








Research Article

The Impact of Gratitude Letters and Visits on Relationships, Happiness, Well-Being, and Meaning of Graduate Students

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Abstract

In this mixed-methods research, we examined the practice of writing and delivering letters of gratitude (gratitude visits) and its impact on well-being, happiness, meaning and relationships for students in an online graduate program in psychology. Participants completed assessments and inventories relating to happiness, well-being and meaning in life, including the *Satisfaction with Life Scale*, *Meaning in Life Questionnaire*, *Approaches to Happiness Questionnaire* and open-ended qualitative questions before and after they wrote and delivered gratitude letters. Quantitative analyses found significant increases in meaning in life, satisfaction with life, and approaches to happiness after the gratitude visit intervention. Using a grounded theory qualitative analysis of the data, eight primary themes emerged related to the impact and meaning of gratitude letters on graduate students: (1) the impact on the relationship; (2) positive emotions experienced; (3) experiencing a reciprocal expression of gratitude from the receiver; (4) overcoming uncomfortable emotions; (5) relief, release or liberation after sharing; (6) impact on spiritual growth; (7) unexpected responses; and (8) greater reflection on the meaning of life and a changed perspective. Overall, providing graduate students with the opportunity to engage in gratitude visit interventions was related to greater meaning and well-being. This study suggests implications and recommendations related to the use of positive psychology interventions in educational settings.

Keywords: Positive psychology, gratitude visits, well-being, meaning, relationships

Research has placed gratitude at the pinnacle of positive character strengths and positive psychology interventions as one of the most effective ways to manage emotional health and well-being (Kaufman, 2015). This current study expanded on the existing gratitude research by focusing on writing and delivering gratitude letters, specifically as practiced by participants within a graduate psychology program. The purpose of this mixed method study was to (a) measure the impact of writing and delivering letters of gratitude on participants in an online graduate program in regards to happiness, well-being and life satisfaction and (b) qualitatively explore how completing gratitude

visits impacted participant relationships and sense of meaning in life.

While research currently supports gratitude as an important character trait and positive intervention to improve well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kaufman, 2015; Watkins, 2018), less is known about the specific impact and benefit of writing gratitude letters and delivering them to the recipient (a gratitude visit). In the literature review below, the authors provide a broad overview of the research related to positive interventions and gratitude, focusing on the gratitude visit. The benefits and limits of gratitude will also be addressed.

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The current study, which is a mixed methods study conducted with over 100 students in an online graduate program in psychology, is a unique application of gratitude towards another person, a one-time incident that allows for a specific interaction of focused and well-thought out gratitude. Participants were asked to complete three pre- and post- intervention inventories to measure the impact of gratitude visits on their well-being, happiness, life satisfaction and relationships. Participants were also surveyed qualitatively to explore the impact of the experience in their own words.

Literature Review

What is Gratitude?

Gratitude has a long history, both in religious and philosophical circles, but more recently, psychologists and researchers have provided specific empirical definitions to facilitate scientific experimentation of the construct. Emmons and McCullough (2003), for example, frame gratitude as a two-step process: 1) “recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome” and 2) “recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome” (p. 378). Based partially on Emmons’ definition, Watkins (2018) clarifies his own understanding of gratitude: “An individual experiences the emotion of gratitude when they affirm that something good has happened to them, and they recognize that someone else is largely responsible for this benefit” (p. 8). A framework to understand different dimensions of gratitude is also helpful. Psychologists often categorize gratitude “as an “affective trait” (one’s overall tendency to have a grateful disposition), a mood (daily fluctuations in overall gratitude), and an emotion (a more temporary feeling of gratitude that one may feel after receiving a gift or a favor from someone)” (Allen, 2018, p. 2).

In research, these definitions and distinctions can make a significant difference in understanding the impact, effectiveness, and benefits of various gratitude interventions on overall well-being, meaning and happiness.

Benefits of Gratitude

Gratitude has risen in popularity and impact as one of the most effective psychological and spiritual practices for enhancing overall well-being. After investigating which of 24 character strengths (e.g. courage, love, humility, etc...) were most closely correlated to well-being, Kaufman (2015) reported these findings: “Interestingly, virtually every single one of the 24 character strengths were individually correlated with well-being at the $p < .05$ level of significance” (p. 6). However, Kaufman (2015) continues, “Out of all 24

character strengths, the only significant independent positive predictors of well-being were gratitude and love of learning” (p. 10). Emmons (2013) affirmed that gratitude has one of the strongest connections to well-being and life satisfaction even when compared to other positive virtues, including optimism or compassion. Allen (2018) suggested that gratitude is “the mother of all virtues’ by encouraging the development of other virtues such as patience, humility, and wisdom” (p. 8).

The benefits of gratitude seem endless. According to Emmons (2013), numerous research studies with diverse participant groups have revealed that the practice of gratitude leads to the following: “Increased feelings of energy, alertness, and vigor; success in achieving personal goals; better coping with stress; greater sense of purpose and resilience; solidified and secure social relationships; bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence; and generosity and helpfulness” (p. 10).

Watkins (2018) reported, “According to correlational studies, grateful people tend to be happier, healthier, more likeable, better in dealing with stress, more humble, less narcissistic, more giving, and more spiritual” (p. 5). However, Watkins (2018) provided this caveat, “most of these studies are investigating the relationship of well-being variables with trait gratitude. So we’re not just looking at the good of an occasional feeling of gratitude...these are really relationships with a lifestyle of gratitude” (p. 26). The gold standard of predicting causation, according to Watkins (2018), is true experimental studies conducted as Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs). He found that “over 40 true experimental studies have shown that *gratitude exercises produce increased well-being*” (Watkins, 2018, p. 28).

