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SECULAR AND SPIRITUAL GRATITUDE WRITING EXERCISES BENEFIT GRATITUDE, STRESS, POSITIVE MOOD, AND SPIRITUALITY

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ŚWIECKIE I DUCHOWE ĆWICZENIA WDZIĘCZNOŚCI KORZYSTNIE WPŁYWAJĄ NA WDZIĘCZNOŚĆ, STRES, POZYTYWNY NASTRÓJ I DUCHOWOŚĆ

Streszczenie: W badaniu sprawdzono hipotezę, że napisanie świeckiego lub duchowego listu wdzięczności przyniesie korzyści dla poziomu wdzięczności, stresu, nastroju i duchowości. Uczestnicy ($N = 57$) napisali świecki lub duchowy list wdzięczności lub napisali o jedzeniu, które jedli tego dnia (warunek kontrolny). Wyniki w dużej mierze potwierdziły hipotezę. Wdzięczność, pozytywny afekt i duchowość zostały wzmocnione dzięki obu ćwiczeniom pisania listów. Pisanie duchowych listów wdzięczności nie zwiększyło jednak duchowości w porównaniu do pisania świeckich listów wdzięczności. Tylko świeckie pisanie listów wdzięczności zmniejszyło poziom stresu w porównaniu z grupą kontrolną. Nie zaobserwowano różnic grupowych w zakresie negatywnego afektu. Zarówno duchowość, jak i świeckie ćwiczenia wdzięczności zwiększyły wdzięczność, pozytywny afekt i duchowość. W związku z tym dostosowanie interwencji wdzięczności do indywidualnych orientacji duchowych lub świeckich nie wpływa w różny sposób na wyniki. Osoby praktykujące wdzięczność za dobre samopoczucie, poprawę nastroju i duchowość powinny wybrać preferowane metody bez obawy o skuteczność.

Słowa kluczowe: wdzięczność, duchowość, stres, nastrój, interwencja wdzięczności

Abstract: This study examined the hypothesis that writing a secularly- or spiritually-oriented gratitude letter would show benefits for levels of gratitude, stress, mood, and spirituality. Participants ($N = 57$) wrote a secular or spiritual gratitude letter or wrote about food they ate that day (control condition). Results largely confirmed the hypotheses. Gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality were all enhanced because of either letter-writing exercise. Spiritual gratitude letter writing, however, did not preferentially enhance spirituality, as compared to secular gratitude letter writing. Only secular gratitude letter writing reduced stress levels, as compared to the control group. No group differences were observed on negative affect. Both spiritually- and secularly-based gratitude exercises enhanced gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality. Consequently, tailoring gratitude interventions to suit an individual's spiritual or secular orientations does not differentially impact outcomes. Practitioners of gratitude for wellness, mood uplift, and spirituality should choose their preferred methods without concern for effectiveness.

Keywords: gratitude, secular, spiritual, stress, mood, gratitude intervention

Background

Much empirical research has found that the practice of gratitude improves mental health, mood, resiliency, and well-being (Llenares et al., 2020; Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2016). Gratitude has thus become a central theme in positive psychology. Activities like writing letters of gratitude and making lists of things one is grateful for have been shown to enhance gratitude itself, along with happiness and well-being (Toepfer & Walker 2009).

Gratitude Enhancement

Research on gratitude enhancement is growing. For instance, in one study, Toepfer and Walker (2009) found important attributes such as positive affect, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and gratitude itself increased after participants wrote multiple letters of gratitude. These participants wrote letters approximately every two weeks over eight weeks, totaling four letters (Toepfer & Walker 2009). In related work, researchers have discovered the relevance of the disclosure phenomenon, a mental health benefit that occurs as a result of talking or writing about emotional and upsetting experiences (Pennebaker, 1997). This technique, commonly known as journaling (when written) offers relief from mental distress, and this type of journaling can be easily adopted. In one study, Emmons and McCullough (2003) asked participants to keep a journal of things they were grateful for. Keeping a gratitude journal had a beneficial impact on positive affect and well-being. Whether it be through writing a letter or keeping a journal, focusing one's attention on the blessings of life may be a powerful self-directed act to increase well-being. Previous studies have found a positive connection between gratitude and well-being (Bohlmeijer et al., 2022; Jackowska et al., 2016; O'Leary & Dockray, 2015). This could give way to a more specific connection between a gratitude intervention and its effect on mood.

