Engagement with Beauty and Depressive Symptoms

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Abstract

Successful positive psychology counseling for increasing well-being and decreasing depression have often focused on clients reflecting about their experiences of forgiveness, gratitude, or hope. Would reflecting on experiences of beauty also decrease depressive symptoms? A quasi-experimental group logged biweekly reflections on natural, artistic, and moral beauty for 10 weeks; two comparison groups did not. Although the quasi-experimental group significantly gained in engagement with beauty, no group changed in level of depressive symptoms.

Keywords: beauty, depression, positive psychology
Engagement with Beauty and Depressive Symptoms

One of the main tenets of the positive psychology approach to counseling is to focus on the positive rather than the negative; to focus on clients’ strengths rather than their weaknesses (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Magyar-Moe, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Counselors with a positive psychology approach tend to focus on increasing happiness and life satisfaction, more than focusing on decreasing depression. However, this does not mean that positive psychology counselors are unconcerned with dealing with depression. In fact, in a seminal paper on evaluating positive psychology interventions, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005), used the CES-D (Ladoff, 1977) measure of depressive symptoms as a dependent variable. Their studies demonstrated that two positive psychology approaches, using signature strengths in new ways, and writing about three good things that happened each day for a week, can significantly decrease depression for up to at least 6 months. Indeed, counselors are calling for an integration of cognitive-behavior therapy methods with positive psychology interventions (Karwoski, Garratt, & Ilardi, 2006).

Positive Psychology and Depression

One focus of the positive psychology movement has been on 24 character strengths, which are similar to traits, and are derived from six fundamental cross-culturally relevant virtues: knowledge and wisdom; courage; temperance; transcendence; love or humanity; and justice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Research has shown that psychological work with several of these character strengths can either lessen depressive symptoms or at least reduce negative emotions. Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) performed a meta-analysis of 25 separate studies, with a collective N of 1,812 participants, which addressed alleviating depression through the use of positive
psychology interventions (PPI). They demonstrated that 80% of the effect sizes from these 25 studies showed that PPI not only worked but “worked well” for lessening depression (p. 482).

In particular, counseling work with the character strength of forgiveness, a component of the virtue of love/humanity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), lessens depressive symptoms (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Basking, 2004; Reed & Enright, 2006). Therapeutic work with the character strength of gratitude, derived from the virtue of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), lessens depression (Seligman et al., 2005) as well as decreasing negative emotions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Hope therapy, another character strength based on the virtue of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), also has been shown to decrease depressive symptoms (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, & Snyder, 2006).

Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006) emphasized application of the character strengths of forgiveness, gratitude, and hope in their counseling with clients diagnosed with major depressive disorder. They also individualized counseling by having all clients complete the VIA Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), identifying each client’s specific signature strengths, and working with clients to deploy their strengths in new ways. In their randomized study, the clients receiving positive psychology counseling (PPT; \( N = 11 \) completed pretests and posttests) showed significantly less depressive symptoms than did the “treatment as usual” group (TAU; \( N = 9 \) completers) or the “treatment as usual with anti-depressant medication” group (TAUMED; \( N = 12 \) completers), after 10-12 weeks of counseling. Additionally, they performed a study with \( N = 40 \) mild to moderately depressed college students; half these participants were randomly assigned to PPT group counseling, receiving six weeks of counseling, in two-hour blocks once a week, and the other half became a no-treatment control group. After the six weeks the PPT
group scored in the non-depressed range on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961), whereas the control group continued to score in the mild to moderately depressed range. The PPT group members continued to be significantly less depressed than the control group members at 6 month and 12 month follow up with the BDI.

Therefore a variety of positive psychology studies show that employment of the character strengths of forgiveness, gratitude, and hope will aid in the treatment of depression for many, if not most, clients. Additionally, identifying a client’s top five character strengths (their signature strengths), and encouraging the client to use them in new ways, also reduces depressive symptoms (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2006). However, are there other character strengths, besides forgiveness, gratitude, and hope, whose use will lead to lessened depression? In particular, does an emphasis on appreciation of and engagement with beauty decrease depressive symptoms?

