


The Gratitude Visit: Student Reflections on a Positive Psychology Experiential Learning Exercise

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine students' subjective experiences and insights in response to engaging in a positive psychology exercise focused on gratefulness that was part of a college course. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of 97 reflection assignments submitted as part of undergraduate and graduate level positive psychology courses at a large public university. A grounded theory approach to qualitative research guided the analytic process. Six major themes emerged, including students' thoughts about the interventions and difficulties with the experience, how the gratitude visit impacted their interpersonal relationships, reflections on the construct of gratitude, the effect of the intervention on their mood and stress levels, and beliefs about how the experience had and would continue to affect their lives beyond the course. Our findings support prior research suggesting the beneficial impact of experiential learning and imply that such experiential exercises are feasible in multiple levels of psychology courses.

Keywords: Higher education, positive psychology, gratitude, experiential learning

Positive psychology is the study of human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001). This includes the psychological factors that allow people to thrive, live a meaningful and fulfilling life, and enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. In the past few decades, positive psychology research has flourished due to increased public interest and advocacy from positive psychologists (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Seligman, 2019; Sheldon & King, 2001). Experimentally tested interventions that promote constructs such as gratefulness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) and kindness (Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, & Fredrickson, 2006) have been shown effective at increasing well-being. Furthermore, positive psychology interventions have clinical relevance for depressed, older, and highly-motivated individuals (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) and may promote physical health (Kushlev et al., 2020).

Three positive psychology interventions (i.e., the gratitude visit, listing three good things daily, and using

signature strengths) have been shown to foster long-term happiness and lessen depression (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Woodworth, O'Brien-Malone, Diamond, & Schuz, 2017). However, replication studies suggest that these positive psychology intervention participants may fare no better than control participants who receive a positive placebo (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). Further research is needed to better understand the potential mechanisms that might explain the positive effects of such exercises, and for whom the exercises may be most impactful. In recent years, the field is being more thoughtfully defined to encompass the variation of possible outcomes of interventions. The effectiveness of interventions delivered electronically has been studied (e.g., Wellenzohn et al., 2018), cross-culturally (Flores & Lee, 2019), and clinically (Chakhssi, Kraiss, Sommers-Spijkerman, & Bohlmeijer, 2018). Positive education, or the implementation of positive psychology interventions into schooling, has also been

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studied (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009).

Positive Psychology and Higher Education

In recent years, many positive psychology interventions have been developed and studied in various contexts, one being the classroom. Positive psychology courses in universities have surged in popularity, such as the happiness course at Yale University, “The Science of Well-Being,” which has turned out to be the most popular course ever offered at the institution (Hathaway, 2020). Similar courses have proliferated throughout academia as positive psychology has infiltrated popular culture (Smith, 2019). Self-discipline and grit have been raised as applicable positive psychological constructs for the academic success of college students (e.g., Duckworth & Seligman, 2005), but other constructs may be more relevant to general well-being of students. Given the staggering number of college students reporting severe stress, anxiety, and pressure to succeed (American College Health Association, 2019), organizational-level initiatives to enhance student resilience and well-being have increased in number and are contributing to a new model promoting student well-being in higher education (Watts, 2017). Proponents of implementing positive psychology into such programs argue that the subfield lends itself to coursework through the use of its empirically studied interventions, which are often applicable to students’ own lives (Waters, 2011).

Prior research has documented the psychological and subjective well-being benefits of taking a positive psychology course that includes positive psychology experiential learning exercises, such as writing a letter of gratitude to someone whom one had not formally thanked and writing down three good things that bring joy, pleasure, or meaning in life every day (Goodmon, Middleditch, Childs, & Pietrasiuk, 2016; Maybury, 2013; Seligman et al., 2009). As a replication of an earlier study of positive psychology course outcomes (Maybury, 2013), Goodmon et al. (2016) found that increased happiness and life satisfaction, lower depression, and lower stress were reported by students in a positive psychology course, which included experiential exercises relevant to gratitude, character strengths, altruism, forgiveness, and savoring, compared to students enrolled in a control course. As positive psychological experiential exercises hold promise for promoting well-being in the classroom, further understanding of how students engage with such course exercises is necessary.