Gratitude Visits

There are numerous ways to cultivate gratitude, including Grateful Recounting, Grateful Reappraisal and Grateful Expression (Watkins, 2018). Grateful Recounting involves remembering and reflecting on blessings or good things in your life. Examples of these interventions include Counting Your Blessings, Gratitude Journaling, and Three Good Things. Grateful Reappraisal is an exercise that asks participants to recall a negative or difficult experience and reflect on it in a new light.

The primary focus of this study was the Gratitude Visit, which is also known as a form of Grateful Expression. As Emmons (2013) suggested, one of the most effective means of increasing gratefulness is to write and read a letter of gratitude to someone who has impacted us. Emmons (2013) reports that research

published in the most rigorous scientific journals shows that the gratitude visit can increase happiness in the letter writer for up to three months after the visit.

A number of studies have attempted to identify the impact of writing and reading gratitude letters on overall well-being. In one study, participants were asked to write a gratitude letter once a week for three weeks; after completing the exercise, they were happier, less depressed, and more satisfied with their lives (Toepfer et al., 2012). In another study, participants were assigned to write a gratitude letter and were told these letters would be sent to the person they were thanking. Participants reported increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (Allen, 2018).

Research from Seligman's positive psychology laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania has shown that gratitude visits can help improve well-being. Seligman et al. (2005) reported that "gratitude visits, caused large positive changes for one month" (p. 416). These were the instructions that Seligman (2002) and his assistants gave participants:

Select one important person from your past who has made a major positive difference in your life and to whom you have never fully expressed your thanks. Choose someone who is still alive. Write a testimonial just long enough to cover one laminated page. Take your time composing this – several weeks if required. Invite that person to your home or travel to that person's home. It is important that you do this face to face, not just in writing or on the phone. Do not tell the person the purpose of the visit in advance.

Bring a laminated version of your testimonial with you as a gift. Read your testimonial aloud slowly, with expression and eye contact. Then let the other person react unhurriedly. Reminisce together about the concrete events that make this person so important to you (p. 74).

Although Seligman's initial research showed greater happiness and decreased symptoms of depression one month later, Allen (2018) reported a potential bias. The subjects in the study were recruited through Seligman's website and were informed that the study "was intended to increase participants' well-being. This process for recruiting participants may have led to self-selection effects, which could help explain why the results reported in this study were stronger than those from other studies" (p. 34).

Watkins (2018) reported that the initial impact of the gratitude visit is much greater than other interventions such as using your signature strengths,

and counting blessings; however, there were no long-term benefits after six months (Seligman et al., 2005).

Gratitude Visits: Evidence of Effectiveness

In the gratitude research literature, there are three exercises that most frequently appear: counting blessings, gratitude journals and diaries, and gratitude visits (Morgan et al., 2015). While there is an abundance of research investigating gratitude interventions, meta-analytic studies have posited that the majority of studies (79% in one meta-analytic investigation) focus on gratitude journal exercises (Dickens, 2019). Gratitude visit interventions have been empirically studied less frequently. However, researchers have proposed that these interventions may be more powerful than gratitude journals, given the interventions opportunity to feel gratitude twice: during the writing of the gratitude letter and during the subsequent visit, where the letter is read to the recipient (Dickens, 2019). There is limited empirical research on gratitude visits, but a few empirical studies have investigated the positive effects of participating in a gratitude visit intervention (Dickens, 2019; Gander et al., 2013; Proyer et al., 2014). Interventions that incorporated gratitude visits have been investigated within several populations, including children and adolescents, breast cancer patients, and older adults.

One particularly important study related to gratitude visit effectiveness was Seligman et al. (2005), which provided empirical data on the efficacy of this intervention. Gander et al. (2013) aimed to replicate the findings of that study by providing participants with the opportunity to participate in gratitude visits. The researchers investigated the immediate and long-term effects of a condition using a gratitude visit intervention as well as another condition which included the combination of a gratitude visit and the three good things intervention. Immediate effects included increased happiness. Effects after one month included participants in both conditions reporting a reduction of depressive symptoms. After three months, that reduction of depressive symptoms was reported in the gratitude visit condition but not in the combined intervention condition. This research suggests that gratitude visits provide immediate and long-term positive effects (Gander et al., 2013).

Gratitude visit interventions have been shown to be effective in populations throughout the lifespan, including with children and adolescent populations and older adult populations. One such study looked at gratitude visits as a classroom intervention to promote

self-compassion, with positive results and a recommendation to implement gratitude visits in the classroom ((Lloyd-Hazlett & Maestri, 2013). Another study found that gratitude visit interventions implemented among children and adolescents in grades 3, 8, and 12 were related to enhanced levels of subjective well-being (Froh et al., 2009). Proyer et al., (2014) investigated the impacts of several positive psychology interventions, including gratitude visits. This study reported that gratitude visit interventions are related to increased happiness, subjective well-being and a reduction in depressive symptoms one-month post intervention. Three months post intervention, participants in the gratitude visit condition showed significant improvements in happiness and a marginally significant reduction of depressive symptoms when compared to the placebo control group (Proyer et al., 2014).

One study sought to investigate which specific component of the gratitude visit contributes to increased levels of happiness. This study incorporated three conditions: writing a gratitude letter and reading it to the recipient, writing a gratitude letter and reading it to another research participant, or writing a gratitude letter but not reading it to anyone else. The results of this study found that happiness and gratitude levels increased significantly in all three conditions, suggesting that the act of writing the letter may be related to changes in happiness (Brausen, 2017). However, one of the unique and particularly meaningful effects of traditional gratitude visit interventions is that they provide the opportunity to have positive effects on both the writer and the beneficiary (Grant & Gino, 2010). In one study, participants wrote gratitude letters and then predicted how surprised, happy, and/or awkward the recipients of those letters would feel. Those who wrote gratitude letters significantly underestimated how surprised and happy the recipients would feel and overestimated how awkward recipients would feel (Kumar & Epley, 2018). Overall, people may underestimate the positive impact of expressing gratitude on the recipients (Kumar & Epley, 2018).