**Appreciation of Beauty as a Character Strength**

Appreciation of, or engagement with, beauty has been shown to be associated with many desirable traits and abilities. A study with 206 participants demonstrated that engagement with beauty predicts higher levels of spiritual transcendence ($r = .39; p < .001$), lower levels of materialism ($r = -.18; p < .01$), as well as higher levels of the trait of gratitude ($r = .47; p < .001$) (Diessner, Parsons, Solom, Frost, & Davidson, 2008). In a study with 135 subjects it has been shown that engagement with beauty correlates positively with mindfulness ($r = .27; p = .002$), the quality of being alert, serene, and attuned to the moment (Cattron, 2009). Smith’s study, with 115 adults, demonstrated that empathy, the key to successful interpersonal relationships, significantly and positively correlates with appreciation of beauty ($r = .46; p < .001$) (Smith, Mayton, & Diessner, 2009).
Harvard philosopher Elaine Scarry (1999) has argued that justice and beauty are closely connected. A study (Diessner, Davis, & Toney, 2009) with 136 adult empirically validated her argument. There is a significant relationship between the character strength of fairness, that is, having the personality trait of fairness, and engagement with beauty ($r = .35, p < .001$).

Isaacowitz, Vaillant, and Seligman (2003) analyzed the relationship between satisfaction with life and various character strengths, including appreciation of beauty. Their 89 participants, average age 78, were all members of the longitudinal Grant Study of Harvard Graduates, and their levels of appreciation of beauty predicted life satisfaction ($r = .38; p < .001$).

An intriguing psychological quality of beauty is that it may simultaneously have a calming, peaceful effect, as well as a stimulating, exciting effect. The existential psychologist Rollo May, in his text *My Quest for Beauty* (1985), emphasizes that in the beauty experience we are joyfully exhilarated, while at the same time feeling a sense of peace and timeless repose. Armstrong and Detwieler-Bedell (2008), in their review paper on beauty as an emotion, interpret research related to differentiating the pretty from the beautiful, and conclude, “The fluent processing of pretty stimuli signals familiarity, lowering arousal and leading to a calm pleasure. The dysfluent processing of beautiful stimuli, as well as the disruption of pressing expectations, increases arousal, leading to an exhilarated pleasure” (p. 322).

DeTommaso et al.’s (2008) neuroaesthetic study of event-related potentials may be explained as also showing a simultaneously peaceful and energized state in the brain when perceiving beauty. Scalp electrodes on their subjects showed larger P3 amplitudes when looking at both paintings and geometrical shapes that they had previously judged as beautiful, over paintings and shapes they had judged as neutral or ugly, thus showing greater arousal when experiencing beauty. A second part of DeTommaso et al.’s study was to examine reaction times
following a beautiful, neutral, or ugly stimulus, and the beautiful stimuli caused the slowest reaction time. This may simply be a distraction effect of beauty, or it could align with the idea that experiences of beauty both calm us (slow our reaction time), and stimulate us (arouse our neurons).

Further research by DeTommaso in Italy (DeTommaso, Sardaro, & Livrea, 2008) has demonstrated that looking at paintings that subjects had previously judged as beautiful actually increases allowed for a greater tolerance of physical pain. Paintings the subjects had judged as neutral or ugly, however, did not have this effect. The authors of this study argue that this consequence of beauty on pain thresholds goes beyond the influence of merely being distracted by beautiful paintings; the perceived beauty in the paintings actually causes the ability to tolerate greater levels of pain.

Jonathan Haidt’s research (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Silvers & Haidt, 2008) has shown that becoming engaged with acts of moral beauty, that is, appreciating others’ virtuous behavior, such as self-sacrificial acts of love, mercy, or justice, creates the emotion of elevation. The emotion of elevation then creates a prosocial action tendency for people to desire to become better human beings, and to desire to serve the needs of others. If one simply admires another’s behavior, without feeling their actions to be morally beautiful, it does not create the emotion of elevation. Additionally, experiencing the emotion of elevation increases the production of the neurotransmitter oxytocin, thus creating feelings of love and bonding.