Current Study Aims

Despite these examples of implementing experiential exercises in positive psychology courses, to our knowledge no study has evaluated students’ perceptions of class-required interventions or assignments. One experiential exercise from the intervention literature, the “gratitude visit” exercise (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Seligman et al., 2005), is one of the more involved and difficult exercise to complete as it requires participants to potentially leave their comfort zones and explicitly express gratefulness to another person.

Gratefulness is a well-studied construct in positive psychology that has been linked to emotional and interpersonal benefits, including positive affect (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). It is also associated with fostering healthier behaviors, including healthier eating (Fritz, Armenta, Walsh, & Lyubomirsky, 2019). Longitudinally, higher gratitude seems to foster social support and protects from stress and depression (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008), although a recent meta-analysis of gratitude interventions suggests these effects may be modest for depression and anxiety (Cregg & Cheavens, 2020). However, it may be the case that they are more effective for general well-being and happiness, as suggested by prior meta-analyses (Dickens, 2017).

Despite the growing significance of experiential positive psychology interventions, including gratefulness, in higher education courses, there remains a lack of exploratory research regarding the subjective insights of the participants. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine students’ subjective experiences and insights in response to engaging in a positive psychology exercise focused on gratefulness.

Method

Qualitative methodology has emerged as vital in understanding how positive psychology interventions are interpreted and experienced by participants (Corbin, 2017; Rich, 2017). As such, a grounded theory-inspired approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to data analysis was used to illuminate the subjective experiences reflected in the assignments by employing constant-comparison and inductive coding methods.

Participants

The study sample consisted of students who were enrolled in six undergraduate level courses (five of which were honors level courses) and one graduate level course focused on the introductory study of

positive psychology ($N = 119$) at a large public university in the Northeastern United States.

The undergraduate courses were not offered exclusively to psychology majors, but the graduate level course was offered to psychology masters and doctoral students. Students were not required to have any prior knowledge of positive psychology, making them an ideal sample to provide access to the subjective experience of pedagogy as it applies to positive psychology.

One hundred and nine students were enrolled in the courses. Ninety-seven assignments were eligible for inclusion in the analysis. Of the twelve assignments excluded, ten did not include the required written reflection of the experience, but just submitted the gratitude letter they wrote. Two students did not submit an assignment.

Procedures

After institutional review board approval, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of assignments submitted as part of undergraduate and graduate level positive psychology courses at a large public university in the Northeastern United States. The study examined students' subjective experiences and insights in response to positive psychology exercises that were part of a college course reflected in their written homework assignments (where students were asked to "skillfully reflect upon and discuss" their experiences with these exercises). Over the course of the semester, each of the exercises were assigned in an order which progressed from being solely intrapersonal to more interpersonal, such that participants reflected on their relationships with others more as they progressed. The assignments were based on evidence-based interventions from the positive psychology literature, including identifying and using one's character strengths (Seligman et al., 2005), listing three things one is grateful for each day for a week (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005), writing a future obituary for oneself imagining one has lived a fulfilling life (Vail et al., 2012), practicing active and constructive responding to others (Passmore & Oades, 2014), savoring (Jose, Lim, & Bryant, 2012), and engaging in philanthropic versus pleasurable acts (Otake et al., 2006). The course culminated in the "gratitude visit" exercise (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Seligman et al., 2005), the most involved and difficult exercise to complete.

The data consisted of de-identified content pulled from the study sample's written class assignments. The principal investigator designed and conducted all courses between 2015 and 2019 and graded the

assignments for course credit prior to them being considered for the research study. To avoid biasing results, the principal investigator who taught the courses and may have been familiar with the identity of students through their responses was not involved in the coding of assignments. The first author designed and conducted all analyses but was not involved in conducting the courses.

Students were encouraged to reflect honestly about their encounters with the experiential assignments, and, because homework grades were based on engaging with the exercises in good faith and providing insightful, thoughtful responses, there was no explicit incentive to react in a particular way. The course was designed to allow students to critically think about and experience positive psychology interventions. Although students self-selected into this course and it was not required, many students took the course for multiple reasons, beyond an interest in positive psychology (e.g., fulfilment of an elective requirement).

Assignments from all students who were enrolled in the courses were included. However, students who did not follow the instructions for the assignment or did not submit the assignment were excluded from the analyses. Students were encouraged to respond critically and honestly to discourage adjustment of their opinions in their reflections. Exercises were pitched as an "inquiry" and to discuss them thoroughly. The analyses were conducted after the conclusion of the courses and participants were not aware that their assignments' content would be subjected to thematic analysis by coders other than the principal investigator's grading.