Gratitude visits can impact one's desire to participate in future helping behaviors, as well. Research suggests that expressions of gratitude to others through gratitude visits not only positively impact one's feelings of self-efficacy and social worth, but also one's prosocial behaviors (Grant & Gino, 2010).

Gratitude visit interventions have been incorporated into individual and group psychotherapy

practices. Gratitude visits can provide personal well-being benefits, but also positive effects on one's relationships with others, including friends and family, which can offer added benefits to one's life and therapeutic treatment (Priebe et al., 2014). Dowlatabadi et al. (2016) investigated the effects of a group positive psychotherapy intervention on the well-being of breast cancer patients. The intervention within the study included two sessions on gratitude visits. Overall, the intervention was related to significant reduction in depressive symptoms and significant increases in happiness when compared to the control group (Dowlatabadi et al., 2016).

There appear to be benefits to the use of a gratitude visit intervention as part of a larger psychotherapy intervention. One article proposes the use of a virtual gratitude visit, where role-playing with an empty chair can enact a gratitude visit. This intervention may be especially useful for expressing gratitude towards a higher power, to a person who may no longer be living, to a person who is alive but unavailable, and/or to parts of one's self that one has gratitude towards (Tomasulo, 2019). Virtual gratitude visits may also be useful in group therapy, where witnessing the expression of gratitude by others may provide benefit for the observer. Future research can empirically study the effects of the use of the virtual gratitude visit in individual and group therapy, seeing as this intervention can provide unique and nuanced opportunities to conduct gratitude visits that may help to address some of the barriers to participating in gratitude visits (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014; Tomasulo, 2019).

One particularly relevant study to the current project is one that incorporated a gratitude visit intervention into higher education courses and qualitatively examined students' experiences and insights related to participating in the intervention (Payne et al., 2020). Six major qualitative themes emerged from the data, including the following: expressions of satisfaction, insight, and positive emotions as a result of participation in the intervention; experiences of awkwardness, nervousness, and difficulties related to the experience; relationship improvement with the recipient of the letter; reflections on gratitude as it related to the intervention and their own experiences; benefits related to mental and emotional health; and reflections on long term effects of the intervention beyond the course. These qualitative data highlight the positive effects of a gratitude visit intervention, while also noting some of the challenges of engaging with this exercise. This study noted the

eagerness of students to meaningfully engage with positive psychology interventions through courses and encouraged the use of similar exercises in future courses (Payne et al., 2020).

Gratitude and Meaning in Life

Broader than gratitude visit interventions specifically, several studies have investigated the role of meaning in life related to experiences of gratitude. Datu and Mateo (2015) posited that gratitude relates to higher levels of life satisfaction through the partial mediating effects of meaning in life, more specifically, presence of meaning in life. Kleiman et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between gratitude and reduction of suicidal ideation, and suggested that the combination of gratitude and grit were related to reduced suicidal ideation, and that these were partially mediated by increased levels of meaning in life. In one longitudinal study, gratitude and meaning in life predicted decreased depression levels (Disabato et al., 2017). Several studies investigating gratitude visit exercises have suggested the relationships between gratitude and life satisfaction and happiness (Brausen, 2017; Dowlatabadi et al., 2016; Froh et al., 2009), however, more research investigating the potential role and relationship between gratitude and meaning in life is needed.

Purpose of the Research

As indicated, much research has been conducted on the benefits of gratitude and gratitude practices over the past few decades, but few have focused on the impact of gratitude visits on happiness, well-being and specifically meaning within an online graduate program. To provide a greater understanding of this apparent gap in the research and literature, the purposes of this mixed method study are to (a) measure the effect of writing and delivering letters of gratitude on student happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction in an online graduate program in psychology and (b) explore how completing gratitude visits impacted student relationships, well-being and sense of meaning in life.

With these purposes in mind, the authors of this study hoped for a twofold impact: First, that participants might experience improvements in happiness, well-being and life satisfaction by participating in the practice of gratitude visits within their first course of a graduate psychology program. Second, this research might add to the current level of knowledge and understanding of the experience of gratitude visits and the impact on relationships, well-being and meaning in life.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 123 graduate students at a medium-sized university in the Midwest. The majority of participants were female (81%; $N=103$). 35% of participants ($N=45$) identified as Black and 56% of participants ($N=56$) identified as White. 9% ($N=22$) were multiethnic or declined to report. Participant ages ranged from 23 to 62 years, with a mean age of 34.9 years ($SD = 9.51$). Of the 123 graduate student participants, 100 completed all of the quantitative and qualitative measures.

Procedure

This study examined archival information, results of student surveys from assignments in a masters in psychology program. The information was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24.0). The University Institutional Review Board approved the study, and participant information was kept confidential and private.

Research data was collected from the first course in an online graduate psychology program. Over a three-week period of time, students took pre-tests, wrote and delivered a letter of gratitude in person or via an online video platform, and completed post-tests. The activities were required and graded assignments and were accompanied by additional assignments associated with the focus of the course, which was lifespan development.

Prior to the gratitude visit, students were asked to visit the University of Pennsylvania Authentic Happiness Test Center website and complete three measures and then self-report their results. In the assignment, students were provided the following instructions for the gratitude visit:

“Write a letter of gratitude to someone who has had a meaningful impact on your life and then personally deliver it and read it to them by means of face-to-face contact or a virtual contact, such as Facetime or Google Hangouts.”

After the gratitude visit intervention, participants were then asked to complete the same three measures and self-report their results, along with sending their quantitative results from the website to the course instructor. At this point, students were asked to compare the pre- and post- test results, and to answer several open-ended questions related to their experience with the gratitude visit assignment.

Measures

Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985).

This five-item instrument measures subjective well-being. Items include: "In most ways my life is close to ideal" and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Participants respond to these items using a 1-7 Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006).

This ten-item instrument measures meaning in life. The scale has two subscales: one that measures presence of meaning in life (items include: "I understand my life's meaning") and one that measures search for meaning in life (items include: "I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.") Participants respond to these items using a 1-7 Likert scale (1=absolutely untrue, 7=absolutely true).

