

LETTERS OF GRATITUDE AS A METHOD FOR IMPROVING FAMILY RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

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This study explored the impact of writing letters of gratitude on family strength factors. Emerging adults wrote three letters of gratitude over time to assess if the gratitude induction improve family emotional involvement and perceived family criticism. Two-hundred-nineteen participants were compared over a four-week period. A 2 (writers vs. non-writers) x 2 (pretest vs. posttest) repeated measures ANOVAs revealed improvements in family emotional involvement by authors. No significant change in family criticism was found. Findings suggest that the act of writing letters of gratitude represents a relatively simple, cost-effective strategy to strengthen perceived family emotional involvement.

The premise of this study was to explore if the written expression of gratitude would positively impact family relationship quality, specifically, perceived family emotional involvement and family criticism. The process of contemplating and writing in an expressive manner is a powerful method for positive emotional change (Harley, Sotto, & Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker, 1997). The current study employed this framework of positive expression to affect and examine specific changes in perceived family relationships due to the gratitude induction of letter writing.

GRATITUDE

Gratitude has been defined as “awareness and apperception of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself” (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009, p.6) and commonly contains an appreciative quality for a gift or concrete act (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). The established orientation of gratitude toward the act of material gift-giving persists in the literature (Emmons, 2004). Emmons and Crumpler (2000) stated, “Minimally, gratitude is an

emotional response to a gift (pg. 56).” They contend this tends to cast gratitude as an individual experience in relation to an object or distinct act when someone becomes “aware of and thankful for the good things that happen” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 412). This investigation departed from the tradition of gratitude for a gift by examining gratefulness for emotional support. The focus was on the less tangible “awareness and apperception of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself” by orienting participants to consider and write about general support or kind acts by others as opposed to material gifts (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 412). Letters of gratitude in this study were not “thank you notes” for gifts; instead, they refocused participants toward relationships and emotional connection to others. This circumvents potential obligatory appreciation while orienting gratitude by asking authors to think about kind acts and interpersonal support. Previous research has shown that gratitude expressed toward a person or relationship instead of a material gift improved individual well-being (Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012; Toepfer and Walker, 2009). More germane to this investigation, gratitude has also been shown to enhance a general sense of coherence between people when it was focused on non-tangible experiences (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009). We expand on these findings by exploring whether or not letters of gratitude might fortify that interpersonal link to strengthen perceptions about family relationships.

GRATITUDE IN RELATIONSHIPS

Robust literatures show not only increases in author health and well-being due to the expression of gratitude, but also improvements in relationships and social functioning (Algoe et al., 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky 2006; Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012; Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Wood et al., 2008). Lambert and Frank (2011) found that gratitude increases the positive perception of one’s partner and subsequently improves the perception of the relationship.

Much of the research on interpersonal gratitude has concentrated specifically on marital relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Schramm, Marshall, & Harris, 2005; Sharlin, 1996) and generally shows positive effects in both long- and short-term

romantic relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Sharlin (1996) showed that verbal gratitude expression between married partners lead to more satisfying marriages over time. There are also immediate effects. Newly married couples benefit from expressing gratitude toward one another and enjoy higher marital satisfaction and better adjustment (Schramm et al., 2005). Perceived positive behavior of a partner was improved without behavioral change in that partner due to the expression of gratitude the same day (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Slav, 2006). Findings consistently show the expression of gratitude by couples improves communication and strengthens relationships (Kramish, 1956; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). The effect is so strong that in couples with an acknowledged divide, such as an unequal division of labor, the expression of gratitude quickly dissipated negative feelings (Klumb, Hoppmann, & Staats, 2006). Gratitude has been described as the most powerful variable for improving couple relationships when compared to factors such as effective communication, domestic labor, and listening (Hawkins, Marshall, & Allen, 1998). Together, these findings underscore the significance of gratitude expression as a strategy to strengthen and improve significant social relationships.

