



The impact of the gratitude journal on gratitude, happiness and life satisfaction, and the link with religiosity

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Introduction

Background: Gratitude can be defined as a feeling of joyful appreciation from receiving a physical or non-physical gift (Emmons, 2004). Gratitude has a positive effect on physical, psychological and social well-being (Shankland, 2016). There are different ways to cultivate gratitude in one's daily life; an intervention called "the gratitude journal" has been shown to increase positive affect (including happiness) and life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). People also tend to differ in their level of grateful disposition – the tendency to be grateful (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Shankland, 2016).

Religiosity is involvement in personal sacred and religious practices and activities. It is linked to a higher life satisfaction, health and happiness (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Aghababaei, 2013). Gratitude is a central concept in conventional world religions (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). McCullough, Emmons & Tsang (2002) found that people with a higher grateful disposition tended to be more religious. Prayer also plays an important role in gratitude: in general, the more people pray, the more grateful they become (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, 2009).

Objective: In the current study, we were interested in studying the impact of the gratitude journal intervention on gratitude, happiness and life satisfaction, and the link with religiosity. We hypothesized that the participants in the gratitude condition would have a significant impact on their gratitude, happiness and life satisfaction in comparison with the neutral condition. We also hypothesized that the impact of the gratitude journal would be less significant for religious people in comparison with non-religious people due to their higher grateful disposition and/or due to their prayer frequency.

Method

Participants: The sample considered in this study comprises participants who completed the pre- and post-intervention survey (N = 68 out of 98, 66 % women, $M_{age} = 31-40$ years, 62% Europeans). Out of the sample, 75% considered themselves religious. The participants who took part in at least 6 out of 14 days of the intervention (n = 56) were included in the statistical analyses.

Procedure: Participants were recruited via Facebook and LinkedIn social media platforms. After completing the pre-intervention survey, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, i.e. the gratitude journal or the neutral journal, for a period of 14 days. The journaling instruction (see Table 1) and post-intervention survey were sent via e-mail.

Measurements:

- Gratitude: The Gratitude Questionnaire – Six Item Form (GQ-6) (McCullough et al., 2002) in pre- and post-intervention survey
- Life Satisfaction: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) in pre- and post-intervention survey
- Happiness: Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) in pre- and post-intervention survey
- Stress at work on a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = low stress, 10 = high stress) in pre- and post-intervention survey
- Stress at home on a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = low stress, 10 = high stress) in pre- and post-intervention survey
- Grateful disposition: Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Scale (GRAT) – Short Form (Watkins et al., 2003) in pre-intervention survey
- Religiosity: The Centrality of Religiosity Scale – 5 items version (CRS-5) (Huber & Huber, 2012) in pre-intervention survey
- Journaling frequency (0-2, 3-5, 6-9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 days) in post-intervention survey

Gratitude journal instruction for the experimental group	Neutral journal instruction for the control group
For the next 14 days, starting from today, I would like to ask you to keep a journal answering the following question for yourself, on a daily basis: "There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past day and write down up to five things that you are grateful or thankful for." (based on Emmons & McCullough, 2003)	For the next 14 days, starting from today, I would like to ask you to keep a journal answering the following question for yourself, on a daily basis: "What were some of the events or circumstances that affected you today? Think back over the past day and write down up to five events that occurred today." (based on Emmons & McCullough, 2003)

Table 1. Journaling instructions sent to the participants.

Results

For all the statistical analysis we focused on people who journaled between 6 to 14 days, as significant results were reached from the moment participants completed six days of journaling. Analysis of the means (see Table 2) showed an increase in happiness, life satisfaction and gratitude. This increase was not significant ($p > 0.05$) for the experimental and control groups.

A higher level of religiosity ($M_{cont.} = 4.06$, $M_{exp.} = 3.66$), grateful disposition ($M_{cont.} = 7.25$, $M_{exp.} = 7.13$) and prayer frequency ($M_{cont.} = 5.32$, $M_{exp.} = 4.57$) was found for the control group in comparison with the experimental group. Pre-intervention gratitude ($M_{cont.} = 5.66$, $M_{exp.} = 5.79$) was higher for the experimental group in comparison with the control group. However, these differences were not significant.

For the control group, there was a trend in a significant direction in happiness scores pre-intervention ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 0.85$) and post-intervention ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.90$) according to a paired-samples t-test, $t(27) = -1.75$, $p = 0.092$ (two-tailed). The eta squared statistic (0.10) indicated a moderate effect size. A Wilcoxon signed rank test revealed an increase at the margin of significance in life satisfaction in the control group, $z = -1.91$, $p = 0.056$, with a moderate effect size ($r = 0.26$).

	Pre SHS	Post SHS	Pre SWLS	Post SWLS	Pre GQ-6	Post GQ-6	Pre GRAT	Religiosity (CRS-5)	Prayer frequency
	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
All (n = 56)	4.97	5.13*	4.91	5.18**	5.72	5.88	7.19	3.86	4.95
% increase		+3.2%		+5.5%		+2.8%			
Exp. (n = 28)	4.94	5.09	4.86	5.11	5.79	5.89	7.13	3.66	4.57
% increase		+3.0%		+5.1%		+1.7%			
Cont. (n = 28)	5.01	5.18*	4.96	5.24*	5.66	5.88	7.25	4.06	5.32
% increase		+3.4%		+5.6%		+3.9%			

Table 2. Comparison of means (M) and percentage (%) increases for the dependent variables across all participants, experimental ("exp.") group and control ("cont.") group. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

The gratitude journal intervention did not have the significant effect that was expected; there was no significant increase of gratitude, happiness or life satisfaction in the experimental group. However, the results indicate the possibility that a reflective activity during 6 to 14 days was enough to cause an increase in gratitude, happiness and life satisfaction. The results could have been influenced by the rather small sample size, and there might have been a language barrier for some of the participants. Wood, Froh, and Gerathy (2010) recommend using a hassles condition control group instead of a neutral journal condition as a true control group. We chose not to include a hassles condition due to the current COVID-19 pandemic to protect the well-being of the participants.

The effect of religiosity on the findings was of particular interest, as we hypothesized that the gratitude journal would have less of an impact on religious people, possibly because religious people tend to have a higher grateful disposition or they pray more frequently. The results show that, indeed, religious people have a higher grateful disposition and pray significantly more than their non-religious counterparts. However, contrary to what was expected, the religious participants' gratitude scores increased over time, even more so than for the non-religious participants. Kim-Prieto and Diener (2009) found that religion is a source of variability in the experience of gratitude and that more religious people tend to self-report higher levels of gratitude. There seems to be a nuanced relationship between different types of gratitude (e.g. religious or general) and well-being (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen, Galler, & Krumrei, 2011). Moreover, Schnitker and Richardson (2018) studied the effect of adding a prayer condition to the gratitude journaling intervention and found that it had a positive impact on gratitude. They also discovered that prayer can automatically activate the expression and experience of gratitude. These research findings could provide another possible explanation for the non-significant results of the current study, as there was a large number of religious participants (75%) in comparison with non-religious participants. It could be that the religious participants journaled about things they were grateful for, regardless of the specific journaling instruction.

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