



The impact of a gratitude ritual in subjective well-being: An experiment.



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Introduction

The aim of this study was to examine the **impact of gratitude ritual on the personal (affectivity) and interpersonal well-being** (perceived social support and loneliness).

Gratitude

Gratitude can be considered as a meta-strategy for happiness, since it has been established that grateful people are more optimistic, express more positive affect, are more kind and show more empathy for others (1). Most definitions of gratitude share a concept of recognition of benefit obtained owing to another, and the experience of being emotionally moved. McCullough and colleagues (2; 3; 4) include in their definition the fact of being a **moral emotion**, as it results from and stimulates moral behaviour. They distinguish **two cognitive processes underlying experience of gratitude**:
 □ perception of having obtained something **positive**
 □ recognition of **another person's contribution** to this benefit.

And **three central functions** of gratitude:

- can serve as **moral barometer** as it enables evaluating moral relevance of given situation;
- can act as a **moral motive** which motivates the **beneficiary to act benevolently and prosocially**;
- plays a **moral reinforcer role**, involving the **benefactors** in another forms of **prosocial behaviour in the future**;

Gratitude has been associated with happiness (personal and interpersonal), especially with positive and negative affect, from a variety of perspectives:

- in its **natural form**, as a global personality disposition, for example people that are grateful in general as an appreciation of life (1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7)
- **experimentally induced**, both directly telling someone that you feel grateful with a letter or in person, and indirectly by writing a diary of things you are thankful for (8; Peterson, etc; XX; 9; Seligman et al. XX; 11; 10)
- stemming from **therapeutic work** (12).

People who express gratitude in any of these ways shows **better levels of happiness, positive affect and less depression symptoms**, at least four weeks after doing a gratitude act (1; 9).

Rituals

The gratitude is taken up in this study with a specific approach, as it will be analysed in this study from the ritual perspective, applying the **theory of structural ritualisation** (13), which argues that the ritualised act plays a crucial role in the context of group dynamics or social behaviour.

Ritual holds various functions:

- has similar objectives to those which has coping and emotional regulation;
- reinforces social cohesion and collective identity, solidifying interpersonal relations (14);
- **writing rituals** have positive impact on well-being (15; 16; 17).

Gratitude and rituals - integration and innovation

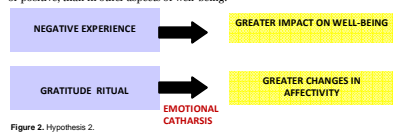
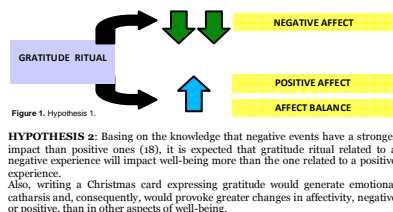
This study has an innovative character due to:

- cognitive induction of emotions by remembering an experience when somebody helped them and differentiation between giving thanks to a person who helped:
 - to achieve something (positive experience)
 - to overcome a difficulty (negative experience)
- experimental design
- placing the gratitude induction in the specific time of year, when natural rituals are being celebrated (in the Christmas and New Year's Eve time, being the gratitude ritual linked to a transition moment)
- links gratitude and traditional ritualised acts in the context of well-being

Hypotheses

It is assumed that to write a Christmas card expressing gratitude will have a positive impact on personal well-being till one month later.

HYPOTHESIS 1 (Figure 1): The gratitude ritual will impact affectivity, causing an increase both in positive affect and affect balance, and a decrease in negative one. Moreover, a stronger effect in negative affect (decrease) than in positive one (increase) is expected, according to positive-negative asymmetry (18).



HYPOTHESIS 3: The gratitude ritual would impact positively the interpersonal aspect of psychological well-being, diminishing perceived loneliness and increasing the perceived social support.

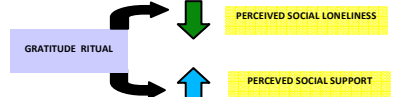


Figure 3. Hypothesis 3.

Method

Participants: 110 undergraduate students (80.9% female, 19.1% male) from psychology of the University of the Basque Country, distributed in three randomized situations:

- Group A** - experimental group, gratitude ritual: to write a card to someone related to a positive experience (receiving help in achieving something)
- Group B** - experimental group, gratitude ritual: to write a card to someone related to a negative experience (receiving help in overcoming a difficulty)
- Group C** - control group

Instruments (dependent variables):

The *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988 - 19)
Vaux Social Support Appraisal Scale (reduced version; Basabe, 2004 - 20)
Social Loneliness Scale (reduced version; Moya, 2003 - 21)

Procedure:

	PRE-EVALUATION:	EMOTIONAL-COGNITIVE INDUCTION	POST-EVALUATION:
Affectivity	A	to think about a person who helped one to achieve something (5 min)	to write about one's experience responding to open questions (15min)
Social Support	B	to think about a person who helped one to overcome a difficulty (5 min)	Affect Social Support
Loneliness	C	to think about a person who helped one to overcome a difficulty (5 min)	Social Loneliness

Results

Prior to hypotheses verification, initial characteristics of pre-evaluation variables were analysed. The univariate ANOVA results showed that there were no significant differences between two groups in any of the variables before the experimental manipulation was introduced. The post-evaluation variables analysis indicated, however, lack of normal distribution in case of perceived social support and perceived social loneliness, so no-parametric statistics were applied to analyse data related to those variables.