FAMILY STRENGTHS FRAMEWORK

The family strengths framework is a model that promotes strong and positive family relationships (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). The framework outlines parameters for gratitude inductions to work within complex family systems. Based in a global perspective DeFrain and colleagues identified several qualities that describe "strong families," which include: *showing appreciation and affection*, *commitment*, *positive communication*, *enjoyable times together*, *spiritual well-being*, and *the ability to manage stress and crisis effectively* (DeFrain & Asay, 2007; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2007). Writing letters of gratitude is a direct expression of these qualities, specifically *positive communication* and *showing appreciation*, as a method for strengthening families. Previous research in gratitude expression as a method for strengthening relationships and reducing negative feelings toward family members make gratitude inductions a natural fit with the family strengths framework (Klumb et al., 2006; Lambert et al., 2010). Writing letters of gratitude is a manifest act of those vary qualities.

THE EMERGING ADULT

Emerging adulthood is a socially and culturally constructed period of life characterized by fluctuation in life roles and responsibilities that present multiple options and lack major commitments such as serious romantic relationships and careers (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2006a; Arnett 2006b; Tanner, 2009). Research suggests that the contemporary transition to adulthood spans the ages of 18-34 years (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). There is consensus that emerging adulthood begins at 18 but its conclusion varies within the literature where the end of the stage could be approximated to be 25 or 29 years of age (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2001). Arnett (2007, p 68) has been careful to say "roughly" when referring to the end of the age bracket because it varies depending on the individual and the culture in which they live. While there is some debate regarding the exact end of emerging adulthood, it is the conceptual characteristics (e.g., fluctuating life options, lack of serious romantic relationships, continued education) which remain the central tenet of the stage. Emerging adulthood is about the development of enduring choices of love and work that are in the process of developing.

During the emerging adult years, many adult children receive extensive support from their parents as they become more independent (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselman, Zarit, Furstenberg, & Birditt, 2012), which we propose may provide a context for them to be grateful and appreciative toward others, especially parents. This study explored whether the written expression of gratitude could be used to strengthen family ties among emerging adults who face the developmental task of establishing autonomy while often relying on their family for support (Furstenberg, 2010; Nelson et al., 2007). The context of emerging adulthood is fertile ground for grateful sentiments to potentially improve emotional involvement toward the family of origin.

HYPOTHESIS

This exploratory study examined the extent to which expressed gratitude, over time and in written form, fostered positive changes in emerging adult authors of their perception of family relationships. Specifically, *emotional involvement* and *perceived criticism* of family relationship quality was measured in the author

after writing a series of gratitude letters. Grounded in the family strengths framework this provides the framework for two hypotheses:

Research question #1 (H1): Writers, compared to non-writers, will perceive increased family emotional involvement over time.

Research question #2 (H2): Writers, compared to non-writers, will decreased perceive criticism from their family over time.

METHODS

Participants. In the current study, participants match both the conceptual standards and the age requirements for emerging adulthood with a mean age of 22. Age is part of the framework, but salient factors such as being single and enrolled in college full-time characterize participants as emerging adults.

Participants were 219 adults with a total of 31 men and 188 women selected from a research pool across three campuses at a large Midwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 years old, however, for the purposes of the current study we selected an analytic subsample of adults ages 18-34 years ($M_{age} = 22.3$, $SD = 4.3$), representing the ages for the contemporary transition to adulthood (Furstenberg et al., 2004). The great majority of respondents reported being single and never married (71.5%), whereas ~24% reported being married, engaged, or cohabiting and less than 4% reported being separated or divorced. The experimental group included 151 adults, 18 men and 133 women. Eighty-seven percent of respondents identified as Caucasian ($n = 131$), 9.3% identified as African American ($n = 14$), 2% identified as Hispanic ($n = 3$), and 1% of respondents self-identified as other ($n = 1$) or other ($n = 1$). *Table 1* provides demographic details for the experimental and control groups.

“Table 1 about here.”

Participants who completed the project were compensated with research extra credit from instructors of participating classes. The study was approved by the university Internal Review Board.