Spiritual vs. Secular Gratitude

Researchers have studied how spiritual gratitude is similar to or different from secular gratitude and whether the benefits of each are comparable. Spiritually based gratitude is defined as being thankful toward a spiritual being or deity. Secularly based gratitude can be thought of as being thankful for a person, aspect, or moment in one's life. In one study focused on monotheistic religions like Christianity and Judaism, Rosmarin et al. (2011) discovered that spiritually-based and secularly-based gratitude had a positive influence related to happiness, life satisfaction, positive affect, and gratitude. Rosmarin et al. (2011) also noted that stress has been shown to influence spiritual gratitude and vice versa. The work of Krause et al. (2012) detailed participants' answers in interviews about spirituality and revealed that spiritual gratitude has a positive impact on stress levels. Importantly, the effects of stress on health are also buffered by spiritual gratitude, however, these effects were not tested on secular gratitude. Researchers have also delved into spiritual gratitude and its impact on other religions. Aghababaei & Taghi Tabik (2013) studied adherents to the Islamic faith and found that secular gratitude and spiritual gratitude improve measures of both mental health and subjective well-being.

Present Study

The present study tested the effects of spiritual and secular gratitude letter-writing interventions on gratitude, stress, mood, and spirituality. We hypothesized that (1) the secular and spiritual groups would exhibit higher scores on gratitude and positive affect and lower scores on stress and negative affect, and (2) on the spirituality outcome measure, the spiritual group would show higher scores in comparison to the secular and control groups.

Method

Participants

A total of 57 participants, comprised of 30 females, 25 males, and 1 non-binary individual, completed this experimental study. The average age of participants was 32 years (range = 18 to 80 years). The majority of respondents were White ($n = 50$) and all other ethnic groups comprised the remainder of the sample ($n = 7$). Participants in this research were recruited via social media, word-of-mouth, and fliers. Individuals who indicated that they were “not spiritual” were excluded from the study. Participants were provided with informed consent. This study was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

Procedure

Participants in this study were randomly assigned to one of three groups. Participants in the secular gratitude group ($n = 19$) were asked to, “Write about an experience in your life that has shaped who you are, for which you are grateful. Explain the event in full detail, trying to use all five senses.” Next, participants were asked to, “Write about the reasons you are grateful for this experience. As you re-imagine this experience and its impact on you, reflect on how the gratitude feels in your body.” Last, participants were asked to, “Write a brief note of gratitude to someone or an aspect of this experience that was particularly impactful for you.” Participants in the spiritual gratitude group ($n = 19$) were asked to, “Write about a spiritual experience in your life that you are grateful for. Explain the event in full detail, trying to use all five senses.” Next, participants were asked to, “Write about the reasons you are grateful for this experience. As you re-imagine this experience and its impact on you, reflect on how the gratitude feels in your body.” Last, participants were asked to write a brief note of gratitude to the Deity/Higher Power you believe made this happen.” In the control group ($n = 19$) participants were asked to, “Write about the food you ate yesterday, explain in detail what each meal consisted of, about the snacks or beverages consumed during the day and the environment in which you were eating.” Participants entered their text into

text boxes in the online experiment tool. Writing tasks lasted 10 minutes. After the writing task, participants proceeded to fill out the study measures.

Measures

Gratitude

The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 was used to measure levels of gratitude. This measure is designed to assess multiple facets such as intensity, frequency, span, and density of gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002). There are six items on the Gratitude Questionnaire-6, and each item is responded to on a 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) response scale. The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 has evidence of acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .82$) (McCullough et al., 2002). Evidence of construct validity has been provided in the form of factor analytic results showing a single factor and correlations of the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 with numerous other variables such as affect, spirituality, happiness, and optimism in expected directions.

In the present study, the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 showed an unacceptably low Cronbach's $\alpha = .58$. Given the importance of a measure of gratitude in this study, we sought to determine whether a subset of the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 items could be used that would possess adequate internal consistency. We examined all possible combinations of items that could be used to form two-, three-, four-, and five-item scales. A three-item scale was identified that consisted of the items: 1) If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list, 2) I am grateful to a wide variety of people, and 3) As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history. This three-item subscale had a Cronbach's alpha = .72. One other two-item scale which contained the second and third items in this scale also possessed a Cronbach's alpha = .72 but adding the third item allowed for a broader assessment and was equally reliable. We used the three-item version of the scale in all analyses in this study.

Emotion

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was used to assess both positive and negative affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). There are 20 items on the PANAS, and each item is responded to on a 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely) response scale. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule has evidence of acceptably high internal consistency reliability for positive (.86-.90) and negative affect (.84-.87), along with acceptable test-retest reliability for positive (.79) and negative affect (.81) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Convergent validity has been shown through factor analyses from a bank of mood descriptors by Zevon and Tellegen (1982), and

they correlate to positive and negative moods. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the positive (.91) and negative (.89) affect subscales was acceptable.

Stress

The Perceived Stress Scale four-item version was used to assess individuals' perceptions of stress (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). There are four items on the shortened Perceived Stress Scale, and each item is responded to on a 0 (never) to 4 (very often) response scale. The four-item PSS has evidence of acceptable reliability at .72 and test-retest reliability at .58. Construct validity was shown in three different samples, two samples of college students and one more from a more homogenous community (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the Perceived Stress Scale was acceptable (.75).