In terms of the five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992), with a web-based study of 3199 adults, the more highly one is engaged with beauty, the more likely one is to be agreeable ($r = .32; p < .001$) and open-minded ($r = .36; p < .001$). Engagement with beauty appears unrelated to emotional stability ($r = .01; p = .45$); minimally related to conscientiousness
(r = .06; p = .001) and has a low correlation with extraversion (r = .21; p < .001) (Diessner, 2010).

Schwartz (1992) has identified 10 value domains that are relevant across many cultures: power and achievement (the two domains of self-enhancement), stimulation and self-direction (the two domains of openness to change), universalism and benevolence (the two domains of self-transcendence), conformity, tradition, and security (the three domains of conservation) and hedonism. Engagement with beauty is considered a component of the virtue of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and Haidt and Keltner (2004) have predicted it would be related to other character strengths of self-transcendence, such as spirituality. Schwartz (1992) has identified two of his 10 value domains, universalism and benevolence, as a higher order value type of self-transcendence. In a web-based study of 2594 participants (Diessner, 2010), the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner et al., 2008) correlated higher with universalism (r = .46; p < .001) and with benevolence (r = .42; p < .001) than with any of Schwartz’ other eight domains. Additionally, although Schwartz (1992) states his cross-cultural data collected in 20 countries showed an “absence of evidence for a cross-culturally consistent spirituality type of values” (p. 36), it is reasonable to suppose that a combination of the values of “a spiritual life,” “inner harmony,” and “meaning in life” make up a spiritual cluster. That spirituality cluster showed a correlation of r = .46 (p < .001) with the EBS. Correlations between the EBS total score and the Schwartz’s other 8 classic value domains were low, ranging from the lowest of -.09 (power) to the highest of .18 (self-direction). These findings affirm that engagement with beauty is a character strength of the virtue of transcendence, showing moderately strong associations with the self-transcendent value domains of benevolence, universalism, and spirituality; yet low to very low associations with all other value domains found in Schwartz’s comprehensive cross-
Therefore we see that engagement with beauty is related to hope, gratitude, spirituality, empathy, mindfulness, less materialism, satisfaction with life, agreeableness, open-mindedness, pain tolerance, universality, benevolence, and the moral emotion of elevation. But what research has been published concerning beauty and depression?

**Beauty and Depression**

There appear to be two published studies regarding the relationship of depression and appreciation of beauty. One is a reliability and validity study concerning the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner, Parsons, Solom, Frost, & Davidson, 2008). In that study, with 206 undergraduates, the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, et al., 1961) correlated -.12 (p < .05) with the EBS. This is a fairly low negative correlation, and in fact, after a Bonferroni type adjustment in the Diessner et al. (2008) study, it was considered non-significant. Based on that study it appears there is no relationship between depression and engagement with beauty.

The other published study concerning depression and appreciation of beauty was conducted by Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006). This retrospective web-based study of 2087 adults found that the character strength of appreciation of beauty ameliorates the negative effects of psychological disorders, increasing life satisfaction among depressed persons who score high on the subscale of appreciation of beauty on the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Of the 24 character strengths measured by the VIA-IS only two had this type of influence: love of learning and appreciation of beauty. Peterson et al. (2006) summarized their study thus:

Bravery, kindness, and humor are associated with a return to life satisfaction in the case
of physical illness, as are appreciation of beauty and love of learning in the case of psychological disorder. We suggest that deliberate interventions to increase these particular strengths may help people flourish following a major health crisis. (p. 25)

Therefore, based on these two studies (Diessner et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2006) it appears that depression is unrelated to appreciation of beauty in a small college sample (N = 206), yet in a larger web-based sample (N = 2087) appreciation of beauty appears to assist persons who have been diagnosed with depression to overcome it and return to a sense of life satisfaction. We wished to further extend the research on the relationship of engagement with beauty and issues of lessening depressive symptoms. In particular we asked the question: Would an increase of engagement with beauty also decrease depressive symptoms? And we wondered: Would keeping a log of beauty experiences increase levels of engagement with beauty?