Approaches to Happiness Questionnaire (Peterson et al., 2005).

This eighteen-item instrument measures three approaches to happiness: the Good Life, the Meaningful Life, and the Pleasant Life. Items include: "My life serves a higher purpose" and "For me, the good life is the pleasurable life." Participants respond to these items using a 1-5 Likert scale (1=very much unlike me, 5=very much like me).

Open Ended Questions. Participants were asked to respond to the following open-ended questions: (1) Report on any significant differences you noticed between the first and second taking of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (2) Who is the person you contacted for the Letter of Gratitude? (3) What is your relationship with them? (4) Summarize in a few sentences what you are most grateful for about this person? (5) How did expressing gratitude to this individual in a personal way affect you? and (6) How did this individual respond to your expression of gratitude? Participants were encouraged to write a two to three-page response to the open-ended question

prompts, in order to allow the opportunity for meaningful reflection.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS. To investigate whether participants experienced improvements to well-being and meaning after participating in a gratitude visit intervention, scores on the three measures pre-gratitude visit and post-gratitude visit were compared. Multiple significant differences were found when using paired samples t-tests to compare measures from the pre-test to the post-test. The satisfaction with life score pre-gratitude visit ($M=23.1$, $SD=6.3$) was significantly different ($t_{(115)}=-5.51$, $p<.05$) from post-gratitude visit ($M=25.1$, $SD=6.3$), indicating potential improvements in satisfaction with life post-gratitude visit intervention. The meaning in life-presence subscale score pre-gratitude visit ($M=23.4$, $SD=3.5$) was significantly different ($t_{(117)}=-3.66$, $p<.05$) from the post-gratitude visit score ($M=24.5$, $SD=3.2$), suggesting potential improvements in presence of meaning in life through the gratitude visit intervention. All three subscales of approaches to happiness (meaning, pleasure, and engagement) were significantly different pre-gratitude visit to post-gratitude visit (see Table 1), indicating potential relationships between a gratitude visit intervention and improved levels of happiness.

No significant differences were observed on any measures of interest between ethnic groups or gender.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The graduate students who participated in this research study were asked several questions about the experience of writing and delivering gratitude letters, and how this may have impacted their well-being and sense of meaning in life. Their answers to these questions were analyzed and coded by a qualitative research team using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Table 1. Approaches to happiness pre-gratitude visit and post-gratitude visit

	Pre-Gratitude Visit	Post-Gratitude Visit	Paired samples t-tests results
Happiness- The Meaningful Life	$M=4.06$, $SD=.74$	$M=4.26$, $SD=.60$	$t_{(110)}=-4.25$, $p<.05$
Happiness- The Pleasant Life	$M=3.38$, $SD=.81$	$M=3.55$, $SD=.89$	$t_{(115)}=-2.89$, $p<.05$
Happiness- The Good Life	$M=3.14$, $SD=.60$	$M=3.38$, $SD=.70$	$t_{(109)}=-4.38$, $p<.05$

Grounded theory is a respected qualitative approach that carefully analyzes the responses of participants to generate theory about the rich meaning of participant words and explanations in regards to a specific subject of study (Charmaz, 2000; 2006). In this case, researchers used a grounded theory approach to explore how completing gratitude visits impacted graduate students' well-being and sense of meaning in life.

Coding of participant responses was performed by a research team (see Appendix A) who had very little experience with gratitude letters, with most having "none at all." The research team identified domains, themes, patterns and particular responses in the participant data, using grounded theory as the guiding methodology for this process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The data analysis and coding that was used was emergent, reflexive and continuous, and team dialogue was used as a tool for a more diverse and complex understanding of participant responses. A detailed list of specific qualitative themes and categories, with numbers of responses for each domain, is included with the data (Appendix B).

Results

After the participant responses were analyzed by the research team using a grounded theory approach, eight primary themes emerged related to the impact and meaning of gratitude letters on graduate students: (1) the impact on the relationship; (2) positive emotions experienced; (3) experiencing a reciprocal expression of gratitude from the receiver; (4) overcoming uncomfortable emotions; (5) relief, release or liberation after sharing; (6) impact on spiritual growth; (7) unexpected responses; and (8) greater reflection on the meaning of life and a changed perspective. Each of these themes was detailed and explored, using the quotes of participants to demonstrate agreement, variations, and unique ideas in the specific thoughts, feelings and experiences of the participants. The quantitative results provide insight into several potential improvements post-gratitude visit intervention, specifically related to satisfaction with life, presence of meaning in life, and approaches to happiness. The qualitative results provide added insight and context into the specific ways that the intervention impacted the participants' well-being. These qualitative themes illustrate the impact and meaning of writing and delivering gratitude letters on individual participants and their relationships.

Impact on Relationship

Many of the graduate student participants discussed the impact of writing and delivering a gratitude letter in terms of the impact it had on their relationship with the recipient. Participants felt that the impact of writing the letter enhanced their relationship with that person. One participant wrote "we can look back at negative experiences with an attitude of appreciation, knowing that we can grow through difficulties." Participants reported specific categories of change in their relationship with their gratitude letter recipients. These changes included a revival of the relationship, renewed friendship and a recommitment to their relationship. "We have a renewed commitment to connect more often as our friendship is important to both of us." Another participant expressed "we both reassured ourselves of the fact our friendship will always be strong enough to endure the obstacles life brings us. I believe writing the letter of gratitude made our friendship stronger." Also, many participants experienced an enhanced closeness and bonding, as well as a feeling of being supported.

We must be open to hear and be physically present for emotional support. I learned a valuable lesson about friendship that no matter how close you think you are; you are not. People are afraid to express how they really feel even to those closest to them. Another participant expressed that Delivering my letter to [the recipient] was a genuinely cathartic experience. My emotions ran strong as I felt an overwhelming sense of elation each time I read it. I emphasized my promise to always be there for him, no matter what life brings, as well as the extraordinary impact that love has in our lives.

