

Letters of Gratitude: Improving Well-Being through Expressive Writing

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Abstract: Researchers have shown that about 40% of our happiness is accounted for by intentional activity whereas 50% is explained by genetics and 10% by circumstances (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). Consequently, efforts to improve happiness might best be focused in the domain of intentional activity: willful and self-directed activity (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). Such activity is nested in the “sustainable happiness model” proposed by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) which states that happiness is in part within our ability to manage. Earlier work (Fordyce, 1977; 1983) supports the premise that individuals can sustain levels of happiness through volitional behavior. The current pilot study explored one such intentional activity – composing letters of gratitude. It was hypothesized that writing three letters of gratitude over time would enhance important qualities of subjective well-being in the author; happiness, life-satisfaction, and gratitude.

Keywords: Expressive writing, gratitude, letters, well-being



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1. Review of the Literature

According to Burton and King (2004) most writing studies which involve repeated writing sessions focus on negative emotional experiences such as traumatic events and personal problems. The current investigation refocuses on an alternative writing strategy by examining the expression of positive emotion, specifically, composing letters of gratitude. Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) demonstrated that writing which included higher levels of positive emotion words, a moderate level of negative emotions words, and increased insight words had positive effects on participants. Pennebaker's (1997) expressive writing paradigm was employed to measure participants as they repetitively re-experienced their happiest day. This paradigm drives the current investigation and employed the method to study potential effects in the author's global state of well-being as measured by happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude.

Utilizing Pennebaker's (1997) paradigm, Lyubomirsky, Sousa and Dickerhoof (2006) studied and found that writing and talking about one's day increases a person's positive emotions four weeks after the study. Emmons and McCullough (2003) asked participants to keep gratitude journals once a week, three times a week, or not at all. In their journals, participants wrote down up to five things for which they were grateful in the past week. The gratitude-outlook groups exhibited heightened well-being across several outcome measures with the most robust finding being positive affect.

Expressive writing studies are plentiful and the once anemic domain of letter writing as a vehicle for improving health has seen a recent surge of interest (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a; Seligman et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2009). For example, VandeCreek, Janus, Pennebaker and Binau (2002) asked participants to pray and write letters to God and found that both prayer and the letters increased insight and positive emotion, more so than simple written descriptions, where a single letter to God had the most impact. The authors explained that the act of praying or explaining to another (in this case in a letter to God) was more conducive to personal insight and greater positive emotional formulations about life events. In other words, writing a letter to God was found to improve participant's positive feelings about life events.

Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts (2003) conducted a study that examined mood changes as the result of various gratitude inductions, one of which was a letter writing condition. Their findings revealed that writing a gratitude based letter produced a positive affect increase compared to the other gratitude inductions (Watkins et al., 2003).

Lyubomirsky et al. (2009) used gratitude letters (not mailed to recipients) to measure the power of reflection on past memories as a factor for improving general well-being. Participants were asked to recall experiences during the past few years for which they were

grateful to something. Based on those memories participants wrote essays once a week for 15 minutes. Intentional and positive activities such as writing essays (as well as visualizing one's dreams coming true) were found to bolster perceived positive change. The authors stated that increased well-being was most likely due to a higher motivation to become happier. Furthermore, they suggested that increased well-being may be most beneficial when the expression of gratitude has time to manifest, perhaps allowing people to improve their relationships. They called for future research in this area.

The current study explored the influence of prolonged writing, or writing multiple letters over time, as a means to better understand possible cumulative effects of expressive, gratitude driven writing on the author's well-being. To do so we measured change in two primary variables of well-being: happiness and life-satisfaction.