Logging Character Strength Experiences

Several positive psychology studies have shown that writing about, or logging, experiences of using a character strength or virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) can increase positive affect and decrease negative affect. For instance, in a study with 119 Japanese female undergraduates, Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, and Fredrickson (2006) had an intervention group of participants keep track of (log) each act of kindness that they performed for one week, and the comparison group did not keep such a log. Subjects in the intervention group, at one month follow-up, showed significantly more subjective happiness than the subjects in the comparison group.

One of the experimental studies reported by Emmons and McCullough (2003) investigated the effects of gratitude on 65 adults with neuromuscular disease. Once a week for three weeks the participants wrote down a list of “up to five things in your life that you are
grateful or thankful for” (p. 379) and they also completed, on a daily basis, ratings of positive and negative affect. Although they did not measure depression directly, the participants completing the weekly gratitude log showed significantly less negative affect (such as “bitter, sad, and afraid” [p. 385]) after 21 days than did the control group, which did not complete a gratitude log. The gratitude logging group also demonstrated significant greater positive affect than the control group.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) had 67 introductory psychology students log their experiences of gratefulness or write about and log their visions of their best possible selves (BPS) or simply write about the details of their lives (the control group). In their review of the efficacy of writing about “best possible selves” they noted that “previous research has consistently shown that disclosive writing has numerous benefits for well-being, health, and emotional adjustment” (p. 75). They randomly assigned their participants to one of three writing (logging) conditions, and asked them to write about gratitude experiences or BPS or details of their life. The researchers mildly suggested to the participants that they perform these exercises twice more in the next two weeks of the study; however, on the average, the participants voluntarily logged their experiences three times a week for two weeks. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) found that all three of the exercises immediately reduced negative affect in the participants. Only the BPS logging exercise, however, created a significant increase in positive affect.

Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, and Parsons (2006) conducted a quasi-experimental study in which college students in an intervention class (N = 29) completed beauty logs once a week for 12 weeks (briefly writing about experiences of natural, artistic, and moral beauty); the comparison group of students (N = 23) did not write such beauty logs. Participants in the
intervention class were told that the beauty logs were optional, but that completing them would earn them extra credit points in the class. Over the course of the 12 weeks of the study, the intervention group showed significant gains on trait hope (Snyder et al., 1991) and also significant gains on engagement with beauty (Diessner, Parsons, Solom, Frost, & Davidson, 2008), when compared to the comparison group.

Therefore it appears that logging experiences of kindness (Otake et al., 2006), logging experiences of gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), and logging about our best possible self (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006), all lead to either positive outcomes, or at least less negative outcomes. And specifically, once-a-week logging experiences of beauty (Diessner et al., 2006) leads to an increase in trait hope and greater engagement with beauty.

Research Question

Will 10 weeks of bi-weekly logging of experiences of natural beauty, artistic beauty, and moral/behavioral beauty lead to a decrease in depressive symptoms?

Method

Participants

An initial \( N = 109 \) participants completed the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner, et al., 2008) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) as pretests in four sections of PSYC 205 Developmental Psychology at Lewis-Clark State College, in Lewiston, Idaho. One section served as the quasi-experimental group; one section served as a comparison group and was taught by the same professor who taught the quasi-experimental group’s section; and a different professor taught two other sections, thus forming another comparison group. Of the \( N = 28 \) in the quasi-experimental group, \( N = 22 \)
completed usable pretests and posttests; this group was comprised of 71% women, 29% men, age $M = 21.9$ ($SD = 6.8$), 42% education majors, 29% social science majors, 8% natural sciences majors, 4% humanities, 4% vocational, 4% business, and 8% undeclared; 68% White, 17% mixed ethnicity, 8% Latino/a, 4% Native American, and 4% not reporting.

