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Well-Being in Response to Gratitude Interventions: A Student Elicitation Approach

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Abstract

Keywords

Contemplative practices; Gratitude intervention; Higher education pedagogy; Mental well-being; Physical well-being

Various methods exist to invoke gratitude, such as gratitude lists, acts directed towards others, and gratitude contemplation (Rash, Matsuba, and Prkachin, 2011). This study, through student perception elicitation, examines a gratitude list intervention in a professional development undergraduate class which tests the gratitude and enhanced well-being connection theory.

Results suggest various reasons why students perceive a connection between gratitude lists and mental and physical well-being, although there was an overall belief among participants that gratitude lists help more with mental health than physical health. Also, the gratitude and enhanced well-being connection theory was not fully supported as overall respondent sentiment shifted after the gratitude intervention with fewer respondents believing than before the intervention that a gratitude list can help with mental and physical well-being. While the current results show a lower frequency of the belief that gratitude lists can help with well-being, students overall still enjoyed the exercise and recommended more contemplative practices in the classroom.

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Gratefulness is there from the very beginning, because it is always a loving listening to whatever comes your way, and if you lovingly listen to it, you are grateful for it.

--Br. David Stendl-Rast, *Grateful Living*, 2014

Introduction

The Tree of Contemplative Practices offers an illustration of various opportunities to practice awareness and inner wisdom (CMind, 2021). The generative limb of this Tree contains a branch with the term gratitude. Gratitude, embodying many meanings, has been defined as both a state and a trait (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Watkins et al. (2009) define state gratitude when individuals “affirm that something good has happened to them ... and they recognize that someone else is largely responsible for this benefit” (p. 438), while Wood et al. (2010) conceptualize trait gratitude as “a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (p. 891). Sansone and Sansone (2010) embrace both state and trait contexts of gratitude by defining gratitude as “the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself and represents a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation” (p. 19). In recent years, the importance of gratitude has garnered significant attention among researchers in a multitude of disciplines, including psychology, theology, philosophy, and anthropology to name a few. This existing research on gratitude has, in large part, revealed a connection between gratitude and enhanced well-being.

For those interested in improved well-being, the cultivation of gratitude appears to be a suitable pathway for exploration. However, an important question that arises is whether the cultivation of gratitude can augment the well-being of students in the higher education setting. This is an important question because student mental health has been cited as the number one major concern outside of the classroom by university presidents and student affairs leaders (Rubley, 2017). A second question of equal importance focuses on determining what gratitude interventions are effective in enhancing well-being. This understanding of gratitude interventions can help inform undergraduate curriculum decision-makers of on what types of contemplative practices may be useful as pedagogical tools.

This study, through student perception elicitation, examines a gratitude list intervention in a professional development undergraduate class to test the theory between gratitude and enhanced well-being. The hypothetical claim is that the gratitude list intervention can lead to well-being benefits. A pre- and post-test assessment was administered with the pre-test given at the beginning of the semester and the post-test given at the end of the semester. The pre-test asked for student perceptions related to how they define gratitude, their experience with gratitude lists, and if they believe that keeping a list of things they are grateful for can help their mental and/or physical well-being. The post-test asked students to define gratitude again, if they enjoyed the experience of keeping a list of things they were grateful during each class, if they believed keeping a list of things they were grateful for helped their mental and/or physical well-being, and if they believe that more contemplative practices such as gratitude lists should be introduced into the curriculum. The analysis presented in this paper explores undergraduate students’ perceptions about a gratitude intervention in an attempt to provide a more qualitative analysis of the topic and explore a potential pathway to alleviate student mental health issues.

The paper begins with a discussion of the connection between gratitude and enhanced well-being. Next, studies examining gratitude intervention implementation, including gratitude lists,

acts directed toward others, and gratitude contemplation, are reviewed. An overview of the data and methodology used to examine student perceptions on the connection between a gratitude intervention and enhanced well-being is presented next. This is followed by a summary of the results and a discussion of these results, including research limitations and issues in need of further analysis. The paper concludes with the key findings of the study.

