



Why do people prefer gratitude journaling over gratitude letters? The influence of individual differences in motivation and personality on web-based interventions



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2014

Received in revised form 30 October 2014

Accepted 2 November 2014

Keywords:

Gratitude

Motivation

Positive psychology

ABSTRACT

Gratitude interventions can be divided into those that explicitly cultivate appreciative feelings (gratitude journaling) and those that strengthen relationships (gratitude letter). There is an absence of research on the motivation to participate in different gratitude interventions. Using an experimental approach, we compared two gratitude interventions on underlying motivations for starting and completion. We provided students ($N = 904$) with an opportunity to start a web-based intervention (gratitude journaling or letter). Subsequently, we measured the perceived usefulness of the intervention, social norms related to using this intervention, their self-control, and intention to start the intervention. Results showed that keeping a gratitude journal and writing a gratitude letter to someone were perceived as equally useful and socially acceptable. Yet participants felt less efficacious in writing a gratitude letter, which in turn decreased self-initiation and the actual completion of the intervention. As for individual differences, people with greater dispositional gratitude expected the intervention to be easier, more beneficial, and socially acceptable; meaningful sex differences also emerged. Our findings provide new insights into underlying motivations and individual differences that influence the initiation and efficacy of gratitude interventions.

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1. Introduction

Expressing gratitude to another person via a letter offers a unique vehicle for furthering one's own gratitude (Toepfer & Walker, 2009) and enhancing social relationships (Lambert, Clark, Durtzsch, Fincham, & Graham, 2010; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Yet, when introduced to a variety of positive psychological interventions, people rarely show a preference to write gratitude letters to benefactors. In a recent study on self-initiated interventions, people were five times more likely to keep a journal about people, objects, and events that produced gratitude than use emails, texts, or phone calls to express gratitude to someone (Parks, Della Porta, Pierce, Zilca, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). To further understand the preference for and efficacy of gratitude interventions, we explored why people may prefer gratitude journaling over the expression of

gratitude to specific benefactors. This is an important line of inquiry as theorists suggest that people will gain more from an intervention if there is congruence with their values/interests/preferences (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2007). As a secondary aim, we investigated the role of grateful dispositions (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), and sex (Kaczmarek, Goodman, et al., 2014; Kaczmarek, Kashdan, et al., 2014) as individual differences that influence motivation towards the self-initiation of gratitude-related interventions.

1.1. Perspectives on gratitude

Gratitude stems from the recognition that one has obtained a benefit that can be attributable to the actions of another person or some impersonal (e.g., God, nature) sources (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Grateful feelings can be attended to and contemplated individually – and this has been formalized into an exercise where people report their daily experiences in a journal (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Additionally, the experience of gratitude can be communicated to the benefactor – and this has been formalized

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into an exercise where people write and deliver a letter of thankfulness (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

The interpersonal expression of gratitude is of particular interest for the science of well-being. In addition to personal benefits such as greater life satisfaction and fewer depressive symptoms, sharing grateful feelings offers relational benefits, promoting close relationship formation and maintenance (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Lambert et al., 2010). The presence of satisfying, meaningful social relationships has been shown to be the most robust predictor of whether or not someone can be classified as “very happy” (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Sharing grateful feelings appears to be one way to strengthen and nurture social relationships.

Despite studies that document the efficacy of gratitude interventions, whether focused on personal experiences or the behavioral expression (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lambert et al., 2010; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012), little is known how these activities are self-initiated in everyday life (Kaczmarek et al., 2013; Parks et al., 2012).