PROCEDURE

The current study includes two groups of respondents, including a control group (non-letter writers) and an experimental group

(letter writers). Respondents in the experimental group completed a battery of questionnaires four times at 1-week intervals. During weeks two, three, and four respondents in the experimental group also composed a letter of gratitude, resulting in four measurement periods. The control group completed the same inventories at time one and four without the writing component. Participants were not privy to the upcoming letters. Instead, they were told only that an additional assignment was forthcoming. The instructions for composing the letters were identical each week, with the condition that there could be no repeat recipients. Multiple letters to the same recipient may cause diminishing returns. Finding new content to be grateful for could have been challenging and reduce the impact of the exercise, as the literature shows with repeated gratitude inductions (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Including that condition removed that possibility.

WRITING THE LETTERS

Participants in the experimental group ($n = 151$) composed letters either by hand or word processor. Research supports either method as it has been shown to make no significant difference when used for similar expressive writing studies (Harley, Sotto, & Pennebaker, 2003). Participants were instructed to write non-trivial letters of gratitude to an individual to express appreciation for them. Participants were asked to be reflective, write expressively, and compose letters from a positive orientation while avoiding "thank-you notes" for material gifts. Writing was restricted to three letters to avoid "over-practicing" or a plateau effect of diminishing returns (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Sixty-two percent of participants wrote between half a page to one full page and 79% of writers took 15–30 minutes to complete their letters of gratitude. Letters were individually examined by the primary investigator to ensure the basic guidelines (e.g., non-triviality, expression of gratefulness, return address, a stamped envelope, etc.) were followed. The primary investigator mailed the physical letters after the third and final composition in order to prevent recipient feedback. Participants were aware that letters would be mailed to the intended recipients, therefore increasing the psychological realism and ownership of the exercise.

MEASURES

Questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes to complete at each of the four intervals of testing. In addition, a demographic and exit survey was included at the fourth and final assessment. The primary scale utilized in the current study was the Family Emotional Involvement and Criticism Scale (FEICS).

FEICS. The FEICS consists of 14 items and has two subscales: 7 items assess Perceived Criticism (PC; Example item: *"My family complains about what I do for fun"* and *"My family finds fault with my friends."*) and 7 items assess Emotional Involvement (EI; Example item: *"I am upset if anyone in my family is upset"* and *"If I am upset, people in my family get upset too."*). The scale is scored separately for PC and EI. The FEIC asks participants to describe their family and to rate them on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*almost never*) to 5 (*almost always*). Higher scores on the scales indicate higher levels of expressed emotion (EE). Shields, Franks, Harp, McDaniel, and Campbell (1992) reported an alpha coefficient of .82 for scores on the Perceived Criticism scale and an alpha coefficient of .64 for scores on the Emotional Involvement scale. Factor analysis of the FEICS showed a stable two-factor structure (Nelis, Rae, & Liddell, 2006).

RESULTS

Letters of Gratitude Recipients. When presented with the open-ended opportunity to write anyone they wished, participants chose the family more than all other possible recipients combined. Fifty-three percent of all letters were written to an immediate family member (parents, spouse, siblings). Stated another way, 348 of the 657 letters (0.52968) were composed to family members within their immediate family. Within the immediate family mothers were the most frequent recipients, receiving 55% (n=191.4 letters) of the letters while fathers and siblings received 15% (n=52.2 letters) each. Spouses received 12% (n=41.8 letters) of the letters.

The remaining 47% (309 letters) of the letters were written to recipients outside the immediate family. In descending order those letters went to: Non-married significant-others such as boyfriends and girlfriends (43%, n=132), friends (26%, n=79), grandparents (7%, n=22), acquaintances (5%, n=14), teachers (5%, n=14), aunt/uncles (3%, n=12), roommates (3%, n=12), coaches (2%, n=5), co-

workers (2%, $n=5$), civil servants (1%, $n=2$), and celebrities (1%, $n=2$). The "Other" category typically included single-instance letters to a future self, a God, celebrities (e.g., Ellen DeGeneres), and a deceased dog. The "Other" category also included strangers (2%, 5 letters) that could not be identified; these strangers had helped the authors in one way or another.