Literature Review

The Connection between Gratitude and Enhanced Well-being

The fulfillment of universal human needs cultivates well-being (Maslow, 1943). This fulfillment includes three distinct and interconnected human well-being dimensions, including physical, mental, and social (WHO, 2022). Well-being, operationalized within the context of positive psychology that focuses on mental health rather than mental illness, is a result of “positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 410). While well-being can be cultivated through a variety of practices, the focus of this review is on the association between gratitude and well-being.

The connection between gratitude and enhanced well-being has been well studied with numerous grateful disposition measures created in the last 25 years to analyze this relationship (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Lin & Yeh, 2011; McCullough et al., 2002; Morgan et al., 2017; O’Leary et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2005; Proctor et al., 2010; Thomas & Watkins, 2003; Watkins et al., 2003). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of the relationship between dispositional gratitude (the tendency to perceive and value positive aspects of life), and well-being among 158 independent samples and 100,099 observations reveals a moderate to strong positive correlation (Bhullar et al., 2015; Portocarrero et al., 2020). There is also evidence that state gratitude contributes positively to well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Jiang, 2022; McCullough et al., 2002; Witvliet et al., 2019). This association between state gratitude and well-being has been shown to be particularly effective in Western individualist cultures such as the United States (Shin et al., 2020). Watkins (2004) furthers this connection by arguing in the *Psychology of Gratitude* that gratitude, which can be studied as an affective trait or state, is a significant component of well-being. State gratitude is based more on time and situation versus affective trait gratitude, which refers more to a person’s average level of gratitude.

A multitude of reasons have been put forward to explain this connection between gratitude and enhanced well-being. Within the physical dimension of well-being, gratitude may motivate moral behavior, promote physical health, and facilitate goal attainment (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). It has been suggested that gratitude can facilitate coping with stress, reduce toxic emotions resulting from self and social comparison, reduce materialistic strivings, improve self-esteem, and enhance accessibility to positive memories within the mental dimension of well-being (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Gratitude may also contribute to enhanced social relationships in the social dimension of well-being (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

Gratitude Interventions

If gratitude and enhanced well-being are connected, how can we cultivate more gratitude to take advantage of these well-being benefits? And do these well-being benefits manifest across the physical, mental, and social dimensions? Researchers have examined these questions utilizing various interventions to invoke gratitude, such as gratitude lists, acts directed towards others, and gratitude contemplation, with various results.

Gratitude List Interventions

“Counting your blessings” is a common practice and has been studied extensively in the literature. Emmons and McCullough (2003) tested a gratitude list intervention across three studies with various populations and various gratitude list frequencies. In study one, the participants were 201 undergraduates, 147 women and 54 men, enrolled in a health psychology class at a large public university. In this study, participants were randomly assigned to a gratitude, hassles, or life events group through random distribution of a 10-week survey packet representing the three experimental groups. Each participant was asked to fill out several appraisal forms and to list up to five things in their life that they were grateful for or hassled by, or share general life events, respectively, weekly for 10 weeks. In study two, the participants were 166 undergraduates, 125 women and 41 men, enrolled in a health psychology class at a large public university. Study two was similar to study one with the exception that the intervention was changed to a daily basis over a two-week period; the life events condition referenced above was changed to a downward social comparison condition where participants were asked to write down ways in which they were better off than others. In study three, the participants were 65 adults with adult-onset of neuromuscular diseases, recruited from a mailing list provided by the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic. For study three, the intervention frequency was on a daily basis over a three-week period and included only the gratitude group used in study one and study two and a control group where participants only filled out the appraisal forms daily.

The participants in the gratitude group in study one experienced significant well-being benefits across physical, mental, and social dimensions compared to the other groups. Mentally, they rated their life as a whole as well as their expectations for the upcoming week more positively than the other groups. Still, there was no significant influence on global positive or negative affect. Physically, the gratitude group significantly exercised more and complained less about physical symptoms; socially, a grateful response to help-giving was associated with enhanced well-being.

Mentally, in study two, the gratitude group showed higher levels of positive affect during the intervention, but physically, there was no significant difference among the three groups in time spent exercising or physical symptom complaints. Socially, the gratitude group was more likely to offer someone emotional support and help someone with a problem. In study three, mentally, the gratitude group rated their life as a whole more positively than the other groups as well as their expectations for the upcoming week. Physically, compared to the other two groups, the gratitude group experienced no significant impact on exercise or complaints about physical symptoms but did show significant improvements in the amount and quality of sleep. Socially, the gratitude group felt more connected with others.