Spirituality

The Spirituality Scale was used to assess individual's experiences of spirituality (Delaney, 2005). The spirituality scale is a comprehensive instrument designed to index multiple aspects of spirituality including: "beliefs, intuitions, lifestyle choices, practices, and rituals" (Delaney, 2005, p. 145). This Spirituality Scale is on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The four-item PSS has evidence of high reliability at .94 and test-retest reliability at .84 (Delaney, 2005). Evidence of construct validity has been shown with correlations between the Spirituality Scale with factors of self-discovery, relationships, and eco-awareness (Delaney, 2005). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the Spirituality Scale was acceptable (.92).

Analyses

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and multivariate and univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were used to examine the study hypotheses. Post-hoc comparisons were done using LSD tests. Covariates included age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Eta squared and Cohen's d was used as the effect size estimates. One missing data point on the sex and spirituality variables was imputed using Hot Deck imputation (Myers, 2011). Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. SPSS version 29 was used for analysis.

Results

Multivariate analysis of covariance revealed statistically significant group differences on the multivariate composite of gratitude, stress, affect, and spirituality, Wilk's $L = .57$, $F(10, 94) = 3.06$, $p = 0.002$, $h^2 = .25$. Univariate analyses of covariance revealed

statistically significant groups differences on gratitude $F(2, 51) = 8.63, p < 0.001, h^2 = .25$, stress $F(2, 51) = 3.61, p = 0.034, h^2 = .12$, positive affect $F(2, 51) = 13.38, p < 0.001, h^2 = .34$, and spirituality $F(2, 51) = 5.13, p = 0.009, h^2 = .17$, but no group difference on negative affect $F(2, 51) = 1.43, p = 0.250, h^2 = .05$.

Pairwise comparisons revealed that both secular and spiritual gratitude groups were significantly higher on gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality, as compared to the control group. Only the secular gratitude group was lower than the control group on stress. See Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Errors for Study Outcomes by Group

Outcome	Control Group		Secular Gratitude		Spiritual Gratitude	
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Gratitude	18.25 _a	0.37	20.28 _b	0.38	19.99 _b	0.37
Stress	10.52 _a	0.53	8.51 _b	0.53	9.60	0.52
Negative Affect	18.38	1.40	15.48	1.41	15.51	1.39
Positive Affect	27.90 _a	1.58	39.40 _b	1.59	35.07 _b	1.57
Spirituality	97.39 _a	3.18	111.59 _b	3.21	107.07 _b	3.18

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at the $p < .05$ level by the least significant difference test.

Discussion

The results of the present study largely confirm the hypothesis that secular and spiritual gratitude letter-writing exercises improve gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality, as compared to a control group. This study found results similar to those of Toepfer and Walker (2009). In their study, the act of secular grateful writing led to higher levels of gratitude compared to a control group. The present study also found spiritual grateful writing led to higher levels of gratitude compared to a control group and this is also consistent with previous studies (Rosmarin et al., 2011). Secular gratitude letter writing also reduced stress levels, compared to a control group. Similarly, Jackowska et al. (2016) found that the activity of a gratitude journal decreased stress levels in a secular context. There was no statistically significant effect of the gratitude intervention on negative affect, although the pattern of results was as hypothesized, and the effect size approached a medium-sized effect. Interestingly, both spiritual and secular gratitude letter-writing exercises produced equal-sized increases in spirituality. In summary, the effect of gratitude letter writing, whether secularly- or spiritually-focused, was beneficial for levels of gratitude, positive affect, and spirituality, and secular gratitude letter writing was beneficial for stress levels. Interestingly, and in contrast to the findings of Boehm et al. (2011), continued practice of the gratitude exercises

was not necessary to observe an effect. Rather, a simple and one-time exercise was sufficient to produce significant and notable gains in gratitude and related outcomes.

Limitations

There are some important limitations of the present study that should be considered. First, this is a small study of a convenience sample of participants. However, the participants varied considerably in age. Second, the gratitude measure, a key outcome in this study, did not behave as expected, and therefore, an alternative scoring of three items was identified for reliable use. This is unfortunate and should be examined in future work. Third, although this is an experiment and causal statements can be drawn from our results, generalizations should be made with caution as our manipulations were specific to writing and our measures were all self-reported.

Conclusion

Studies of gratitude and faith have shown the connection between these constructs, but few, if any, studies have experimentally examined secular and spiritual gratitude interventions and evaluated their differential effects on positive psychological outcomes within the same randomized experiment. This study provides a beginning in this regard and demonstrates that both secular and spiritual gratitude interventions have beneficial effects on positive psychological outcomes. Future studies should aim to replicate these findings, expand sample generalizability, and continue to refine and/or enhance both types of gratitude interventions to optimize the benefits of the experience of gratitude for those of secular and spiritual ways of life.

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