Of the $N = 31$ in the same-professor comparison group, $N = 25$ completed usable pretests and posttests; this group was comprised of 58% women, 42% men, age $M = 20.6$ ($SD = 5.1$), 46% education majors, 35% social science majors, 8% natural sciences majors, 4% humanities, and 8% undeclared; 66% White, 15% mixed ethnicity; 4% Asian, 4% Latino/a, 4% Pacific Islander, 4% other, and 4% not reporting. In the other-professor comparison group, $N = 50$ began the study, and $N = 20$ completed it. This group comprised 75% women, 25% men, age $M = 25.3$ ($SD = 8.1$), 35% social science majors, 25% education majors, 20% natural sciences majors, 5% business, and 15% undeclared; 60% White, 20% mixed ethnicity; 5% Asian, 5% Native American, 5% Pacific Islander, and 5% not reporting. Attrition from the study was partially due to the Fall 2009 H1N1 swine flu season. However, t-tests demonstrated no significant differences among any of the groups, on either the EBS or CESD, between those that completed the post-tests and those that either dropped the class or missed the post-test class day.

**Measures**

**The Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS).** The EBS is a 14-item self-report scale indicating various levels of cognitive and emotional engagement concerning natural, artistic, and moral beauty. Although there are other instruments that measure appreciation of beauty as a subscale, the EBS is the only scale extant that is devoted to measuring the trait of engagement with beauty (Diessner et al., 2008).
The EBS uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “very unlike me” to “very much like me,” on questions such as, “When perceiving beauty in nature I feel changes in my body, such as a lump in my throat, an expansion in my chest, faster heartbeat, or other bodily responses,” “When perceiving beauty in a work of art I feel something like a spiritual experience, perhaps a sense of oneness or being united with the universe or a love of the entire world,” and “When perceiving an act of moral beauty I find that I desire to become a better person.”

The EBS provides a total scale score and also has three subscales tapping engagement with natural beauty (4 items), artistic beauty (4 items) and moral beauty (6 items). Studies of the EBS with an American sample ($N = 206$; 58% female) yielded a total score internal consistency of .91, and test-retest reliability of .79; EBS Natural Beauty subscale $\alpha$ of .80; Artistic Beauty subscale $\alpha$ from .88; and the EBS Moral Beauty subscale $\alpha$ from .89; test-retest reliability correlations ranged from .67-.79 on the subscales. International studies with translations of the EBS, in Iran, Samoa, Germany, Cyprus and Croatia, have shown it to maintain fairly high internal consistency across translations ($\alpha$s from .85-.94) and to have a similar factor structure across cultures (Richel et al., 2008). A variety of concurrent and predictive studies have shown the promising validity of the EBS (Diessner et al., 2009; Diessner et al., 2008; Diessner et al., 2006). In this current study the EBS total score had a Cronbach’s alpha of .89 on the pretest and .93 on the posttest.

**Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (CES-D).** The CES-D (Radloff, 1977) is one of the most widely used measures of depressive symptoms extant in the world today, and its reliability and validity are well established (Eaton, Smith, Ybarra, Muntaner, & Tien, 2004). It is a relatively short scale, with each of 20 depressive symptoms rated by the subjects on a 4-point scale, from “rarely or none of the time,” to “most or all the time.” Its
internal consistency is high (alphas of .84 to .90), and has adequate test-retest reliability (correlations of .51 to .67). It has strong concurrent and predictive validity (Radloff, 1977; Eaton et al., 2004). In this current study the CES-D total score had a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 on the pretest and .91 on the posttest.

**Procedure**

One section of a Developmental Psychology course served as an intervention group and other sections served as comparison groups. The intervention, or quasi-experimental, group completed bi-weekly beauty logs, and was taught by the principal investigator. To control for teacher style and personality, a comparison group section was taught by the same professor who taught the quasi-experimental group’s section, but this group did not complete beauty logs. To add further control, a different professor’s two sections of Developmental Psychology served as a third comparison group. All three groups completed the EBS and CES-D at the beginning of the semester, and 11 weeks later, completed the EBS and CES-D again.