Froh et al. (2008) tried to partially replicate Emmons and McCullough's (2003) study with 221 middle school students, consisting of 48.8% males, 40.7% females, with 9.5% not reporting their gender. Students were randomly assigned to a gratitude, hassles, or control group and then asked to complete the daily appraisal forms. The gratitude group was also asked to write up to five things they were grateful for and the hassles group to write up to five things that were a hassle for them. Findings show the gratitude group was associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction. However, no significant difference was seen in physical health and prosocial behavior between the gratitude group and other groups.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) also looked at the undergraduate college student population, specifically 67 introductory psychology students (women = 50, men = 17) at the University of Missouri. Participants were randomly assigned to gratitude, best possible selves, or life details groups and instructed to write about what they were grateful for, their ideal life in the future, or their typical day, respectively, throughout four weeks. This study found that a gratitude list intervention did not produce a significant increase in positive affect as Emmons and McCullough (2003) found in study one. However, it should be noted that participants were not asked to turn in their lists, but only to write about their specific condition and turn in the appraisal measures. Flinchbaugh et al. (2012) examined stress management techniques and gratitude journaling with 117 undergraduate business major students (59% males) at a large Midwestern university. Over 12 weeks, participants were either assigned to a stress management technique group that was presented with four different stress management techniques throughout the semester, a gratitude journaling group instructed to list up to five things they were thankful for on a weekly basis for twelve weeks, a combined stress management technique and gratitude journaling group, or a control condition that only filled out the pre- and post-test surveys. Results showed that the combination of stress management techniques and gratitude journaling was the most effective in increasing the level of meaningfulness and engagement in the classroom. However, the interventions had no significant effect on stress or life satisfaction.

Geraghty et al. (2010) examined an internet gratitude list intervention focusing on reducing worry in the general adult population; the study consisted of 213 females and 34 males that were recruited by local newspapers and local radio in South West England. Participants were randomly assigned to a gratitude diary group, worry diary group, or waitlist group. The gratitude diary group was instructed to complete the appraisal measures and to list up to six things they were grateful for on a daily basis for 14 days. The worry diary group was instructed to complete the appraisal measures, write down their worries, and then challenge those worries daily. However, the waitlist group only completed the appraisal measures during the study period. Results showed that the gratitude diary and worry diary groups reduced worry compared to the waitlist group and that the gratitude intervention had a higher retention rate.

Rash et al. (2011) recruited 56 adults, of whom 30 were males, through radio broadcast and poster distribution within British Columbia, Canada to examine the effects of gratitude reflection. Participants were randomly assigned to the gratitude group or memorable events group. The gratitude group participants were instructed to reflect on people, items, or events for which they were grateful for five minutes and then write down their grateful experiences in a journal. The memorable events group was instructed similarly, but told to reflect on a memorable moment versus a grateful experience. This grateful contemplation intervention produced a positive physical response through a more ordered heart rate ECG waveform and greater physiological coherence. Mentally, the contemplation intervention also had an effect on increased self-esteem and increased life satisfaction.

Killen and Macaskill (2015) examined the impact of gratitude lists on an older adult population in England that consisted of 88 participants (females = 65, males = 23) with an age range between 60 and 91 years. The participants were recruited through local community organizations that focus on older adults. All participants were asked to complete a daily gratitude diary by listing three good things that happened to them and why they viewed them as good. Results showed that the gratitude intervention significantly increased the well-being factors of flourishing and decreased perceived stress.

Various populations studied include adolescents, college students, adults, and older adults over varying time frames and frequency. Based on these studies, gratitude lists tend to have more significant positive impact on the mental dimension of well-being than on the physical and social well-being dimensions across populations and gratitude list frequency variations.

