

Student Paper

**Examining the influence of a gratitude journal intervention on university students' psychological wellbeing and engagement (a pilot study)**

Jake Benjamin & Andrew J. Holliman

**Abstract**

A pilot study was conducted to examine the effects of a two-week gratitude intervention on participants' engagement, gratitude, and life satisfaction. Five university students were randomly assigned to either the experimental gratitude journal condition or the control happiness journal condition. We found significant improvements in gratitude across both groups, but not for engagement or life satisfaction. Moreover, while the experimental gratitude journal group showed greater gains in all outcomes relative to the control happiness journal group, the differences were not statistically significant. These preliminary results indicate some merit in reflective journal activity (especially where the focus is on gratitude) and welcome future attempts at replication with larger and more diverse samples.

**Keywords:** *Wellbeing; University; Gratitude; Journal; Engagement.*

**Introduction**

Cultivating gratitude, defined here as the quality or emotion of being thankful and appreciative of one's circumstances, has been associated with a range of positive health benefits such as psychological well-being and happiness (Watkins et al., 2021) as well as life satisfaction (Robustelli & Whisman, 2018). However, there is a paucity of intervention work in this area and even less which examines the effects of gratitude on regulatory processes, such as motivation and engagement. In one notable exception, Nawa and Yamagishi (2021) found that a two-week online gratitude journal intervention had a positive impact on the

academic motivation of university students. This preliminary evidence suggests that the benefits of enhancing gratitude may extend beyond the realm of psychological wellbeing and also positively influence the regulation of goal-directed behaviours, such as motivation.

The present ‘pilot’ study was inspired by, and attempts to build on, this work. First, we used the construct of engagement rather than academic motivation, as this is the behavioural manifestation of motivation and is associated with academic outcomes at university (e.g., Collie et al., 2017). Second, it was important to establish whether the gains reported in Nawa and Yamagishi (2021) stem specifically from the gratitude component of the intervention or from the reflective journal activity more broadly (an inactive control group was used). We therefore included a more comparable control group, which involved reflective journal writing but not gratitude (we instead focused on happiness).

## **Method**

### **Design**

This was an intervention-based experimental pilot study with a pre- and post-design. The first independent variable was Group, and this comprised two conditions: the experimental condition, who received the gratitude intervention, and the control condition, who received the happiness intervention. The second independent variable was Time, and this comprised two timepoints of pre-intervention and post-intervention two weeks later. The dependent variables were engagement, gratitude, and life satisfaction.

### **Participants**

Five participants, aged between 20-25 years (three females and two males) were recruited via self-selective sampling using the participating university’s research participation pool.

### **Measures**

### ***Gratitude Disposition***

Gratitude disposition (experience of the emotion of gratitude) was measured using a 6-item gratitude questionnaire (GQ-6), (McCullogh et al., 2002).

### ***Engagement***

Engagement was measured using the 32-item 'University Student Engagement Inventory' (USEI), (Maroco et al., 2016).

### ***Life Satisfaction***

Life satisfaction was measured using the 5-item satisfaction with life scale (SWSL), (Diener et al., 1985).

### **Procedure**

Participating students were directed to a 'Qualtrics' survey that, after reading participation sheets and consent forms, prompted them to fill out basic demographics (e.g., age and gender). Afterwards, participants were randomly assigned via 'Qualtrics' algorithms to either the experimental gratitude journal condition (which involved written daily journal entries describing up to five events or thoughts that lead them to experience emotions associated with the state of gratitude) or the control happiness journal condition (which involved written daily journal entries describing emotions associated with the state of happiness).

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

<Table 1 about here>

A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was performed to investigate pre- and post-intervention changes (regardless of group): this revealed significant improvements in gratitude ( $z = -2.032, p = .042$ ), but not engagement (marginally NS,  $z = -1.826, p = .068$ ) or

life satisfaction. In the second analysis, and using ‘change’ scores, a Mann-Whitney-U test was performed to compare the effects of each group on the different outcome variables. No statistically significant results were observed; however, as can be seen from Table 1, the experimental gratitude group made greater gains in gratitude, engagement, and life satisfaction, relative to the control happiness journal group.

### **Discussion**

The results from this pilot study should be treated with a degree of caution; however, they do indicate that, at a descriptive rather than inferential level, there are benefits in engaging in reflective journal activities to promote psychological wellbeing and engagement, and that these benefits are more profound when the focus of journal entry is on gratitude rather than happiness. These are generally in line with the findings of Nawa and Yamgishi (2021); although the present study suggests there may be merit in the mere act of reflective journal writing (and not necessarily gratitude), which might partially account for the findings reported in Nawa and Yamgishi (2021). However, further work is required to help consolidate these preliminary findings using larger and more diverse samples.

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Table 1: Mean 'change' scores for each group on the three outcomes measures

Variable	Group	Pre-Post Mean Score Difference	
		Mean	SD
Gratitude (GQ-6)	Experimental ( $n = 3$ )	.72	.51
	Control ( $n = 2$ )	.33	.24
Engagement	Experimental ( $n = 3$ )	.42	.36
	Control ( $n = 2$ )	.38	.13
Life Satisfaction	Experimental ( $n = 3$ )	.53	.12
	Control ( $n = 2$ )	-.50	1.27

Note, mean-change scores were calculated by subtract scores at Time 1 from those at Time 2