Happiness is often defined as a feeling of gladness and satisfaction or contentment, suggesting increased insight, and therefore subjective selection and consideration about the important things in one's life (Griffin, 2006). Myers (1992) described happiness, or subjective happiness as it is often called, as a lasting sense that life is fulfilling, meaningful, and pleasant. Happiness includes emotional states of joy, contentment, positive well-being, and a perception that one's life is worthwhile (Lyubomirsky, 2001). Diener and Seligman (2002) have shown that individuals with high levels of happiness possess an abundance factors such as joy, contentment, and the perception that life is valuable. Conversely, unhappy people report fewer satisfying relationships and less gratitude (Park, Peterson, Martin & Seligman, 2004). Happiness and fulfillment is an important and increasingly common pursuit of people around the world (Diener, 2000; Diener, Suh, Smith & Shao, 1995). While happiness is often assumed to be highly related to life-satisfaction this is not necessarily the case. According to some researchers (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007) the correlations are modest and one is not always an indicator of the other, especially when assessed at particular times or in various contexts. As a result, this investigation looked at these variables separately.

Life-satisfaction is commonly referred to as the cognitive and personal assessment of general quality of life and is based on unique or personalized criteria that varies among individuals (Shin & Johnson, 1978; Goldbeck, et al., 2007). This cognitive comparison of various criteria results in one's general satisfaction with life and is supported by previous research (Diener, et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993; Moller & Saris, 2001; Praag & Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2004) as a general evaluation because it allows for measurement of overall life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985; Headey & Wearing, 1989). Tatariewicz (1976) stated that "life as a whole" (p. 8) is an important indication of one's affective state and one important index of happiness. Diener et al. (1985) assert that an overall assessment of subjective life satisfaction is attainable, allowing individuals to weigh various domains in whatever way they choose and derive a subjective perception of life satisfaction. Life-satisfaction clearly

has stronger cognitive features than happiness. Those cognitive tendrils reach into the related concept of gratitude, fortifying its candidacy as the vehicle of change.

Gratitude is typically comprised of appreciation, thankfulness, and a sense of wonder (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). It indicates that people can extract the most satisfaction and enjoyment from life events and facilitates positive experiences (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Positive emotions such as gratitude contribute to more favorable cognitive judgments of life-satisfaction and overall well-being (Diener & Larsen, 1993; Buss, 2000; Diener, 2000; Stack, Argyle & Schwarts, 1991; Suh, Diener, Oishi & Triandis, 1998) and experiencing or expressing those emotions have been shown to further improve well-being and happiness (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

Watkins, Grimm and Kolts (2004) suggested the hallmark of grateful persons is the appreciation of the simple things in life. Numerous studies have shown that personal gratitude contributes to subjective happiness (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough et al., 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This was evidenced in a study that showed subjective happiness was increased simply by counting one's acts of kindness during the past week (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui & Fredrickson, 2006). As an expression of gratitude, acts of kindness have been shown to increase happiness over a 10-week period simply by engaging in kind acts such as holding the door for strangers or doing a roommate's dishes (Tkach, 2005). Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade (2005) found that acts of kindness over time, as opposed to doing them all in one day, improved happiness levels. Such finding suggests that happiness can be boosted through sustained and intentional gratitude-oriented activities.

Recently, a concerted and broad-based effort was made to examine the impact of a full spectrum of character strengths regarding health and well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The endeavor revealed that gratitude is among the most beneficial character strengths due to its strong impact on well-being (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Gratitude plays two important roles in the present investigation. First, as the independent variable gratitude is the agent for potential change in happiness, life-satisfaction, and gratitude. Second, if tilling the soil of gratitude with expressive writing shows significant changes in the domains of happiness, life-satisfaction, and gratitude itself it would present a simple means for improving important aspects of well-being. Participants put pen-to-paper or fingers-to-keys to assess the intentional activity of positive expressive gratitude, what Fordyce (1977; 1983) called a volitional strategy, in order to assess potential change in well-being.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Student participants were drawn from six classes at three campuses in a large Midwestern university system. Three of these classes were comprised of the experimental group, which engaged in the letter writing campaign, and three randomly selected classes participated as the controls who did not engage in writing. These classes were not positive psychology courses, which could contribute to improvement of the variables under consideration, leaving participants happier than if found them. This should mitigate potential confounds that might be present in a positive psychology course. For letter writers the task was a class assignment which, if completed, resulted in a grade for student participants.