The intervention group participants completed beauty logs twice a week for 10 weeks, for a total of 20 completed beauty logs. The high completion rate of 98% of all logs due may have been because the course syllabus stated that completing the beauty logs was required and students earned course credit for completing and turning in their logs to the professor. Instructions in the course syllabus stated that students were to identify and describe three aspects of beauty that they personally observed within a week of writing the beauty log. They were asked to write three short paragraphs describing something of beauty from a) nature, b) art or something made by a human, and c) human behavior, that is, beautifully good deeds. The comparison groups did not write any beauty logs.

**Results**
A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between the quasi-experimental group and the comparison groups in regard to changes in depressive symptoms. Although we anticipated decreases in depressive symptoms in the quasi-experimental group, they increased slightly, as they did in the comparison groups as well; thus we dealt with “gain” scores. The CES-D scale scores can range from 0 (not depressed) to a maximum of 60 points (very depressed). The quasi-experimental group increased .41 of a point ($SD = 8.0$); the same-professor comparison group gained .08 points on the CES-D ($SD = 5.9$); and the other-professor comparison group gained 1.8 points ($SD = 10.2$). An ANOVA showed that the quasi-experimental group’s gain in depressive symptoms was not significantly different than either comparison group’s gain $F(2, 66) = .276, p = .76$ (partial $\eta^2 = .009$).

A one-way analysis of variance was also conducted to evaluate the relationships among the quasi-experimental group and the comparison groups in regard to gain scores on engagement with beauty (total EBS score can range from 7 to 98 points). The quasi-experimental group gained 4.3 points ($SD = 6.9$); the same-professor comparison group gained 1.9 points ($SD = 8.3$); and the other-professor comparison group decreased 8.2 points ($SD = 13.2$). The ANOVA was significant, $F(2, 66) = 9.78, p < .001$ (partial $\eta^2 = .23$). Because the variances among the three groups were fairly widely dispersed, we did not assume homogeneity of variance, and thus used Dunnett’s C test for the post hoc comparisons. Dunnett’s C demonstrated no significant difference between the EBS gain scores for the quasi-experimental group and the same-professor comparison group (95% confidence interval -3.23 to 7.94); however the other-professor comparison group was significantly different, at the .05 level, from both the quasi-experimental (95% confidence interval -20.86 to -4.09) and same-professor comparison groups (95% confidence interval -18.71 to -1.53).
Discussion

Based on the results of this study we conclude that bi-weekly logging of beauty experiences did not lessen depressive symptoms, at least with our particular sample of participants. The quasi-experimental group appeared to gain 0.4 of a point on the CES-D, the same-professor comparison group about a 0.08 of a point, and the other-professor comparison group gained 1.8 points. However, there were no significant differences among the groups, indicating that there was no change in depressive symptoms during the course of the intervention semester for any group. Additionally, although the quasi-experimental group gained 4.3 points on the EBS, this was not significantly different than the 1.9 point gain that the same-professor group made (who did not complete beauty logs); both of these groups made significant gains in engagement with beauty when compared to the other-professor group which dropped 8.2 points on the EBS.

Perhaps logging about beauty experiences simply does not lessen depressive symptoms. Or, it could be that we failed to design optimal timing for writing the beauty logs. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) have emphasized that “optimal timing” is “critical” (p. 125). They review two studies, one concerning acts of kindness, and one concerning reflecting on gratefulness. In the acts of kindness study they asked participants to either commit five acts of kindness in one day, or to spread the five acts of kindness out over a week. The participants that did all their acts of kindness in one day showed significantly increased happiness, and the participants that chose to spread them out over the week slightly decreased in happiness levels. Likewise in the gratefulness study: subjects were either assigned to a condition in which they contemplated things for which they were grateful once a week or were assigned to do it three times a week. The participants in the once-a-week condition showed significant gains in well-
being over a six week period, whereas the participants in the three-times-a-week condition decreased in well-being over the same six weeks. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) conclude, “perhaps counting their blessings several times a week led people to become bored with the practice, finding it less fresh and meaningful over time” (p. 126). Likewise, perhaps logging beauty experiences twice a week became boring and less meaningful; perhaps we should have asked them to only log beauty experiences once a week.

