cooperrider & Hetzel Silbert, 2008) conducted over a two-week time frame that focuses on the family's meaning sub-system. By guiding families to reflect on their resilience, strengths, and family identity, the intervention was designed to give the family meaning of 'who we are as a family' and help them see how their family resilience fits into the broader scheme of life and where they sit relative to other families in terms of their resilience.

This intervention involves four steps:

- (1) Coming together twice in week one to share stories of the strengths and resilience of their ancestors and relatives.
- (2) Coming together at the end of the week one to map the family stories onto the strengths family tree handout.
- (3) Family members spotting strengths in others over the course of the two weeks.
- (4) Coming together at the end of week two to discuss the identity of their own (i.e., immediate) family, based upon the strengths tree map of their ancestors.

The strengths that they felt their family had inherited from their ancestors (e.g., 'we are a loyal family'; 'we are an adventurous family') were written down on the pre-made handout sheet and families were encouraged to place this where family members would regularly see it (e.g., the refrigerator or the inside of the front door).

Measures

Family happiness was assessed using an author-adapted measure of Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999) Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS). This four-item scale is completed by choosing one of seven options that finish a given sentence fragment. Items were adapted to place the family as the referent point/unit of analysis. For example, 'Some families are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe your family?' Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each family who completed the survey across the three study groups. Cronbach's alpha was 0.76 for the SFC group, 0.77 for the SASF group, and 0.79 for the control group.

Results

Prior to testing the influence of the FPPIs on family happiness, assumptions were checked. Inspection of histograms, Q-Q plots, boxplots, and scatterplots revealed no systematic departures from normality or non-linearity and inspection of residuals supported homoscedasticity.

Table 1 displays the mean and standard deviations of baseline and post-test family happiness for the three study groups. Differences in family happiness across the three groups at post-intervention were tested using an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with baseline levels of family happiness as the covariate for the three groups. Baseline levels of family happiness showed no significant effects on post-test happiness: $F(1, 226) = 2.44, p = .120$. At post-test, family happiness differed among the three conditions: $F(2, 226) = 15.27, p < .001; \eta^2 = .30$. Tukey's Honest Significant Difference test was then used to identify where differences amongst groups occurred. At post-test, families in the

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pre and Post Family Happiness Scores across Three Study Groups.

	Control		SFC Intervention		SASF Intervention	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Family Happiness (T1)	19.69	4.73	17.95	3.86	16.88	4.40
2. Family Happiness (T2)	16.51	3.38	21.12	3.47	19.72	6.15

Note. T1 = Pre-intervention; T2 = Post-intervention.

control group reported significantly lower levels of family happiness than families who undertook the SFC intervention ($p < .001$), or the SASF intervention ($p < .001$). There were no significant differences in family happiness between the two intervention groups ($p = .139$).

Discussion

Despite the call of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) for the field of positive psychology to promote flourishing families, limited research exists on FPPIs that teach positive skills (element 1), enhance positive outcomes (element 2), and are suitable for mainstream families (element 3). This means that many family interventions are still deficit oriented (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Bringing together the tenets of positive psychology and family systems, the current study developed and tested two new strength-based interventions that cover all three elements of an FPPI and tap into a family's emotion and meaning sub-systems. In order to address the criticism that positive psychology is too individualistic (Ciarrochi et al., 2016), and to capitalize on past research showing that well-being can occur at the group level (Barsade & Knight, 2015; Blgbee, 1992), a collective positive outcome was assessed, that of family-level happiness.

Changing family systems through FPPIs

Families are 'relational systems' (Olson et al., 1983) governed by the principle of 'wholeness' (i.e., the whole is greater than the sum of the parts) (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Hence, researchers in positive psychology have the opportunity to design interventions that change the family unit as a whole, in addition to the more typical form of interventions that have aimed to change the characteristics of individual family members such as mindful parenting interventions (De Bruin et al., 2015; Ferraioli & Harris, 2013) or interventions that work on a child's social-emotional/behavioral dysfunction (Sanders et al., 2014).

According to systems theory, when one aspect of the system changes, this has a knock-on effect to other parts of the system and leads to new 'recursive cycles' (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). In layperson's terms, introducing a new goal, new elements or new interaction patterns into a family alters the dynamics of the family system and, thus, shifts the family into a new state of being. In the current study, the new goal of family happiness together with the new elements of strength-spotting and resilience reflection introduced by the FPPIs shifted the families to a higher level of family happiness.