Table 1. Demographics

| Demographic | Control Group | | Experimental Group | | Totals |
|------------------|---------------|------|--------------------|------|--------|
| | N | % | N | % | N |
| Marital Status | | | | | |
| Married* | | | | | |
| Divorced** | 4 | 10 | 6 | 13.3 | 10 |
| Single*** | 14 | 35 | 5 | 11.1 | 19 |
| Race | 22 | 55 | 34 | 75.6 | 56 |
| African-American | | | | | |
| Caucasian | 1 | 2.5 | 4 | 8.9 | 5 |
| Multiracial | 38 | 95 | 39 | 86.7 | 77 |
| Year in collage | 1 | 2.5 | 2 | 4.4 | 3 |
| Fr. | | | | | |
| So. | 17 | 42.5 | - | - | 17 |
| Jr. | 10 | 25 | 1 | 2.2 | 11 |
| Sr. | 8 | 20 | 12 | 26.7 | 20 |
| Graduate/other | 5 | 12.5 | 29 | 64.4 | 34 |
| | - | - | 3 | 6.7 | 3 |

*Married=Never divorced; **Divorced=Includes separated & remarried; ***Single=Never married.

The average age of the sample was 26.7 with a median age of 23 (*range*=18-52, *sd*=8.44). Eighty-five percent (*n*=72) of participants were female and 15% (*n*=13) male. See table 1 for sample demographics.

2.2 Procedure

Participants in the experimental group (*n*=44) typed or hand-wrote three letters of gratitude that emphasized the expression of gratitude over an 8-week period of time. Students were permitted to use either method based on research that shows writing by hand versus word processor makes no significant difference (Harley, Sotto, & Pennebaker, 2003). Instead, what matters most is expressive writing with a focus on meaningful content. Participants were therefore instructed to avoid trivial letters (e.g. "Thank you" notes for material gifts) and alternatively compose non-trivial letters which included something significant for which they felt gratitude toward the recipient. Participants were instructed to be reflective, write expressively, and compose letters from a positive orientation. The expressive writing intervention was limited to three letters to avoid "over-practicing" or a plateau of diminishing returns (Brickman & Cambell, 1971; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Writers were examined in two primary ways on happiness, life-satisfaction, and gratitude; within group and between groups. The within group comparison assessed change in the authors over four time periods. It was intended to measure whether or not writing letters of gratitude influenced the authors after the first letter (time 2), compared to their baseline measurement prior to letter writing (time 1), and with subsequent letters (times 3 and 4).

The between group assessment compared the experimental group to a control group (*n*=40) who filled out the same questionnaires, at the same points in time, but did not write letters of gratitude. The only difference between groups was the introduction of the letter writing campaign for the experimental group at times 2, 3 and 4. Participants in the control group had no knowledge of the letter writing endeavor.

The time frame between letters for all participants was approximately two weeks with minimal variation and therefore evenly-spaced intervals. Letters were examined by the instructors, not to read, but to check against basic guidelines (e.g., non-triviality, author identification, return address, a stamped envelope, etc.). The primary investigator was responsible for mailing the physical letters. Participants were aware that letters would be mailed to the intended recipients, therefore increasing the psychological realism of the exercise.

The questionnaires took approximately fifteen minutes to complete and included a demographic form (filled out once at T1), the Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, &

Griffin, 1985), the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and an exit survey (T4 only) which included questions regarding participant experience such as time spent writing, writing method, and general perceptions of the process.

2.3 Measures

Gratitude Questionnaire – 6 (GQ6) is a brief self-report measure of the disposition toward experiencing gratitude. Participants answer 6 items on a 1 to 7 scale (1 = "strongly disagree", 7 = "strongly agree"). The GQ-6 has good internal reliability, with alphas between .82 and .87, and there is evidence that the GQ-6 is positively related to optimism, life satisfaction, hope, spirituality and religiousness, forgiveness, empathy and pro-social behavior, and negatively related to depression, anxiety, materialism and envy (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLS) is a 5-item measure that assesses life satisfaction as a whole. The scale does not assess satisfaction with specific life domains, such as health or finances, but allows subjects to personally integrate and weigh these domains (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985; Pavot, Diener, Colvin, & Sandvik, 1991).