The gratitude visit assignment was the final of seven assignments designed to allow the students to engage in and reflect on positive psychology topics and interventions discussed in the course. Participants submitted the assignment to an electronic course management program used by the university. The instructions given to the students for this assignment were:

Think of someone to whom you are very grateful, but who you have never properly thanked. Compose a letter to them describing your gratitude, and read the letter to that person by phone or in person. Write a 1-2 page essay describing your experience (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Seligman et al., 2005).

Students were permitted to adapt the assignment with permission of the instructor (i.e., send the letter via email rather than read it to the person they were expressing gratitude to) or to opt out of the assignment if they asserted that it made them feel too

uncomfortable. No demographic information was obtained or associated with participants' data.

Data Analysis

Downloaded content was uniformly formatted and de-identified before analysis. Data analysis was conducted by a graduate student investigator and a team of trained undergraduate research assistants. A grounded theory approach to qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided the constant-comparative analytic process. This enabled thorough and transparent inductive coding (i.e., topics apparent in the data) and theme generation, in addition to deductive coding (i.e., topics determined by the research team before reviewing the data). Thematic analysis, a method of qualitative data analysis which emphasizes the active role of the researchers in identifying key points from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to determine resulting themes.

Qualitative data were analysed using MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019). Deductive and inductive coding methods were employed by the study personnel. Before beginning the coding process to determine inductive codes, a list of deductive codes was generated based on the assignment prompt and prior review of the literature. A constant-comparative method of analysis was utilized to ensure reliability and validity of the results (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For each assignment, the graduate student and two trained undergraduate research assistants first independently reviewed one-third of all transcripts, which they used to generate preliminary inductive codes, or topics that arose in the data. The researchers then met to compile a preliminary code book, which was used to code all transcripts. Study personnel met weekly throughout the coding process in an iterative process of coding and discussing any patterns or changes to the codebook. Disagreements in coding were resolved by discussion among the coding team. All added or updated codes

Results

Themes

Six major themes emerged from the data after analysis, including students' thoughts about the interventions and difficulties with the experience, how the gratitude visit impacted their interpersonal relationships, reflections on the construct of gratitude, the effect of the intervention on their mood and stress levels, and beliefs about how the experience had and would continue to affect their lives beyond the course. See Table 1 for representative quotes for each of the themes.

Thoughts about the intervention. Overall, students expressed satisfaction with the experience of completing the gratitude visit and the assignment. They felt that they gained insight into the intervention and gratitude itself, and also experienced positive emotions as a benefit of completing the assignment.

One student wrote that the previous class assignments were "hit or miss and never transformative, but this really brightened my whole week. I still feel great about it and want to do it again!" Another agreed, stating that they felt "the most notable increase in happiness resulting from any of the [previous] assignments."

Difficulties of the experience. The experience was not easy for all students. Most students described the awkwardness and nervousness they felt at having to be so open and vulnerable with people in their lives. Not only was this the first time many had expressed such feelings to the particular person they addressed their gratitude letter to, but for some it was the first time expressing these feelings to anyone due to the students' reserved personalities or to their family dynamics. Some students wrote that they were uncomfortable because their target (usually their parent) had never expressed such emotions themselves. One student remarked that just "having to say those words out loud was definitely a challenge."

Although difficult, most students expressed that they were happy they overcame the awkwardness and completed the visit. Only a few expressed negative consequences, such as one student who felt "uncomfortable and unsettled for a while after [doing the assignment]." They did not find the experience to be worth the discomfort.