Acts Directed Towards Others

A gratitude visit is an intervention directed towards others where the individual in the intervention is instructed to write a letter to someone they are grateful for and hand deliver it to this person. Seligman et al. (2005) used this intervention in their study where they recruited 577 adult participants (58% females, 42% males) and randomly assigned them to a placebo control exercise about early memories, gratitude visit, three good things in life, you at your best, using signature strengths in a new way, or identifying signature strength group. Each group was asked to write down items related to the topic of the group that they were assigned within the study. The study lasted one week and the gratitude visit group was asked to write and deliver a gratitude letter to someone who had been especially kind to them. Follow-up measures were assigned at one week, one month, three months, and six months after completing the items within their assigned group. Results reveal that at the six-month follow-up, the three good things in life group and using signature strengths group still reported increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms. The participants in the gratitude visit group were happier and less depressed one week and then again one month after the gratitude visit intervention, but returned to baseline after three months. The placebo control, you at your best, and identifying signature strength group revealed positive but fleeting effects on happiness and depressive symptoms.

Froh et al. (2009) examined the impact of a gratitude visit among 89 K-12 students (50.6% females, 49.4% males) within a parochial school. Participants were randomly assigned to the gratitude intervention or a control group. The gratitude intervention group was instructed to write a gratitude letter and hand deliver it to the recipient within a week while the control group was instructed to journal about daily events for five days. Results showed that participants in the gratitude visit intervention with low positive affect experienced more gratitude and positive affect than the control group both at the post-test and two-month follow-up.

Gratitude Interventions Not a Panacea

While gratitude has been shown to help with well-being, gratitude is not a panacea for suffering or for poor mental or physical health. Furthermore, not all research has indicated positive or consistent associations between gratitude interventions and enhanced well-being. Findings from a meta-analysis examining gratitude interventions on youth indicated that these interventions overall are largely ineffective in encouraging youth's subjective well-being (Renshaw & Olinger Steeves, 2016). A systemic review of research focusing on the effects of gratitude interventions within the working population found that gratitude interventions can significantly lower perceived stress and depression, but there were inconsistencies regarding the effects on well-being (Komase et al., 2021). Furthermore, when focusing on the effects of gratitude interventions on physical health, outcomes were mixed. Boggiss et al. (2020) reviewed the literature on gratitude interventions and its influence on objective health outcomes, self-reported physical symptoms and health status, and self-reported health behaviors, and found that only 3 of 8 objective physical health outcomes, 4 of 11 self-reported physical symptoms

and health status, and 7 of 15 self-reported health behaviors, showed significant improvement.

Gratitude Practices as a Pedagogical Tool

Research has offered some limited support to the claim that various components of mental, physical, and social well-being are influenced through gratitude interventions in a multitude of settings. This study focuses on the higher education classroom setting and using gratitude practices as a pedagogical tool, specifically within an undergraduate professional development course. As professional development is inclusive of intra and interpersonal skills, cultivation of gratitude seems like a natural fit for this type of course as cultivating gratitude can influence both individuals and the interactions between individuals. This qualitative study, using existing data that had already been collected and therefore not considered research involving human subjects (as defined by HHS and FDA regulations, according to the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board), directly asks respondents their perceptions on the connection between gratitude lists and enhanced well-being before and after a gratitude list intervention. Any changes in perception after participating in a gratitude intervention can inform decision makers concerning higher education course curriculum on the effectiveness and enjoyment of these types of contemplative practices as a pedagogical tool.

Methodology and Data

Participants

The sample consisted of 48 undergraduate real estate majors (39 males, 9 females) from a large Tier-1 higher education institution in the Southern region of the United States enrolled in a one-credit professional development course required for all real estate majors. The primary course objectives were to provide students with background on professional issues in the real estate industry, such as interdisciplinary teamwork, ethics, and networking.

Procedure

At the start of the first class during the semester, well-being was verbally defined and described for students, and an anonymous pre-test was administered asking for student perceptions related to how they define gratitude, experience with gratitude lists, and if they believe that keeping a list of things they are grateful for can help their mental and physical well-being and why. They were also told to turn over their papers once they completed the questions and they would be picked up by the researcher. Next, students were asked to write down their name and three things they are grateful for on a sheet of paper and to turn it over once it was completed and the gratitude lists would be picked up by the researcher. A presentation on gratitude was presented next, covering the definition of gratitude and why gratitude lists may be helpful; an article was distributed and discussed on how writing down what you are thankful for can be good for mental and physical health.