The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS) is a short 4-item questionnaire that quantifies subjective happiness with regard to absolute ratings and ratings relative to peers. The SHS has been validated in 14 studies consisting of international data across various age groups (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Results have indicated that the SHS has high internal consistency, which has been found to be stable across samples. Test-retest and self-peer correlations have suggested good to excellent reliability. Construct validation studies of convergent and discriminant validity have confirmed the use of this scale to measure the construct of subjective happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The SHS has been found to range between good-to-excellent with regard to validity and reliability in 14 studies (N = 2732). The SHS has demonstrated high internal consistency (from 0.85 to 0.95 in seven different studies), and high test–retest stability (Pearson's $r = 0.90$ for 4 weeks and 0.71 for 3 months). This scale has correlated highly with informant ratings of happiness ($r = 0.65$).

2.4 Results

Table 2 presents the means of each group on the three scales (happiness, life-satisfaction, and gratitude) for each of the four measurement times. A two-way repeated measures analysis of variance was performed for each scale. The between-subjects factor for each analysis was group (letter-writers vs. non-writers), and the within-subjects factor was time. It was of particular interest to determine if the interaction between group and time is significant for any of the scales. This finding indicates that one of the groups demonstrated a differential growth over time on that scale than did the other group.

Table 2. Means on the three scales over time

| | Time | | | | Combined Time |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| Happiness | | | | | |
| Letter-writers | 18.69 | 20.31 | 21.51 | 22.38 | 20.72 |
| Non writers | 19.58 | 21.21 | 20.84 | 21.42 | 20.64 |
| Combined Groups | 19.10 | 20.70 | 21.11 | 22.00 | |
| Life Satisfaction | | | | | |
| Letter-writers | 5.18 | 5.51 | 5.53 | 5.58 | 5.50 |
| Non writers | 5.16 | 5.22 | 5.24 | 5.38 | 5.30 |
| Combined Groups | 5.17 | 5.36 | 5.40 | 5.50 | |
| Gratitude | | | | | |
| Letter-writers | 35.73 | 36.13 | 36.24 | 36.80 | 36.23 |
| Non writers | 35.14 | 35.16 | 34.30 | 33.70 | 34.57 |
| Combined Groups | 35.43 | 35.65 | 35.27 | 35.25 | |

The results, presented in Table 3, show that two significant interactions were obtained: happiness and gratitude.

Although both groups demonstrated an increase over the four testing periods, the letter-writing group increased in their happiness scores with larger increments over time. Specifically, the letter-writers increased at each testing time, with a final increase of 3.69 points. The non letter-writers increased from time 1 to time 2, but then decreased at time 3, and then increased slightly again at time 4. The final increase for non letter-writers was only 1.84 points. More importantly, the letter-writers, who started with a smaller initial mean than did the non letter-writers, ended with a larger mean at time 4.

Table 3. Results of Repeated Measures ANOVA's on the three scales

Time

| | df | MS | F |
|--------------------------|-----|--------|---------|
| Happiness | | | |
| Between-subjects | | | |
| Group | 1 | .62 | .01 |
| Error | 80 | 57.97 | |
| Within-subjects | | | |
| Time | 3 | 113.06 | 45.88** |
| Time x Group | 3 | 19.48 | 7.91* |
| Error | 240 | 2.46 | |
| Life Satisfaction | | | |
| Between-subjects | | | |
| Group | 1 | 3.25 | 1.22 |
| Error | 80 | 2.67 | |
| Within-subjects | | | |
| Time | 3 | 1.37 | 3.3* |
| Time x Group | 3 | .35 | .81 |
| Error | 240 | .43 | |
| Gratitude | | | |
| Between-subjects | | | |
| Group | 1 | 222.05 | 2.30 |
| Error | 80 | 96.65 | |
| Within-subjects | | | |
| Time | 3 | 2.74 | .371 |
| Time x Group | 3 | 25.38 | 3.43* |
| Error | 240 | 7.40 | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The effect for time was also significant, but this finding only indicates that there was an overall difference among the four testing periods when group was not considered. The means for happiness summed over group were the following: time 1 = 19.06; time 2 = 20.70; time 3 = 21.11; time 4 = 21.85. The difference from time 1 to time 4 was 2.79 points. The simple effects analysis between groups for each time was not significant for happiness.