Positive Emotions Experienced

Quantitative results suggested significant improvements in satisfaction with life and feelings of happiness post-gratitude visit intervention. Qualitative results provided added insight into participants' experiences of happiness through the intervention. Participants detailed several positive emotions that were evoked during the writing and especially when delivering and reading their gratitude letter. These included happiness, surprise and joy.

I read the letter and shared those many feelings. I felt a sense of pride in myself for doing so. I also felt euphoric for making her feel special and happy. Bringing her happiness also brought me happiness

at the same time. It is said that one of the greatest gifts is giving.

One participant wrote, “during the conversation at some point, we were both in tears and were a bit emotional. All happy tears. She responded well and is thankful for our friendship too.”

Surprise was also an emotion that was felt by many participants, “I felt a sense of appreciation, love, admiration and surprise while reading my gratitude letter to my daughter.”

Finally, many participants felt a sense of joy, “while reading my letter to [the recipient], I became emotional; however, it was not a sad feeling, it was more so an overwhelming joy from hearing all the great things that had changed within myself.” Another reported that “taking time to slow down and really focusing on all of the positive traits in someone and the many ways in which that person has been a source of wisdom and joy in your world.”

Reciprocal Expression of Gratitude

A surprising theme that emerged during data analysis was the large number of participants who received a reciprocal expression of gratitude from their gratitude letter recipient. A majority of recipients were noted as offering thanks and appreciation for the letter, but some went above and beyond by expressing an unexpected reciprocated response of their own gratitude towards the giver. Students often recognized the impact the recipient had on their lives, but never imagined they had a similar effect on them.

One student noted, “He responded to my letter with reciprocated gratitude and graciousness. He thanked me for everything I had done and stated that I was the greatest blessing in his life. He thanked me for support and always pushing him to do his best. He gave me credit for shaping him into the man he is today.” Another participant discussed how this exercise opened a portal to a whole new level of gratitude and appreciation for the relationship;

This opened up a whole new conversation on additional things that we were grateful for in each other. It is amazing how one act of expressing gratitude can open the door to a whole new conversation on how we were grateful for one another.

And finally, another simply reminisced, “For several minutes after I read the letter, she spoke tender words of blessings and gratitude back to me.” Many participants saw this activity as an opportunity to show appreciation and gratitude to others, yet received an unexpected blessing of reciprocal gratitude in response.

Overcoming Uncomfortable Emotions

Several participants mentioned that the act of delivering and reading gratitude letters took courage, and participants had to overcome uncomfortable emotions to complete the task. Participants noted that they felt nervous, scared, awkward, anxious, or vulnerable as they wrote their letters and prepared to read the letter to their recipient. One participant described her feelings by stating, “When I expressed my gratitude to [the recipient] it felt awkward at first just because I’m not used to speaking this personally with anyone. Even though we are close and she knows everything about me, I did feel nervous.” Sharing their gratitude letter seemed to make many of the participants feel vulnerable and required them to step out of their comfort zone to share their thoughts in a more intimate way than they were used to. Another participant explained, “I’m a fairly emotional person, but I always attempt to keep it to myself and not show it. So being vulnerable like I was when I read her my letter was a unique experience.”

Participants recognized the vulnerability of the exercise and knew that reading the letters would be an emotional experience. For participants who do not typically express their emotions, this was a very uncomfortable activity. One participant described,

“Initially, I was nervous because I am not a touchy, feely type of person. I am usually very much about the issue at hand and taking care of business. I don’t discuss my personal life at work, and I try to stay out of drama. I had to show a side of myself to her that she has never seen, and I was extremely uncomfortable doing so.”

Another respondent described her experience by stating, “I was nervous about completing the assignment because I thought I would look sappy.”

Other participants were unsure of how their recipient would respond to the letter and this uncertainty made them nervous. The participants wanted to make sure that their recipient fully understood their gratitude and how important they were to them, and some participants struggled with the insecurity of not knowing how to best express their sincere and deep gratitude. One of the participants explained, “I was nervous about how it would be received, and if I would be able to express myself in the way that I had wanted to. I wanted my person to feel as if it was genuine, and not just because I was forced to do so for a school assignment.” Another participant reflected, “I was nervous going into it. I didn’t feel I quite had the words to fully express everything I wanted

to say in my letter and I worried that it would not be as meaningful to her as I had hoped.”

Most of the participants who described feeling uncomfortable emotions as they began the exercise expressed that their emotions changed to more comfortable emotions of gratitude, happiness, and comfort as they began to read and discuss the letter. One participant who described her nervousness when preparing the letter explained that, “Afterwards, I felt happy and rewarded, like I had just contributed something significant.” Another participant said, “As nervous as I was though, once I got started, I was shaky at first and then I found my voice and my confidence, so the words just started to come out.”

Relief, Release, or Liberation after Sharing

Another unexpected benefit of delivering and reading gratitude letters was the relief, release or liberation participants felt after sharing their letters with the intended recipient. For some participants, these feelings were a byproduct of finally communicating things left unsaid over the years. Quotes such as “It felt like a burden was lifted off me,” and “I was glad to finally get it off my chest” offer insight on how the exercise helped participants deal with unresolved past circumstances and unexpressed relational thoughts and feelings.

While some participants struggled to overcome the weight of sharing, many more were uplifted by the opportunity to finally give thanks and show gratitude for favorable past experiences. One respondent explained, “Taking time to be detailed and specific in my thoughts and experiences was liberating.” Another declared, “it felt like releasing something good into the world.”

Many participant responses also centered around the feeling of peace or healing enjoyed after going through this experience. Remarks like, “I gained a sense of peace from the entire process” and “I felt peace afterward” were common in the responses. Quotes such as, “after sharing the letter, I felt relieved, or healed in some way” and “this action felt like a release [and] now we can look toward the future with a new perspective” show the powerful effect this gratitude visit had on many participants.