WRITTEN GRATITUDE EXPRESSION AND PERCEPTIONS OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

To test the effects of writing letters of gratitude on individuals' perceptions of their family relationships, we conducted a series of 2 (Time) \times 2 (Group) mixed method ANOVAs, separately for the following dependent variables: FEICS total, emotional involvement (EI), and perceived criticism (PC). Each model included a within-subject effect of time that tested differences from pretest to posttest and a between-subject effect of group that tested the differences between the experimental group (i.e., letter writers) and the control group (i.e., non-writers).

FEICS. Results for the total FEICS score revealed significant main effects of time and group that were qualified by a significant Time \times Group interaction (Table 2). The total FEICS score was significantly higher at posttest than at pretest, however, follow-up tests revealed this difference was only significant for the experimental group ($p < .001$). As expected, the experimental group reported higher total FEICS scores at posttest ($M = 44.34$, $S. E. = 0.54$) than they did at pretest ($M = 42.53$, $S. E. = 0.53$), whereas the difference was not significant for the control group ($p > .05$).

Emotional involvement. Results for emotional involvement with family revealed a significant main effect of time that was qualified by a significant Time \times Group interaction (Table 2). Perceived emotional involvement with family was significantly higher at posttest than at pretest, however, follow-up tests revealed that this difference was only significant for the experimental group ($p < .001$). As expected, the experimental group reported higher levels of emotional involvement with family at posttest ($M = 25.95$, $S. E. = 0.49$) than they did at pretest ($M = 24.77$, $S. E. = 0.47$), whereas the difference was not significant for the control group ($p > .05$).

Perceived criticism. In comparison, results for perceived criticism revealed no significant main effects and no significant

interaction effect. Contrary to our expectations, writing letters of gratitude did not significantly change adults' perceptions of criticism in their family.

DISCUSSION

Findings provided support for the utility of gratitude letters as a strategy to strengthen emotional ties between emerging adults and their family of origin. Emotional involvement was significantly improved due to writing letters of gratitude over-time and during a period when young adults and their parents are negotiating the balance between support and autonomy (Fingerman et al. 2012; Furstenberg et al., 2004). With each of the three letters, emotional bonds for authors became stronger. This means that by writing letters, without any reciprocal interaction, authors felt more emotionally involved with the family. This is true of the overall sample even when some letters were not written to members of the immediate family. Family members such as mothers, fathers, and some siblings were frequent recipients of the letters, but other recipients existed within the overall sample. Other recipients included friends, one's dog, and even celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres. The point is that as a group the process of considering and articulating gratitude strengthens the sense of being emotionally involved with one's family.

The gratitude letter induction fits squarely into the "strong family framework" as a practical method for increasing emotional involvement atop the pillars of *positive communication* and *showing appreciation*. Composing letters of gratitude is an act of relationship maintenance behavior by authors within these channels and may have various applications. First, gratitude letters may be beneficial for families with emerging adults (18-34 years) who are negotiating new boundaries and challenges between more autonomy and a need for familial support. Emerging adulthood has been described as an extended adolescence (Arnett, 2001) complete with high patterns of emotional dysregulation of emotions like anger, fear, and avoidance. Higher variability of negative emotions has been found in emerging adults compared to adolescence (Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). Letters need not be restricted to families with low emotional involvement to reap the benefits but Furman and Buhrmester (1992) showed that emerging adults

perceive a decrease in perceived support from parents, making them good candidates for the process. Certainly, the current letters of gratitude method is a means for bolstering strong families by employing *appreciation* and engaging in *communication*.

Second, individuals who do not have regular access to loved ones in real time can compose letters of gratitude and benefit from increased emotional support. Letters of gratitude do not require authors send the letters to receive the benefits of writing them. It is the writing that produces a sense of improved emotional support in the author. Letter writing provides an outlet for changing perceptions of emotional involvement at a restricted or safe distance when circumstances or geography otherwise prevent it. Letters of gratitude can be used in the way that Prasko et al. (2010) found estranged family members could use writing to make significant and positive changes with significant others. Minimally, writing letters of gratitude is a strategy to improve waning perceptions of familial support.