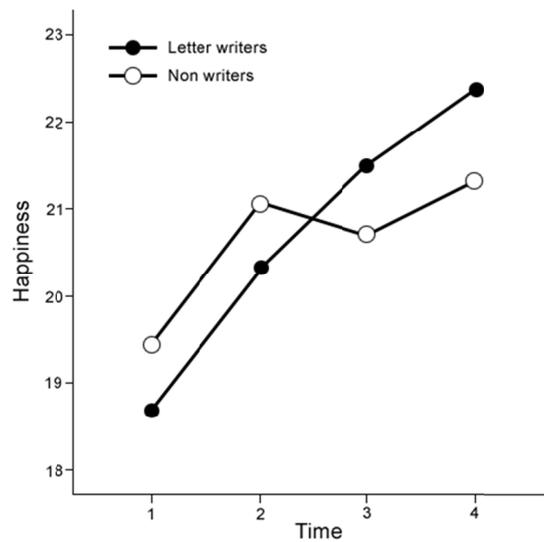


Figure 1. Estimated marginal means by groups on happiness.

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between the two groups on gratitude. In this case, the scores on gratitude for the non letter-writing group actually decreased over time, whereas the scores for the letter-writing group somewhat increased. The letter-writers demonstrated an overall increase of 1.07 points from time 1 to time 4, whereas the non letter-writers demonstrated an overall decrease of 1.44 points. The simple effects examining the difference between the two groups at each time showed that the letter-writers and non letter-writers were significantly different in their gratitude at time 4 ($F=7.32$; $df=1,80$; $p<.01$). The mean difference between the two groups at time 4 was 3.10.

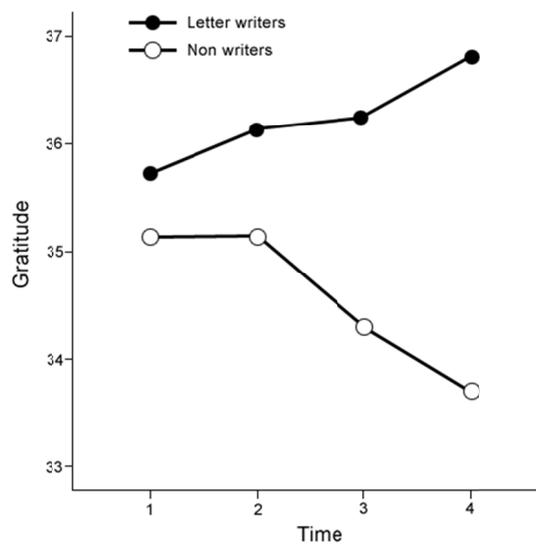


Figure 2. Estimated marginal means by groups on gratitude.

Considering life satisfaction, an interaction between the letter-writers and non letter-writers over time was not found. The two groups demonstrated slight, consistent increases in life satisfaction over the four times, and their patterns were similar. The effect for time was significant, indicating that the increase over time was significant when group was not taken into consideration. The means for life satisfaction, summed over group, were the following: time 1 = 5.17; time 2 = 5.36; time 3 = 5.39; and time 4 = 5.48. The difference between time 1 and time 4 was only .31. No significant simple effects were found for time between the two groups on life satisfaction.

3. Discussion

The act of writing three letters of gratitude was found to positively impact young adult college students in two sub-domains of well-being: happiness and gratitude. Similar to previously studies (Van de Creek et al., 2002; Watkins et al., 2003; Lyubomirsky et al., 2009) the current research showed the most significant improvements in well-being via happiness. These gains in happiness were accomplished through a 3-letter writing campaign and manifested in two ways; from letter to letter, demonstrating a cumulative impact, and compared to participants who did not engage in writing. Previous research

focused on a single letter while this investigation was the first to examine multiple letters over time. As a result, evidence regarding a cumulative effect for both happiness and gratitude indicated that sustained writing is beneficial. In other words, practice was shown to improve the author's global sense of well-being on two fronts.