The course met once a week throughout the semester and students were asked to complete a gratitude list at the start of the remaining 14 class sessions. The gratitude lists were worth 15% of the final course grade and one miss was allowed without penalty. After students completed their gratitude lists on the 15th class session, the last class session of the semester, an anonymous post-test was administered. The post-test asked students to define gratitude again, if they enjoyed the experience of keeping a list of things they were grateful for each class and why or why not, if they believed keeping a list of things they were grateful for helped their

mental and/or physical well-being and why, and if they believed that more contemplative practices such as gratitude lists should be introduced into the curriculum and why or why not.

Content Analysis

An inductive content analysis was conducted to evaluate the reasons why students either believed or did not believe that listing things they are grateful for can help their mental well-being and physical well-being, and whether these perceptions change after experiencing firsthand gratitude list creation. A content analysis methodology is appropriate for this study as this research method helps to identify trends in responses that may otherwise be overlooked (Neuman, 2003). Specifically, an inductive content analysis, through a close reading of the text responses, helps to create an overall summary of the different individual text responses through the buildup of analysis versus using a pre-determined list of themes (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of gratitude interventions and the perception of their effectiveness on enhanced mental and physical well-being can provide rich results that complement the existing quantitative literature on the topic as well as describe the underlying reasoning for these beliefs.

The responses to why participants believed or did not believe that keeping a list of things they are grateful for can help their mental and physical well-being were categorized into emphasis themes for both the pre-test and post-test responses. This was done to identify trends and to uncover any differences there may be prior to doing the gratitude lists throughout the semester and after the gratitude exercises were completed at the end of the semester.

Results

Prior to the gratitude intervention in this course, Table 1 shows that approximately 32% of respondents had prior gratitude list experience based on their responses on the pre-test. Table 2 illustrates that 95% of respondents believe keeping a list of things they are grateful for can help their mental well-being. While the majority of students believe that gratitude lists can help with maintaining mental health, the reasons for these beliefs vary. The most common emphasis on the belief that gratitude lists can help with mental well-being is that it helps to focus on positive aspects of life, with almost 40% of respondents providing this as their emphasis after responding “yes,” as illustrated in Table 4. As one respondent notes, “it’s a little reminder to yourself on the good qualities of your life.” The second most common emphasis was on the help gratitude lists provided during bad times, with approximately 20% provided this as their emphasis; one respondent shared, “because if you are feeling down or think you are having bad luck, you can look at the list and see just how lucky you are.” Other emphasis categories included helping to identify what/who matters in life, putting things into perspective, general yes, re-orientation of perspective, and spirituality.

Table 1 – Prior Gratitude List Experience

<i>Have you ever kept a list of the things you were grateful for?</i>	
Yes	No
13	28

Table 2 – Pre-test Belief that Gratitude Lists can Help Mental Well-Being

<i>Do you believe keeping a list of things you're grateful for can help your mental well-being?</i>		
Yes	No	Maybe
39	0	2

Table 3 - Pre-test Belief that Gratitude Lists can Help Physical Well-Being

<i>Do you believe keeping a list of things you're grateful for can help your physical well-being?</i>		
Yes	No	Maybe
33	6	2

Table 4 – Pre-test Categories for Beliefs on Gratitude Lists Helping Mental Well-Being

<i>Why do you believe keeping a list of things you're grateful for can help your mental well-being?</i>	
Emphasis Category	Frequency
Helps to focus on positive aspects of life	15
Helps during bad times	7
Helps to Identify what/who matters in life	7
Puts things in perspective	3
General yes, it would help	3
Re-Orientation of perspective	3
Spirituality	1
Total	39

It is interesting to note that approximately 20% of respondents did not believe that gratitude lists could help with physical well-being, as illustrated in Table 3, while all respondents responded “yes” or “maybe” to gratitude lists being helpful for mental well-being. The responses from participants who indicated they do not believe gratitude lists can help physical well-being or were not sure were general in nature with no apparent themes. Table 5 illustrates the categories of emphasis for those who believe gratitude lists can help physical well-being. The connection between mental and physical well-being was the main rationale for almost half of respondents believing in gratitude lists, with one individual noting that “many things can manifest as physical things when they stem from mental”. Enhanced gratitude awareness illuminating what’s good for you and helping with motivation were also popular emphasis choices.