On the other hand, an earlier study that used logging of beauty experiences once a week demonstrated both gains in trait hope and gains in engagement with beauty in comparison to a control group (Diessner, et al., 2006). However, that earlier study showed an average gain of 2.9 points ($SD = 6.5$) on the Engagement with Beauty Scale (EBS; Diessner et al., 2008) for the intervention group and drop of 2.9 ($SD = 6.7$) for the comparison group; the current study showed an average gain of 4.3 points ($SD = 6.9$) on the EBS for the intervention group that logged beauty experience twice week and a drop of 8.2 points ($SD = 13.2$) in the other-professor comparison group that did not log beauty experiences. This seems to indicate that logging beauty experiences twice a week is at least as, if not more, effective than once a week in regard to increasing engagement with beauty. Yet it did not influence depressive symptoms.

There also appears to be a professor effect in play. The same-professor comparison group gained 1.9 points on the EBS ($SD = 8.3$), which was not significantly different from the 4.3 points gained in the intervention group; yet the two groups taught by the same professor made substantially higher gains than did the other-professor comparison group (a drop of 8.2 points). It could be that the professor who taught the intervention group, and one of the comparison groups, unconsciously emphasizes beauty in the content and method of instruction.

Another factor that could have influenced the results was pressuring the intervention
upon the students: the beauty logs were a required course assignment in the quasi-experimental group. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) have emphasized and explained the importance of self-concordant motivation in successful positive psychology interventions. People tend to increase positive affect and decrease negative affect when they believe they have freely chosen their behavior. Rewards such as the course credit given for completing each beauty log can also ruin intrinsic motivation. Therefore, even though the intervention group had a gain in engagement with beauty, it may have felt forced upon them, and thus did not reduce negative affect or depressive symptoms.

One of the main approaches to positive psychology counseling and interventions is to complete the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), identify the client’s top five character strengths (their “signature strengths”) from the VIA-IS, and work with the client to employ those character strengths in new ways (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2006). This is an individualizing approach and can fulfill Sheldon and Lyubomirsky’s (2006) warning, based on their research findings, that “the ‘fit’ of the [positive psychology] exercise with the participant’s personality, interests, and goals played an important role, suggesting that happiness seekers would be well advised to carefully consider their choices among possible happiness-increasing strategies” (p. 80). Although in our literature review above we showed that interventions with the character strengths forgiveness, gratitude, and hope all have been successful with lessening depression and/or negative affect, it could be that appreciation of beauty is not the kind of character strength that can be used indiscriminately with any and all clients. Perhaps logging appreciation of beauty experiences would be an effective depression intervention if appreciation of beauty were one of the client’s top strengths. This should be studied in future research.
We do not want to discourage counselors from addressing issues of engagement with beauty with their clients. No study has ever been published on increasing levels of engagement with beauty and its influence on depressive symptoms, and this present study is simply a first attempt to examine it. As shown in the literature review above, engagement with beauty is associated with many psychologically desirable states and traits, such as hope, gratitude, spirituality, less materialism, empathy, mindfulness, elevation, agreeableness, open-mindedness, universalism, and benevolence. Beauty is a powerful force and intrinsically worthwhile to the well lived life (Danto; 2003; May, 1985; Winston, 2006, 2010).

Rollo May (1985) on “what is beauty”:

Beauty is the experience that gives us a sense of joy and a sense of peace simultaneously. Other happenings give us joy and afterwards a peace, but in beauty these are the same experience. Beauty is serene and at the same exhilarating; it increases one’s sense of being alive. Beauty gives us not only a feeling of wonder; it imparts to us at the same moment a timelessness, a repose—which is why we speak of beauty as being eternal. (p. 20)

Philosopher of art and aesthetics Arthur Danto (2003) has explained:

I came to view that in writing about beauty as a philosopher, I was addressing the deepest kind of issue there is. … beauty is the only one of the aesthetic qualities that is also a virtue, like truth and goodness. It is not simply among the values we live by, but one of the values that defines what a fully human life means. (p. 14-15)
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