Relationship reflections. One of the most cited reasons for the positive emotions resulting from the experience was relationship improvement. Whether to a parent, sibling, friend, or mentor, students experienced improved perceptions of their relationship with the recipient of their letter. Although most reflected on change in how they felt themselves, many also shared that their target expressed gratefulness for the experience. It brought them closer together, whether the experience itself was comfortable or more difficult. One student summed up the effect with, "It was very eye-opening, and it really made me think about how precious and beautiful the relationships we have can be." The most frequent targets of the gratitude letter and visit were students' mothers (the timing of the assignment in the course often happened to be around

Table 1. Themes and representative quotes

Theme	Sample Quote
Thoughts about the intervention	<p data-bbox="560 237 1445 371">“Overall, I’m very happy I did this. I feel like I learned a great deal about myself and my mom in the process and I feel the most notable increase in happiness resulting from any of the assignments we’ve had this semester.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 383 1445 483">“All of the other assignments have been hit or miss and never transformative, but this really brightened my whole week. I still feel great about it and want to do it again for someone else honestly!”</p> <p data-bbox="560 495 1445 663">“Gratitude visits, from my small sample size of a gratitude visit, really can change your week, maybe your life, or at least your momentary mood, as were the cases with me. And even despite being normally appreciative towards a lot of things, I think there’s a worthwhile difference in expressing overt gratitude.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 674 1445 752">“This letter was a great idea and I’m happy I wrote it and read it, but having to say those words out loud was definitely a challenge.”</p>
Difficulties of the experience	<p data-bbox="560 775 1445 831">“Honestly, doing this assignment left me feeling uncomfortable and unsettled for a while after.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 842 1445 943">“I was not too keen on this assignment compared to the other ones. This one pushed me very far out of my comfort zone, and although I don’t regret doing it, I feel as though it was not worth the discomfort.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 954 1445 1066">“I don’t know if I would do this again. I have mixed feelings because it does take a lot of emotional energy, and being so emotional and vulnerable is still uncomfortable, but it is very gratifying experience.”</p>
Relationship reflections	<p data-bbox="560 1077 1445 1200">“I feel closer to her, and I’m really glad that I took the time to give her the thank you I know she deserves. It was very eye-opening, and it really made me think about how precious and beautiful the relationships we have can be.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 1211 1445 1379">“At the very end I felt really good about my relationship with my mom and suddenly started to highlight all the other things that she had done for me. I used to be upset over a few petty things and never thought of how hard she worked to ensure that I would have a good life and a good education.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 1391 1445 1491">“I think now that we were able to become a little bit more intimate with each other, she’d be less afraid to ask me for anything and more willing to hear what I have to say to her.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 1503 1445 1648">“I think that’s the biggest thing that I learned through this exercise. That we often assume other people know our feelings towards them, when they actually may not. This made me realize that I should never miss a chance to tell someone how much they mean to me, because they may not realize just how much they really matter.”</p>
Reflections on gratitude	<p data-bbox="560 1659 1445 1827">“...Instead we quickly say “thank you” and go about the rest of our lives and don’t convey our gratitude in a meaningful way. But after doing this activity, I realize the true value that ‘a meaningful thank you’ can have on the other person and yourself. It was honestly so surprising to see how different I felt emotionally after giving my gratitude to my mother.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 1839 1445 2051">“Though it may sound cliché, this experience was indeed challenging and enlightening. As mentioned previously, expressing graciousness is not my strong suit. In fact, I felt somewhat uncomfortable doing so. I don’t know. I guess maybe I feel guilty because I haven’t ever necessarily “expressed” thanks the proper way towards my mother. Nevertheless, I felt the result was worth the struggle.”</p> <p data-bbox="560 2063 1445 2148">“The task definitely opened my eyes up to the importance of being thankful, and that it is not only important to think about your thankfulness, but to vocalize it and say it.”</p>

“We should not take things for granted, and since we don't know what will happen in the future, we should always take opportunities to thank others. If we keep waiting for the most convenient time, we will keep forgetting.”

“I have always said thank you to him without using my words. It felt really great to explicitly use those two words.”

“I think through this gratitude “visit” process I learned something else about why I do not express my gratitude as often. I think it has something to do with my sense of independence. Because I don't like relying on people maybe I subconsciously view expressing gratitude as admitting to my dependency.”

“I think I'm grateful for the selfish reason in that I got the chance to experience this, and get these feelings off my chest. I think it puts my heart at ease that I got this opportunity to voice my gratitude in person.”

“By being thoughtful in my gratitude towards someone, the content of my thanks did not feel like a socialized response and allowed me to experience a deeper connection with that person.”

Effect on mood or stress levels

“I also felt good about myself for making her so happy. Receiving my mom's reaction in the midst of all the finals stressed really cheered me up and helped me feel more motivated to work through the final push of the semester.”

“I am grateful that I was exposed to such powerful activities, especially during a stressful time in my life.”