Table 5 – Pre-test Categories for Beliefs on Gratitude Lists Helping Physical Well-Being

<i>Why do you believe keeping a list of things you're grateful for can help your physical well-being?</i>	
Emphasis Category	Frequency
Connection between mental and physical well-being	16
Enhanced gratitude awareness illuminates what's good for you	9
Helps with motivation	7
General yes, it would help	1
Total	33

After completing the gratitude intervention, overall respondent sentiment shifted, with fewer respondents believing that a gratitude list can help with mental and physical well-being. The proportion of non-believers increased from 0% to 23% for the mental well-being connection and from 15% to 60% for the physical well-being connection, as seen in the differences between Tables 2, 3, 6, and 7. Although there were no apparent themes to the respondents that indicated “no” to the mental well-being connection, the responses varied with one participant noting that “I’m normally very positive already” while another stated, “It made me even more cognizant of the bad emotional state I’ve been in all semester.” Among the respondents who indicated “no” to the physical well-being connection, the vast majority of responses were general in nature, but one did note “it is shortly forgotten about, so it did not help with physical well-being.” For those respondents that did believe in the well-being connection, one noted, “because I know I feel better after writing them” and for the physical well-being aspect, “I thought about how grateful I am for my legs and health. Since then, I’ve been trying to walk around campus vs. taking the bus.”

Tables 10 and 11 demonstrate that the “helps to focus on positive aspects of life” and “connection between mental and physical well-being” emphasis categories remained the most popular among the mental and physical connection aspects respectively, both before and after the gratitude intervention. There were also emphasis categories within the mental well-being aspect that did not remain between the pre- and post-test as well as new emphasis categories created. For example, “spirituality” was not noted after the intervention but new themes emerged, such as “made me feel better,” “work with thoughts more,” and “more self-aware.” The same themes emerged for the physical well-being aspect from the pre-test to the post-test.

It is interesting to note that 86% of the participants reported enjoying the gratitude list experience, as seen in Table 8. Furthermore, 75% recommended more contemplative practices in the curriculum, as illustrated in Table 9. These results suggest that while the gratitude intervention lowered the belief that there is a connection between gratitude lists and mental and physical well-being, there is still value in this intervention as a pedagogical tool.

Table 6 – Post-test Belief that Gratitude Lists can Help Mental Well-Being

<i>Do you believe keeping a list of things you were grateful for helped your mental well-being?</i>	
Yes	No
27	8

Table 7 - Post-test Belief that Gratitude Lists can Help Physical Well-Being

<i>Do you believe keeping a list of things you were grateful for helped your physical well-being?</i>		
Yes	No	Maybe
11	21	3

Table 8 – Gratitude List Experience Enjoyment

<i>Did you enjoy the experience of keeping a list of things you were grateful for in each class?</i>		
Yes	No	Indifferent
31	3	2

Table 9 – Contemplative Practices Curriculum Incorporation

<i>Do you believe that more contemplative practices such as gratitude lists should be introduced into the curriculum?</i>		
Yes	No	Maybe
21	7	1

Table 10 – Post-test Categories for Beliefs on Gratitude Lists Helping Mental Well-Being

<i>Why do you believe keeping a list of things you were grateful for helped your mental well-being?</i>	
Emphasis Category	Frequency
Helps to focus on positive aspects of life	9
Made me feel better	4
Helps during bad times	3
General yes, it helped	3
Puts things in perspective	2
Re-Orientation of perspective	2
Helps to Identify what matters in life	1
More self-aware	1
Work with thoughts more	2
Total	27

Table 11 – Post-test Categories for Beliefs on Gratitude Lists Helping Physical Well-Being

<i>Why do you believe keeping a list of things you were grateful for helped your physical well-being?</i>	
Emphasis Category	Frequency
Connection between mental and physical well-being	6
Enhanced gratitude awareness illuminates what's good for you	2
Helps with motivation	2
General yes, it helps	1
Total	11

Discussion

There is an overall belief both before and after the gratitude intervention that gratitude lists help more with mental health than physical health. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that gratitude interventions have more significant mental versus physical influence (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008). After completing the gratitude intervention, overall respondent sentiment shifted, with fewer respondents believing that a gratitude list can help with mental and physical well-being. This is a somewhat surprising result. While there has been research published highlighting no significant impacts between gratitude interventions and mental and physical well-being, the majority of literature suggests that gratitude interventions help with well-being, especially the mental well-being aspect.