These findings contribute to the literature in four specific ways. First, expressive writing was confirmed as a method for improving multiple aspects of well-being (Pennebaker's, 1997; 2004). Expressive writing within the parameters adopted in this study, and as a method for change, was shown to be beneficial for the authors.

Second, but related to the first point, letters of gratitude contribute to the validity of intentional activity (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a; Seligman et al., 2005; VandeCreek, Janus, Pennebaker, & Binau, 2002). The volitional act of writing letters of gratitude supports previous research which demonstrated that individuals have the ability to direct positive change in their lives (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). In the present study, sustained reflection and elaboration on gratitude fortified previous research which found "counting one's blessings" can improve gratitude, especially with regard to recounting meaningful or significant events (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005), as well as happiness by savoring and expressing positive events and situations (Park et al., 2004). However, action is requisite. The present investigation demonstrated one such intentional activity that utilized an otherwise dormant reserve of gratitude made manifest through sustained writing.

Third, this study successfully employed Fordyce's fundamentals (1977; 1983) in the form of an intentional activity to increase happiness. It expanded on Fordyce's work by demonstrating that young adults can, in addition to increasing positive affect (happiness), build on or improve gratitude. Letters of gratitude engaged participants in an activity that met Fordyce's definition of a volitional behavior: socializing, practicing optimism and thankfulness, being present-oriented, a sense of wonder, and the ability to glean satisfaction and enjoyment from life events (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004) in order to enact positive change. This is particularly significant if we consider, as Krause (2006) explained, this topic is largely unexplored, and that gratitude is a characterological and enduring feature of the personality (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This trait-grounded interpretation may explain why sustained writing (3 letters) is important. It simply takes longer to enact change in trait-based qualities such as gratitude.

Fourth, findings suggest that letters of gratitude provide a practical and simple intervention for helping a normal and relatively happy population (young adult college students) improve subjective well-being. This raises the possibility that such intentional activity may contribute in positive ways to quality of life. It is a reasonable extension to assume that self-directed letter writing may benefit others who, for example, suffer from

maladies such as depression. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to make such assertions but it is something to consider in future inquiries.

Life-satisfaction was not statistically significant but a trend showed improvement over time. Life-satisfaction as a variable was probably the least likely to change as a result of the letter writing activity. As a cognitive factor it represents what authors (Diener et al., 1985; Headey & Wearing, 1989) have referred to as a general or "life as a whole" (Tatarkiewicz, 1976, p. 8) analysis of one's overall satisfaction with life (Pavot & Diener, 1993). It would be a testament to the letters of gratitude activity if a short writing campaign could change one's global perceptions of life, but this was not the case. The trend suggests further investigation is warranted but no conclusions can be drawn about life-satisfaction based on the results of this study.

4. Limitations

An obvious limitation of the study was the homogeneous sample regarding sex, educational level, and initially high scores on happiness and life-satisfaction which restrict generalizability. Another limitation stems from the sampling procedure. Participants in the control groups were included based on random class assignments but the experimental group was drawn from the same type of class across three campuses. A more random and diverse approach toward the selection process is suggested. Sample size should also be increased.

Some researchers have called attention to the potential interpersonal confounds of mailing such letters (Lyubomirsky et al., 2009). The present authors assumed that mailing the letters was valuable because it added psychological realism and responsibility. While we echo Lyubomirsky's concern regarding a potential confound it is unknown whether or not this is an issue. Future investigations should explore and control for this potential problem. One method for doing so is to mail all letters after the final composition is complete in order to prevent recipient feedback during the writing campaign. Until more is known we maintain that the author's knowledge that the letter would be received is an important part of the process. It is also a positive artifact for the recipient.