“I wanted to improve my mother's mood before she goes into oral surgery this Friday so that she could avoid stressing about it. Similarly, I was hoping that this exercise would improve my own mood going into finals week so that I can be less stressed about my exams and hopefully perform well on them.”

“In midst of my monologue, I feel lighter. I feel freer.”

“When I was done writing I already felt better; I felt like I got something off of my chest. It was very relieving even though I didn't feel like I needed relief beforehand.”

Life beyond the course

“I do plan to spread my emotions face-to-face more often with everyone in my life, as this assignment has led me to realize the importance of interpersonal relationships and connections.”

“I learned a great deal about myself and did something that I knew I had to do regardless and for those reasons I would say, for a lack of a better term, it was “rewarding.” It was important to me that I did this and I don't regret it, in fact I'm relieved that I finally did this.”

“I just want to let you know that this course taught me a lot about happiness and in applying what I learned to my everyday life, I have actually been able to feel happy again, and for that I am grateful also.”

“It gives me a sense of satisfaction with my life, and I hope to continue these two activities throughout my life, because they truly made a difference on my attitude and mental state.”

“It felt as if I had addressed something on my mind for a long time, but I was never consciously aware that it existed.”

“Each of these assignments served a unique purpose, and in conjunction with Dr. Seligman's findings, the class has proved very helpful and “positive.” This class evokes feelings of happiness and hope; it brings about the idea that where there is a will there is a way, and that there is some sort of meaning that we each must find.”

Mother's Day), and many expressed feeling closer to their mother after formally thanking them for the sacrifices their mothers made. One student wrote, "At the very end I felt really good about my relationship with my mom....I used to be upset over a few petty things and never thought of how hard she worked to ensure that I would have a good life and a good education." Sacrifice for their child's personal well-being was frequently discussed. Several students of parents who had immigrated for the benefit of their children, in particular, acknowledged they had never personally thanked their parents for their struggles.

Reflections on gratitude. Students reflected on gratitude as a construct as it related to the assignment, as well as how it related to psychology in general. Regarding the assignment, one student stated, "The task definitely opened my eyes up to the importance of being thankful, and that it is not only important to think about your thankfulness, but to vocalize it and say it." This was a sentiment expressed by several participants. In addition, many commented on how often thanks are expressed in everyday life, yet we "don't convey our gratitude in a meaningful way." The act of writing a letter specifying gratefulness and then reading it to the targeted recipient enabled students to interact more intensely with gratefulness. The majority of students discerned the difference between practicing gratitude, as described in the psychological literature, and the common shallow expression of thanks. As one student put it, "I think I'm grateful... that I got the chance to experience this, and get these feelings off my chest." Another described the expression of gratitude as meaningful "because I haven't ever necessarily 'expressed' thanks the proper way towards my mother. Nevertheless, I felt the result was worth the struggle."

Effect on mood or stress levels. A benefit described by students was the effect completing the exercise had on their mental and emotional health. "...I felt like I got something off my chest. It was very relieving even though I didn't feel like I needed relief beforehand." As the gratitude visit was the culminating experience for the positive psychology course, it was completed toward the end of each semester. This coincided with final examinations for most students, and this was reflected in their responses. The positive emotions elicited by this experience for most students helped them improve their mood and ease their stress during this particularly demanding time of the semester. The experience relieved enough stress to make one participant "feel more motivated to work through the final push of the semester."

Life beyond the course. Students encompassed their broader reflection of this assignment within their reflection about the course as a whole. Many students expressed surprise that participation in the course and the experiential exercises impacted them so much. Students mentioned that they "learned a great deal about myself" and that the assignment "enabled me to reexamine my approach to everyday life for the better and I am also grateful for that." Many claimed they believed there would be long term effects that would create positive emotions in the future. One student wrote that the assignment, and the class in general, "evokes feelings of happiness and hope; it brings about the idea that where there is a will there is a way, and that there is some sort of meaning that we each must find."