Third, there are potential therapeutic related benefits to writing letters of gratitude. The previously point regarding inaccessible family members is one potential tool for working through emotional content without face-to-face interaction. Therapeutically, writing has been shown to have numerous positive implications especially when focused on positive words or gratitude focused writing (Esterling, L'Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999). The current method employs exactly that type of writing. Much of the existing research on gratitude and relationships focuses on couples or partner relationships dyads (Algoe et al., 2008; Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011; Lambert et al., 2010) but there is evidence that couple-dyad methods can be used with the family as the central therapeutic factor (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Payne, 2000; Perosa & Perosa, 2001; White & Murray 2002). This investigation contributes to that growing literature by providing evidence of improved emotional involvement in authors by writing letters of gratitude.

Finally, related benefits should be noted. Major components of well-being including increases in happiness and life-satisfaction as well as a decrease in depressive symptoms have been shown in authors who wrote a series of gratitude letters (Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Toepfer et al., 2011). Writing gratitude letters fits into

Pennebaker's disclosure paradigm (1997) which has shown to improve health through similar gratitude inductions, especially important for those dealing with emotional issues. The overall benefits of writing a series of gratitude letters has a positive impact on author well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The hypothesis that *perceived criticism* would decrease in authors was not supported. A trend was observed but the effect was not significant. It is possible the design of the study may contribute to these results. First, the nature of criticism itself may be the issue. It may be difficult to reduce the perception of a specific criticisms through the general application of gratitude letters. Criticism is a concrete, observable behavior which is subject to being quantified in real time and remembered (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Gratitude letters as a method may not be nuanced enough to address specific criticisms, at least in the way they were written as open-ended in this investigation. A variant of the gratitude letter written to address a specific criticism may have a different impact, but such a targeted approach was outside the scope of this study. Second, Shields et al. (1992) found that when Perceived Criticism was partialled out, Emotional Involvement was positively, modestly correlated with depression and anxiety ($r = .25$ and $.22$, respectively). Thus, emotional involvement might reflect enmeshment, and be an indicator of less healthy factors.

Due to the homogeneity of the sample, generalizability is limited. It should be noted that the current sample was mostly educated, Caucasian females ($n=188$, 83% female), and in their twenties. Future research should strive to diversify the sample.

Additionally, this study did not employ Lyubomirsky and Layous' (2013) positive-activity model and measure of "Activity-Fit" to better understand if writing letters of gratitude was the preferred and therefore optimal method for improving author emotional involvement and perceived criticism. An activity-fit pre-test could indicate a variety of gratitude inductions that might better target author proclivities for expressing the emotion of gratitude.

Finally, future investigations should consider more rigorous controls regarding target recipients of the letters. This study showed

that writing gratitude letters changed authors' perceptions toward the family, but it did not distinguish meaningful differences between sub-groups within the family or, regardless of the high percentage (53%) of letters to family members, between recipients in-and-out of the family. Results suggest that authors are significantly influenced by writing to intimate others as a general group but does not provide evidence for sub-groups such as parents, spouses, siblings, or friends present meaningful moderators. Writing letters of gratitude improved overall family relationship quality by increasing emotional expression for authors but more detailed information is needed. Measuring change in the recipients of the letters is an additional step in gathering more information about potential change in the entire family system. Similarly, family versus non-family recipients should be tested if the authors focus on improvement of family relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study found that the act of writing letters of gratitude represents a simple, effective strategy to strengthen the family ties of emerging adults. The act of *positive communication* through letters of gratitude was a significant method for improving *emotional involvement* and supports the family strengths tenet that the family is the central source for emotional interactions in emerging adults (DeFrain & Asay, 2007). When given the opportunity to express gratitude to anyone in their life, emerging adults wrote most frequently to family members, particularly to their mothers, underscoring the continued importance of family relationships in their lives. Writing letters of gratitude may strengthen family bonds at a time when those emotional connections feel more tenuous as they become independent adults (Arnett, 2000; Nelson et al., 2007). Composing letters of gratitude had a positive impact on author perceptions of emotional involvement with the family and warrants further exploration.

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