5. Future Directions

The current findings are encouraging but future letters of gratitude research would benefit from additional considerations. First, a more far reaching methodology that would allow for the assessment of the interpersonal nature of the process would lend interesting insights. For example, a methodology that codes various types of author-recipient relationships: significant other, parent, friend, or child. The preexisting nature of the author-recipient relationship may provide insight into the level of impact based on who one writes. This

question is aligned with the work of Slatcher and Pennebaker (2006) who found that people who engaged in expressive writing became more expressive with their partners, leading to improved stability for individuals in normal, healthy relationships (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006). Others have supported social connections as fundamental to individual gratitude (Otake et al., 2006). Understanding the recipient might help identify the most powerful use for letters of gratitude. Anecdotal evidence from the current investigation suggests the recipients were usually immediate family, friends, and significant others. Rojas (2006) found that some interpersonal domains such as the immediate family matter more when it comes to satisfaction and subjective well-being. Expressing gratitude toward a Good Samaritan versus a family member may have different results and warrants further investigation.

Second, future research might build upon existing evidence that demonstrates those who benefit most from being benefactors, such as volunteer workers, are those who need it most (Astin & Sax, 1998; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Writing letters of gratitude would provide a relatively easy intervention for those who suffer from depression or feel isolated, but further investigation is needed.

Third, looking beyond the authors would enhance the knowledge base regarding expressive writing. To this end, exploration of potential benefits for the recipients, as well as improvements in the author, and the author-recipient relationship, should be studied. This was not the goal of the current investigation but is an option for future work.

Finally, based on the limitations of the present study, future investigations might compare groups based on equal male-female sample size but also character traits (verses state levels) related to happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude. Related trait characteristics such as optimism/pessimism, openness, or trait happiness could provide insight into the best practices for the letters of gratitude method. Others have suggested the results of a specific activity, in this case letter writing, can have varied influence on one's motivation and subsequently their ability to benefit from a particular exercise (Sheldon, K. M. & Kasser, T., 1995; Sheldon, K. M. & Elliot, A. J., 1999). In other words, letter writing may have suited some participants in this study but not others. Analyzing the so called person-activity fit might improve our understanding regarding which intentional activities would be most beneficial to the participants.

6. Conclusion

This study contributed to the literature by generating evidence that multiple letters of gratitude could not only sustain happiness, as proposed by the sustainable happiness model (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005) but improve both happiness and gratitude. Results suggest the quality (expressive and gratitude directed) and quantity (three letters) of writing contribute to the cultivation of improved well-being. Findings indicate that the

emotionally driven construct of happiness improves most and improve more with continued writing. Gratitude also showed improvement with a three-letter effort. Sustained effort yielded meaningful results. In other words, silent gratitude is of little good but its expression (through writing) allows one to tap into and benefit from this otherwise dormant or private resource.

The importance of multiple letters over time is an exciting finding which, coupled with the knowledge that gratitude is more than a positive emotion like happiness, has further implications. Three letters of gratitude gain traction as participants work with the resource of gratitude. In fact, it is important to consider gratitude as a valuable resource. Tapping into this otherwise silent asset has immediate emotional benefits in terms of affect (happiness) but presents additional gains for authors regarding thankfulness and appreciation (gratitude). The power of gratitude is well established but this investigation provided evidence that the intentional activity of letter writing can make a difference in well-being.

Just three installments of 10-15 minutes (average writing time for 35% of the sample) and one page in length (53% of the sample) was sufficient to usher in positive change. This suggests that as an intentional activity, letters of gratitude can have important benefits for authors in a relatively short period of time. The findings presented in this study indicate that putting one's feeling and thoughts of gratitude on paper has real benefits after the pen leaves the paper. The preexisting and often silent resource of gratitude can be mobilized in the pursuit of not happiness alone but toward the growth of gratitude and ultimately well-being. Gertrude Stein seemed to know something about this when she said, "Silent gratitude isn't very much use to anyone." According to the present findings, writing letters of gratitude is an intentional activity that supports that sentiment.

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