1.2. Underlying motivations for gratitude interventions

When people are given an opportunity to begin a gratitude intervention on their own, their intentions and actual behavior can be predicted by components of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) – beliefs about the likely consequences of behavior (utility beliefs), beliefs about others’ expectations of the behavior (social norm beliefs), and beliefs about being able to handle the challenges inherent in starting and maintaining an intervention (self-control beliefs) (Ajzen, 1991; Kaczmarek, Kashdan, et al., 2014). To date, the only study that explored dissimilarities in belief systems across various positive psychological interventions was conducted with a sample of acutely suicidal psychiatric inpatients (Huffman et al., 2014). Huffman and colleagues found that out of 9 interventions, the two most efficacious were writing a gratitude letter and gratitude journaling, respectively. Interestingly, writing a gratitude letter was ranked as one of the three most difficult interventions to complete, whereas gratitude journaling was ranked as one of the two easiest interventions to complete. Difficulties associated with the gratitude letter were echoed in the feedback session as “negative comments focused on feeling too overwhelmed to complete the writing portion or to carry out an activity requiring interpersonal engagement”. These findings suggest that utility and self-control beliefs will be lower for the gratitude letter compared to gratitude journaling.

As further evidence for this hypothesis, theorists have argued that the psychological benefits of expressing gratitude to another person often come with negative outcomes (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Being thankful towards other people means that a person is dependent on other people for their well-being and this sense of vulnerability can be viewed as uncomfortable (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). These emotional costs, however, are often lower for people who are more grateful and by definition, biased toward perceiving help as beneficial (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Thus, the expression of gratitude may be related to stronger social bonds at the expense of personal well-being (Wood et al., 2010). Taken together, the psychological costs of writing gratitude letters are greater than gratitude journaling and these costs might translate into (low utility and self-control) beliefs that affect self-initiation.

1.3. Current study

By contrasting gratitude letters (interpersonal) with gratitude journals (individual), we sought to explore differences in two of

the most efficacious positive psychological interventions (Huffman et al., 2014; Seligman et al., 2005). Using the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), we explored potential differences in motivations for each of these interventions that in turn, influenced self-initiation and for those that took part, completion. Based on prior research, we hypothesized that people would have lower utility and self-control beliefs to write gratitude letters compared to journals.

Happiness seekers are a heterogeneous population and pre-intervention levels of targeted outcomes might differ and influence decision-making (Parks et al., 2012). To date, no study has examined whether individual differences in the threshold for experiencing gratitude influences the self-initiation and completion of gratitude interventions. As a secondary aim, we expected dispositional gratitude to be positively related to each TPB component (utility, self-control, and social norm beliefs). Finally, these motivational beliefs were expected to influence the self-initiation and completion of gratitude interventions.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 904 undergraduates (75.6% female) between the ages 18 and 50 years ($M = 20.54$, $SD = 2.49$). Groups of students were approached before classes by experimenters and invited to a study about well-being. Those who volunteered constituted 93.38% (response-rate) of 968 students who were initially approached. Volunteers remained anonymous and were not offered incentives. Missing data (0.61%) were determined to be random via Little’s test, $\chi^2(566) = 555.49$, $p = .61$, and were imputed using Expectation–Maximization algorithm (Enders, 2001) in SPSS 21. Participants who did not report their sex ($n = 19$) were excluded from analysis. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant.

2.2. Procedure

Participants received leaflets with a description of a gratitude intervention – random assignment based on randomizer.org. Subsequently, participants reported their utility beliefs, social norm beliefs, and self-control beliefs regarding this intervention. They were informed that if they wanted to try out this intervention they should enter a dedicated website with instructions within the next seven days. Following that, behavioral intentions towards the intervention were measured.

Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a gratitude journal and the remaining to the gratitude letter intervention. All participants received the following information: “In recent years, research in psychology has established that performing certain activities can result in increased well-being and happiness.” Following this, they were given intervention specific information.

For the *gratitude letter*:

“One of such activities is the ‘gratitude letter’. In this activity you write a letter to someone to express your gratitude. You type this letter using a dedicated website and send it over e-mail or traditional post, or hand it in personally. The whole intervention involves writing three gratitude letters with weekly intervals.”

After visiting the website they read this instruction:

“There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Write a brief letter to someone whom you would like to thank. After you finish this survey,

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