The Strength Family Contract intervention was designed to boost happiness by positively altering a family's emotion sub-system. The emotion sub-system regulates the family's emotional climate through shaping communication patterns and allowing the expression of emotions. The SFC introduced an emotional goal into the family system – that of 'being happy.' The intervention aimed to support this goal by altering a number of family elements and interactions. For example, a series of new practices and routines (i.e., system elements) were embedded into the life of the family over the two-week duration such as conversations about emotions, goal setting, weekly family reflection time, and use of visuals in the home (e.g., family goals and contract). Additionally, the SFC intervention aimed to positively alter family interactions through techniques such as the intentional use of strength-spotting and praise amongst family members (Waters, 2015, 2016).

The Strong Ancestry-Strong Family (SASF) intervention was designed to boost happiness by helping families tap into their meaning sub-system. The meaning sub-system shapes, and is shaped by, the way a family collectively defines and interfaces with adversity over time and can be influenced by 'legacies from families of origin or earlier generations that are integrated into families and may represent values' (Henry et al., 2015, p. 35). As with the SFC, the intervention worked on altering aspects of the family system such as goals, elements, and interactions. The goal of the SASF was to determine the resilience of the family. The new practices and rituals (i.e., elements) enacted by the family included sharing stories, mapping the family stories onto the strengths family tree, time spent together reflecting on family resilience, and the use of visuals in the household (e.g., strengths family tree). As well as injecting a goal and new elements, the SASF fostered new interactions amongst family members through strength spotting and group reflections of the collective identity of their own family. Both FPPIs incorporate Black and Lobo (2008) family system aspects of positive outlook, communication, time together, and routines and rituals.

In addition to explaining the current results through system theory, Fredrickson's (2001, 2013) broaden-and-build theory provides a lens through which to understand the increases in family happiness. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions create two different outcomes based along two different time lines: (a) effects that occur 'in the moment'; and (b) effects that occur over time. In the moment that someone experiences positive emotions, their thought-action repertoires are broadened, which then changes the way they think and interact with others at that point in time. Over the long term, the momentary cognitive and social benefits of

positive emotions accumulate to build up the accrual of intrapersonal and interpersonal resources.

It may be that moments of positive emotions (e.g., pride, love, curiosity, wonder) were cultivated during the two-week interventions through the positive focus that the interventions gave to the family, through the strength-based communication activities, through spending time together, and through the new family reflections rituals. It may also be that during these moments of positive emotions, family members broadened their view of the family (e.g., 'we are a resilient family') and broadened their interactions with each other in appreciative, strength-focused ways. As the benefits of these positive emotions accrued over the course of the intervention, new resources in the form of strengths knowledge and a newfound sense of meaning and family identity may have built up over the month, thus making the family happier.

Study limitations and suggestions for future research

The results of this study must be considered within its limitations. Families were drawn from the Strength Switch subscriber list and, as such, it may be that they were already using a strength-based approach, which could have contributed to higher gains in happiness because they were able to utilize their strengths more effectively across the two-week time period. Alternatively, the sample may be a more conservative test of the effect of FPPIs on family happiness and perhaps it is families low on strengths who would show the greatest gains in happiness. Future research could examine prior use of strengths within the family as a moderating variable to the effect of FPPIs. Future research would also benefit from looking at other family-level outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and family resilience, as well as adding in mediators such as trust, meaning and frequency of interaction.

Although an increase in family happiness was found one month after the interventions, the capacity of these FPPIs to maintain sustained family happiness is not known. Future studies can observe the long-term outcomes of FPPIs on family systems. With longer time frames, future researchers could also include a measurement of positive emotions to directly test the suggested broaden-and-build effects outlined above and how they create positive change in family systems.

Conclusion

Kirby (2016) argues that evidence-based programs are 'an essential and crucial pathway to building nurturing family

environments' (p. 151). Kern et al. (2019) argue that the design of positive psychology interventions would be strengthened by adopting a systems approach. Taking these ideas together, the current study evaluated two new evidence-based FPPIs grounded in system theory, which were found to promote higher levels of family happiness. It is hoped that this study motivates more researchers to respond to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) call to promote flourishing families. More broadly, it is hoped that this study prompts future researchers to consider all three elements of a PPI outlined in the introduction of this paper when designing interventions (skills, outcome, group targeted) as well as to measure *collective* aspects of wellbeing and to work with the 'wholeness' principle of systems theory in order to help families, schools, workplaces, and other institutions create positive change.

Notes

1. For further thinking on the elements of PPIs, see Owens and Waters (2021) in this special edition, who outline nine classifications of youth-based PPIs based upon treatment approaches that either aim to decrease or prevent problems/deficits/disorders or seek to promote positive processes and outcomes.
2. See <https://www.strengthswitch.com/>.
3. ANOVA and chi-square analysis found no differences in family demographics across the three experimental groups in terms of number of children, parent age, and family constellation.

Disclosure statement

Lea Waters has published a book on her strength-based parenting research and has been a speaker both pro bono and remunerated on the topic of strength-based parenting. The current research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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