Discussion

The intent of this study was to provide insights into the teaching of positive psychology at the college level and to contribute to the field of positive psychology by illuminating the subjective responses to a particular positive psychology intervention, the gratitude visit. Deductively, we analyzed the data to determine how students felt about this exercise. Reflections were mostly positive, although challenges were cited. In particular, some students experienced awkwardness with the vulnerability that the exercise exposed them to, or disrupted in an uncomfortable way, their typical ways of relating to a close other. This has implications for how we teach positive psychology and how we use experiential exercises in psychology courses, in general. Although students from this sample were receptive to and impressed with the exercises, additional support for the difficult aspects of exercises such as these may be warranted. Nevertheless, implementing experiential exercises in psychology courses may enhance learning. This can inform pedagogical decisions about psychology course construction, particularly positive psychology courses. Our findings support prior research suggesting the beneficial impact of experiential learning (Biswas-Diener & Patterson, 2011), and imply that such experiential exercises are feasible in multiple levels of psychology courses.

Students were not asked to discuss outcomes or specifically relate this work to their lives. However, we found an abundance of deep and thoughtful reflections from the students. Some even projected long-term effects of having completed the exercise. This suggests that students in positive psychology courses, and psychology courses in general, are capable of deeply

engaging with experiential exercises. Many students noted how gratitude may be applied in other parts of their lives beyond the classroom. Given the high levels of distress reported by college students, easily implemented interventions are worth studying and incorporating into undergraduate education. Integrating evidence-based positive psychology experiential exercises into college courses in psychology and general education may be one way to broadly target undergraduate and graduate students with high levels of distress (Magyar-Moe, 2011).

Many students related to the subject as a whole. This was likely spurred by the cumulative intention of the exercise. As the final and most involved exercise to complete for the positive psychology course, students were expected not only to internally reflect on or engage with the gratitude construct but to use it interpersonally, with someone who meant a great deal to them. Students in our sample elicited strong meaning from these experiences in their reflections and are a testament to the value of using qualitative methods to illuminate the subjective experience of positive psychology exercises. Although one theme from the current study elucidated the difficulties some students had with the exercise, they usually expressed that they were glad to have had the experience. Very few participants expressed negative effects of participating in the exercise. Further research should explore the reasons why expressing gratitude may be detrimental for some.

As researchers continue to determine the mechanisms behind the power of positive psychology interventions (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012), the experience of individuals participating in them is vital to this pursuit, including measure development. Findings such as these from the present study are also useful for psychologists to understand how to best implement interventions into targeted populations, such as with college students (Magyar-Moe, 2011).

One limitation of this study is the lack of collected demographic information. Due to this, the data cannot be characterized by demographic variables. The current study's sample consisted of mostly honors college undergraduates, in addition to one first-year general undergraduate and one graduate course. In Fall 2019, the university, a large, suburban public institution in the Northeastern U.S., had an undergraduate population that was 50.5% male and 30.1% White, 27.0% Asian, 12.6% Hispanic or Latino, and 6.8% Black or African American. For the same year, the graduate population

was 42.5% male and 44.5% White, 10.0% Asian, 8.4% Hispanic or Latino, and 5.5% Black or African American (Enrollment Dashboard, 2020). It is important to note that the honors and graduate students were likely not reflective of the general population of students, and this may limit the findings' generalizability. In addition, the qualitative data were not correlated to any quantitative measures. A strength is the rich qualitative data garnered from students interacting with the material in real time and providing their opinions free from expectancy effects.

Gratitude, in particular, is a well-studied and potentially powerful positive psychological construct that is relevant to many types of people. Gratitude is linked to many positive physical and mental health outcomes, as well as to decreased stress over time (Wood et al., 2008). It also is relevant to the study of successful and healthy social relationships (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Our findings suggest that it is also a concept easily understood and accepted by college students, one of the populations that may have the most to benefit from gratitude interventions. As one student wrote, "...after doing this activity, I realize the true value that 'a meaningful thank you' can have on the other person and yourself. It was honestly so surprising to see how different I felt emotionally after giving my gratitude to my mother." Future research should expand these exploratory findings to aid in the construction of valid measures, as well to more fully understand how best to utilize positive psychology to improve well-being. For example, which aspects of the intervention are the most salient for participants and may be driving effects? Are there individual differences that make gratefulness interventions more impactful for some people over others? Are well-being improvements due to intrapersonal reflection about gratefulness, or are they actually due to the effect the intervention has on participants' social relationships? And, as far as implementation in college settings, when is the most opportune time to integrate these concepts in coursework? What are the long-term effects of taking such a course? Future research should consider these questions to strengthen this body of literature.

Compliance with Ethical Standards Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) also approved this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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