There may be multiple reasons the results of this study do not align with the majority of existing literature sources. First, the participants might not have seen any noticeable change in their physical or mental well-being that they could attribute to keeping the gratitude list—a simple observation on the part of the students. Also, this intervention was only done once a week across 15 weeks, which may not have been frequent enough to enhance well-being. Additionally, the gender demographic of this course was 83% male, a demographic that has shown less well-being improvements in mindfulness-based interventions (Kang et al., 2018; Rojiani et al., 2017). Furthermore, the study participants were all real estate majors housed within the college of business which may decrease openness to vulnerability; business majors have been shown to score higher than nonbusiness majors in the tough-mindedness personality trait and lower in the openness personality trait (Lounsbury et al., 2009).

The exploration of why participants believed gratitude lists help with mental and physical well-being is instructive in understanding the underlying reasoning for these beliefs and why these beliefs exist. It helps to fill the gap by providing a qualitative analysis that directly asks respondents about their perceptions of the connection between gratitude lists and mental and physical well-being, both before a gratitude intervention and afterwards, so that they have some firsthand experience followed by first-person inquiry. The rich results also complement the existing quantitative literature on the topic. While the current results show a lower frequency of the belief that gratitude lists can help well-being following the gratitude intervention, students still overall enjoyed the exercise and recommended more contemplative practices in the classroom.

One limitation of this study is that the intervention was only used with emerging adults majoring in real estate at one university versus across age groups, majors, and universities,

which makes the study less generalizable. The data were also anonymous so responses from specific individuals could not be compared. Also, the differences between pre- and post-test could be due to a slightly different pool of respondents as the same students were not in class during both sessions. Furthermore, results were based on self-reports from a required undergraduate professional development course for real estate majors, a test situation which potentially be affected by bias. The students could indeed be prone to a form of confirmation bias, reporting what they think the instructor wants to hear.

Perhaps future research can replicate the current gratitude intervention across ages, majors, and universities to explore if any variations occur across these demographics. Also, the current gratitude intervention could be increased in frequency to uncover if more repeated exposures to gratitude interventions have an impact on results. A gratitude measurement scale that includes the mental, physical, and social dimensions of well-being could be used to quantitatively assess the impacts of this gratitude intervention within this population. In a future study, participants can be asked to write down the “whys” of what they are grateful for instead of just a simple list; in that way, participants may start to feel the emotion of that gratitude. Another interesting future study would be to examine the gratitude lists and the specific items that are listed by respondents; this may provide insights on the types of items emerging adults are grateful for. Another intervention to perhaps try and analyze in this context would be a gratitude visit where students are instructed to write a letter to an individual they are grateful for and hand deliver it to this person. This gratitude intervention may lead to more positive changes in well-being, as suggested by Seligman et al. (2005). More generally, a future qualitative study examining why students want more contemplative exercises in the curriculum may be instructive so decision makers of curriculum can see why students see the value in it and perhaps foster greater incorporation of contemplative pedagogical tools in the classroom.

Conclusion

The impetus for this study was to explore gratitude interventions as a pedagogical tool through the lens of students. Based on the literature, the hypothesis was that students would perceive enhanced well-being after the gratitude list intervention. Findings do not fully support this as a pathway for enhanced well-being as respondent sentiment shifted with fewer respondents believing that a gratitude list can help with mental and physical well-being after completing the gratitude intervention. Students who did believe in the connection between gratitude lists and enhanced well-being before and after the gratitude intervention provided reasoning for these connections. Furthermore, the majority of respondents enjoyed the gratitude intervention and believed that more contemplative practices should be incorporated into the curriculum. Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, would be helpful to further explore gratitude interventions in the higher education sector as well as contemplative practices, in general, as a way to help inform curriculum decision makers on the effectiveness and enjoyment of these types of contemplative practices as a pedagogical tool.

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