A number of participants also chose to write their letters to a deceased individual. This experience was quite different from those who delivered letters to individuals who were still alive, but a common theme among these was a final chance to say everything they had always wanted to say but never did. This group experienced many of the same feelings of relief and

release as the others, but the act had the additional impact of providing a means for closure. These participants spoke of the importance of relaying gratitude on a regular basis to those who impact our lives, and how the need and desire to do so may extend to when that recipient is no longer with us.

Impact on Spiritual Growth

Participants reported a distinct impact on spiritual growth due to the writing and delivering of a gratitude letter. Reflecting on their gratitude for the other person caused some participants to also recognize their gratitude to God for divine intervention in their situation or relationship. One participant stated, “this was a good experience for us to look back and reflect about God’s hand in our separate stories and in the connection [between us] that’s now lasted two or three years...it was a blessing to...gain a new layer of understanding and appreciation about what God is doing in our lives!” Another participant reflected,

Seeing that God loved me so much that he placed a man into my life who would love me like God loves me. Chastise me when I am wrong but still give me a hug when I am hurting. The proof that God can and will answer the little prayers...He gave me more than I could ask for or think.

The exercise of writing and sharing the gratitude letters also helped to strengthen some of the participants’ relationship with God. One participant described,

I felt a deeper connection both with her and God. My relationship with both of them was forever changed. Never did I think that sharing my gratitude for her would open up a whole new dynamic to my relationships.

Another participant described her spiritual experience by saying, “I feel that this gratitude experience helped bring my spirit closer to my childhood experiences of flourishing happiness.”

Unexpected Responses

Some participants reported unexpected responses by the recipient when they delivered and read their gratitude letters. These unexpected responses included shock, tears, discomfort, and the recipient struggling to receive gratitude. One participant reported this about her experience:

[The recipient] kept saying, “Girl you do not have to say that” as if she was not worthy of a compliment. I continued reading my letter of gratitude about how her actions in and for life taught me to grow into the person I am as a friend

and a woman. I began to see how she was [incapable] of receiving gratification from others.

After the event, the participant reflected on their recipient's deflection of the gratitude, and the longer version of the story the recipient shared with her about never feeling loved or worthy during her childhood years. The graduate student gained this insight from the experience: "How people receive things let me know it is not always because they are being polite, but there could be a reason for them not being able to receive."

Another participant reported a similar response when she shared her gratitude letter: "After reading the letter, [she] thanked me but then expressed that I didn't need to tell her thank you. She continued on to say that it just felt like the right thing to do and she was glad she did it." This unexpected response of being unwilling or unable to receive gratitude, or to downplay and dismiss the letter, was often surprising to the participants, and sometimes disconcerting.

Other unexpected responses included shock of the recipient, for example: "He said no one has really done this before and he was still in shock that I chose him for it." Also, crying, either a mild or an extreme show of tears, was another response, which sometimes caused similar emotion in the participant: "She teared up as I read each sentence. I did, too! As I saw the tears in her eyes, it made me tear up as well."

Reflection on Meaning in Life, Changed Perspective

Quantitative results suggested significant improvements in meaning in life post-gratitude visit intervention. Qualitative results provided added insight into participants' experiences of reflection on meaning in life through the intervention. Participants reflected on deeper meaning in life and often reported a changed perspective after the experience of writing and delivering a gratitude letter. The reflection involved in writing the gratitude letter caused the participant to look back on past experiences with a changed perspective. This allowed participants to reframe those situations by applying meaning and purpose to past circumstances that may have seemed negative or debilitating at the time. One individual reflected, "Afterward, she expressed to me her thankfulness that we can look back at negative experiences with an attitude of appreciation, knowing that we can grow through difficulties."

Many of the participants chose to write the letters to individuals that were mentors or role models at vital points of their development. They were people that came along at just the right time to provide positive examples and model effective methods of dealing with setbacks and hardship. One participant reported,

"Thinking about different experiences that occurred where she helped look at things differently or kept me laughing instead of crying about a situation is priceless." Another had a similar response, "I was able to reflect on how being around someone with such positivity and who often always looks for the best in someone during difficult circumstances really influences my life for the better."

One participant profoundly noted that while he carried out his gratitude letter, "It also brought me back to a very difficult time in my life, but I was able to look at it as a time that I had conquered." This exercise provided opportunities for participants to look back on their lives with renewed perspective and find the value and meaning in situations or relationships that may have seemed hopeless or disastrous at the time.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative results from this current study are consistent with earlier gratitude studies in many respects. As mentioned previously, numerous research studies with diverse participant groups have revealed that the practice of gratitude leads to a: "greater sense of purpose and resilience; solidified and secure social relationships; bolstered feelings of self-worth and self-confidence; and generosity and helpfulness" (Emmons, 2013, p. 10). The quantitative findings reported in this study support and build on these previous research findings that describe various positive effects related to increased happiness, life satisfaction, well-being and meaning of participants after writing and delivering a letter of gratitude. The graduate students who participated in this study had significantly improved scores in satisfaction with life and meaning in life following the gratitude visit. They also showed improvement on all three operational constructs of happiness (meaning, pleasure, and engagement) post-gratitude visit. This indicates a strong correlation in the potential relationship between a gratitude visit intervention and improved levels of life satisfaction, meaning and overall happiness, which is also consistent with earlier studies. According to Toepfer et al.(2012), after participants wrote letters of gratitude, they were happier, less depressed, and reported greater satisfaction with their lives. In another study, participants reported an increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions (Allen, 2018).

The qualitative results of this study also found that graduate students self-reported that writing and delivering gratitude letters had a powerful positive impact on their relationships, their emotional

expression, their spiritual growth, and promoted a greater reflection on the meaning of life and a changed perspective. The gratitude letter intervention also had the effect of producing relief, release or liberation after sharing in many participants, and often incited a reciprocal expression of gratitude from the receiver. Participants appreciated the added element of receiving a dose of gratitude from their recipients! The positive and meaningful qualitative results found in the current study are similar to those that emerged from Payne et al. (2020), most notably, positive impacts on relationships and benefits on their own well-being as well as experiences of uncomfortable emotions related to the exercise. The quantitative results unique to this study add to Payne et al. (2020) by suggesting increases in scores on measures assessing meaning in life, satisfaction with life, and happiness related to participation in the gratitude visit exercise.

Following the writing and delivery of gratitude letters, participants were able to better understand and express the lessons learned and insight gained from both the specific relationship they were grateful for, and the larger meaning of their lives. When we take time to look back on our lives with gratitude and apply meaning to our journey it helps emphasize our personal sense of efficacy and resilience. This exercise helped some participants realize they don't have to ignore the difficult or hard times from the past, but might look at and appreciate them for the change they initiated or inspired in their lives, and for the people who helped support them through it all.

Limitations

Research has suggested that positive psychology interventions may not be as promising as some might conclude. Davis and Elise (2016), in their article, *Thankful for the Little Things: A Meta-Analysis of Gratitude Interventions*, reported: "Our results provide weak evidence for the efficacy of gratitude interventions" (p. 25). Davis and Elise (2016) suggested that their meta-analysis called into question the value of additional exploration of gratitude interventions:

In fact, a cautious interpretation of our findings is that gratitude interventions may operate primarily through placebo effects.... Consistent with this idea, in a review of self-directed interventions to promote psychological well-being, Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) concluded that engaging in any regular activities involving self-discipline seems to promote psychological well-being" (p. 26).

Berger et al. (2019), in their article on the efficacy of interpersonal versus non-interpersonal gratitude interventions, state, "Gratitude interventions have generally been shown to enhance psychological well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Toepfer et al., 2012), but not trait gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003)" (p. 32).

Watkins (2018) suggests there are caveats to gratitude interventions and that one reason gratitude research may not be as effective or why it is more impactful for some is that initial studies have discovered that it might simply be more beneficial to those who need it the most:

Depressed people gain more from grateful recounting than those not depressed; several studies have found that ungrateful people gain most from a gratitude intervention; although women enjoy grateful recounting more than men, men gain more from gratitude interventions; and those who enjoyed grateful recounting the least, benefited most from this treatment, over the long run. (p. 105)

According to Allen (2018), a growing number of studies have evaluated the impact of various gratitude practices, which have helped to verify many of the benefits of gratitude. Results from these studies also conclude as Watkins (2018) does that some people are more drawn to, and benefit from, certain gratitude interventions. There may be benefit to the act of writing letters of gratitude without delivering them for this very reason; it serves the same purpose as the Three Good Things exercise, in enhancing self-discipline and a positive perspective.

In the current study, any and all of these limitations may be present; participants may have been impacted more by their own self-discipline than by the actual intervention (a placebo effect), or they may have been more likely to be impacted due to personal reasons; perhaps they were more depressed, or more ungrateful before the intervention, or perhaps the participants being majority female influenced the results. Research participants were beginning their graduate work, which also could contribute to improvements in mood and meaning. Additionally, positive psychology concepts were introduced in the course along with the practice of the gratitude visit. While grades were not awarded for more positive post-test results or for favorable qualitative reflections, students could potentially skew their responses to impress their instructors. These are also influencing factors that may have impact on the final results. However, the large sample size

(particularly for a qualitative study) and the strong positive correlation may point to something more significant happening here, beyond these limitations.

Implications and Recommendations

The impact of writing and delivering gratitude letters cannot be understated for many of the graduate students who participated in this study. Being present with another person to share a carefully worded message of gratitude added a renewed sense of value and meaning to how participants approached these relationships, and led to an increase in their sense of happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being. This intervention, done as a part of graduate school coursework in positive psychology, helped to promote the very concepts that these graduate students were being educated about: life satisfaction, well-being, meaning, purpose, relational satisfaction and resilience.

The qualitative responses indicated that participants experienced uncomfortable emotions like nervousness and vulnerability in the preparation leading up to the reading of their letters. One recommendation to ameliorate this in future participants could be to explain the emotions that may be felt throughout the process of writing and delivering the letters of gratitude. It is important to also note, however, that many participants indicated that their initial fears and concerns dissipated as they observed the positive impact the act of reading the letter was having on the recipients.

This study highlights a significant implication for educators: providing students with the rationale and opportunity to engage in gratitude visit interventions can provide added meaning and well-being to their educational journeys. For graduate students, who are often at a very intense and stressful time in their lives (many juggling family, full-time work, and graduate school), positive psychology interventions, such as the one described in this research, may serve as helpful tools for success and life satisfaction. Future research should continue to explore the utilization of gratitude visit exercises in educational settings, and the consequent impact on students' lives and well-being.

Conclusion

Gratitude is often identified as one of the most important traits contributing to increases in well-being and character strength (Kaufman, 2015). Gratitude interventions, ranging from gratitude journals to grateful reappraisal, show increases in many aspects of well-being, but the gratitude visit has shown to be one of the most impactful practices and thus the focus of this current study with graduate students.

This research provided a mixed methods approach to understanding the gratitude visit and its impact on participants within an online graduate program in psychology. The stated purposes of this study were to assess and explore how completing gratitude visits impacted student relationships, happiness, well-being and sense of meaning in life.

After reviewing the results of more than 100 participants who completed the pre- and post- tests and conducted the gratitude visit, the research team discovered improvements in life satisfaction, happiness, and well-being, and most significantly differences in the student's experience of meaning in life. Regarding qualitative responses and conclusions related to overall improvements in well-being and meaning in life, participants felt that the impact of writing and delivering the letters of gratitude helped them renew their perspective on past challenges and find greater meaning in life, enhanced their relationships, evoked emotions of happiness, surprise and joy, experienced an unexpected reciprocal acknowledgement of gratitude, and reported a distinct impact on spiritual growth.

It is clear from both the quantitative and qualitative measures that students in an online graduate program in psychology who wrote and delivered letters of gratitude to intended recipients experienced significant benefits to their overall well-being and also reported changes in their sense of meaning in life.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Standards

All study procedures involving human participants followed institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All participant data was collected in accordance with the APA ethical code of conduct for research. This study and procedures for archival data collection and informed consent were approved by the institutional review board of Indiana Wesleyan University.


Funding

The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Received: January 26, 2021

Accepted: April 18, 2021

Published Online: May 26, 2021

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Appendix A

Research Team Demographic Team

Primary Researcher

Female, Caucasian, age 49, married, Christian, graduate faculty in psychology

Previous experience with gratitude letters: none

Before you participated on this research team, did you think writing and sharing a gratitude letter would have an impact on meaning, well-being and persistence for graduate students? I wasn't sure, but I thought that most participants would have at least an emotional impact from writing and sharing their gratitude letter. I wasn't sure if there would be an impact on well-being or persistence, but possibly on meaning!

Research Team Member

Male, Caucasian, age 46, married, Christian, graduate student at IWU in psychology

Previous experience with gratitude letters: I participated in this exercise one time.

Before you participated on this research team, did you think writing and sharing a gratitude letter would have an impact on meaning, well-being and persistence for graduate students? I know the power and freedom of writing out the thoughts and feelings we have trouble expressing verbally, and transferring those words to paper. However, I was unsure the positive effect of delivering and speaking these letters out in person would overcome the potential anxiety, fear, and doubt that may also be involved, and what the overall outcome of the experience would be.

Research Team Member

Female, Caucasian, age 37, married, Christian, M.A. Psychology

Previous experience with gratitude letters: I have written and delivered a few gratitude letters over the past couple of years.

Before you participated on this research team, did you think writing and sharing a gratitude letter would have an impact on meaning, well-being and persistence for graduate students? I knew that gratitude practices in general can have a positive effect on well-being and I believed that writing gratitude letters would likely be a meaningful experience for both the giver and the receiver. I was not sure if there would be an impact on persistence.

Research Team Member

Female, Caucasian, age 29, raised Catholic, graduate student in Instructional Design

Previous experience with gratitude letters: I do not have any experience with writing or receiving gratitude letters.

Before you participated on this research team, did you think writing and sharing a gratitude letter would have an impact on meaning, well-being and persistence for graduate students? Before participating in this study, I assumed that gratitude letters would have little impact on meaning and well-being other than a brief emotional feeling.

Appendix B – Master List of Qualitative Themes and Categories (# of Participant Responses)

Theme (1): Impact on Relationship

Relational Impact

1. Enhanced Relationship with recipient 17
2. Interaction changed me 4

Experience of Closeness/Bonding

3. Person was incredibly supportive 7
4. Did not expect to bond 4

Relationship Revival

5. Renewed friendship/relationship 10
6. Recommitted to friendship/relationship 7

Change in Existing Relationship

7. Enhanced or strengthened family relationship 4
8. Enhanced marriage or romantic relationship 2
9. Healed family relationship 1

Theme (2): Positive Emotions Experienced

Happiness

- 10. Giver experienced happiness 21
- 11. Receiver experienced happiness 19

Surprise

- 12. Receiver experienced surprise 5
- 13. Giver experienced surprise 4

Joy

- 14. Cried tears of joy 16
- 15. Giver experienced joy 8
- 16. Receiver experienced joy 4

Theme (3): Reciprocal Expression of Gratitude

Meaning

- 17. Receiver acknowledged pride in the giver 8
- 18. Receiver gave giver credit for life success & meaning 6

Emotional Impact of Receiving Reciprocal Message

- 19. Reciprocated expression of gratitude elicited gratefulness 9
- 20. Reciprocated expression of gratitude elicited thankfulness 8
- 21. Reciprocated expression of gratitude elicited humility 5
- 22. Reciprocated expression of gratitude elicited surprise 3
- 23. Reciprocated expression of gratitude was unexpected 2

Pay it Forward-Expressed Desire to do Future Letters

- 24. Expressed desire to repeat this exercise in the future 8
- 25. Receiver Expressed desire to repeat this exercise in the future 2

Theme (4): Overcoming Uncomfortable Emotions

Discomfort in Preparing

- 26. Nervous 16
- 27. Uncomfortable/Out of Comfort Zone 5
- 28. Awkward 4
- 29. Vulnerable 4
- 30. Scared 1
- 31. Embarrassed 1
- 32. Anxious 1

Hesitation/Doubt

- 33. Found experience to be hard 3

Theme (5): Relief, Release, or Liberation after Sharing

Liberating Effect

- 34. Experienced Relief 10
- 35. Experienced peace 6
- 36. Experienced validation 5
- 37. Experienced release 5
- 38. Felt rewarding 3
- 39. Experienced empowerment 1

Expressed things they may have not been able to express before

- 40. Provided opportunity to express things they always wanted to say but hadn't 4
- 41. Got something off my chest/a weight off my shoulders 3
- 42. Wrote letter to deceased individual 3

Theme (6): Impact on Spiritual Growth

Effect on Spirituality

- 43. Strengthened connection to God 4
- 44. Allowed participant to reflect on God 3

Theme (7): Unexpected Responses

Difficult Emotions

45. Shock 4

46. Tears 4

Unable to Receive Gratitude

47. Unable to Receive the Letter 4

48. No response 2

Theme (8): Reflection on Meaning in Life, Changed Perspective

Reflection on Meaning in Life

49. Reflected on overcoming past hardships 14

50. Expressed thankfulness for how life has turned out (blessed) 12

Changed Perspective

51. Reflection on how the relationship had been life-changing 9

52. Had been feeling depressed and this exercise changed my perspective 4