The gratitude ritual impact on the personal well-being

MODEL: mixed factorial General Linear Model with intra-subject (pre-evaluation - post-evaluation) and inter-subject 2-level factor (to write or not a Christmas card expressing gratitude).

DEPENDENT VARIABLES: negative affect, positive affect and affect balance in post-evaluation.

COVARIABLE: sex

Results confirmed statistically significant effect of the gratitude ritual in the model indicating negative affect ($F(1,80) = 4.188; p < .05$) (Table 1). Estimated marginal mean values indicate that negative affect in the post-evaluation is lower in the experimental group (both A and B) than in the control. As regards positive affect, the effect direction was opposite to the one expected: it decreased in all of the groups. Nevertheless, the differences did not reach statistical significance level. Results for affect balance showed the expected differences but was not significant. Neither were statistically significant the differences regarding the intra-subject factor or sex.

Table 1
Mixed factorial General Linear Model - results for 2-level inter-subject factor (Ritual-Control). Estimated marginal means and standard errors (SE).

Dependent variable	Ritual	Control	F	p
Negative Affect	20.56 (0.34)	24.17 (1.55)	4.188	.044*
Positive Affect	32.28 (0.80)	33.67 (1.48)	.679	.412
Affect Balance	10.66 (1.42)	10.56 (1.66)	.635	.428

Being:
 Negative affect = PANAS scale (negative affect)
 Positive affect = PANAS scale (positive affect)
 Affect Balance = PANAS positive - PANAS negative
 Ritual: to perform the gratitude ritual of writing a Christmas card
 Control: not to perform the gratitude ritual
 * $p \leq .05$

Aiming at verifying whether the negative affect varies not only according to the fact of participating or not in the gratitude ritual, but also depending on the type of the experience associated to the support received (negative or positive), the mixed factorial model was applied, with the 3-level inter-subject factor (to participate in the gratitude ritual related to the positive experience, to participate in the gratitude ritual related to the negative experience, not to participate in the ritual). No significant effects were identified. However, the estimated marginal mean values were in the expected directions. The mean differences are shown in the graphs.

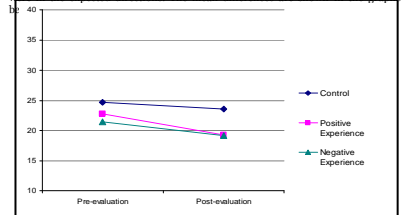


Figure 4. Negative Affect mean differences between Pre-Evaluation and Post-Evaluation

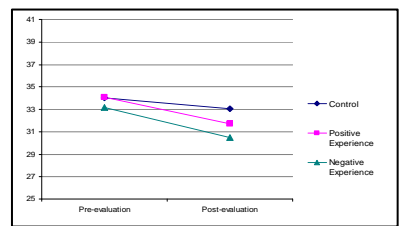


Figure 5. Positive Affect mean differences between Pre-Evaluation and Post-Evaluation

Negative vs positive experience impact on personal well-being

MODEL APPLIED: T test for two dependent samples, with data segmented for each of the experimental conditions.

As shown in Table 2, T test results lent partial support to the second hypothesis. **GROUP A** -> a statistically significant decrease was observed only for positive affectivity ($M(\text{pre})=34.07$; $M(\text{pos})=31.73$), but not in the case of the negative one ($M(\text{pre})=22.63$; $M(\text{pos})=19.20$);

GROUP B -> both positive ($M(\text{pre})=33.17$; $M(\text{pos})=30.48$) and negative affectivity ($M(\text{pre})=21.43$; $M(\text{pos})=19.14$) decreased significantly; **GROUP C** -> no statistically significant differences were observed, whereas the mean values indicate that both positive ($M(\text{pre})=34.05$; $M(\text{pos})=33.05$) and negative affectivity ($M(\text{pre})=24.68$; $M(\text{pos})=23.58$) slightly diminished; Finally, results from the analysis confirmed the hypothesis about the greater changes in affectivity in the experimental groups A and B than in the control group.

Table 2
T test results for two dependent samples, with data segmented for each of the experimental conditions.

Dependent variable	Group A	Group B	Group C
Negative Affect	2.10	2.10	2.10
Positive Affect	2.10	2.10	2.10
Affect Balance	-544	580	312

The impact of gratitude ritual on interpersonal well-being

Being:
 Negative affect = PANAS scale (negative affect)
 Positive affect = PANAS scale (positive affect)
 Affect Balance = PANAS positive - PANAS negative
 Ritual: to perform the gratitude ritual of writing a Christmas card
 Control: not to perform the gratitude ritual
 * $p \leq .05$

Conclusions

The present study **shows particular characteristics** given that:

- applying an innovative experimental procedure design, temporally placed in the moment of the year which could be naturally linked to the act of ritual writing to express gratitude (introducing the gratitude ritual through a Christmas card);
- a natural combination of ritualised act and gratitude was achieved, conducted in a not clinical sample, being a new and so far unexplored practice in the positive psychology field.

Study results shed light on the predictions, partially confirming the hypotheses. In general terms:

- The **gratitude ritual has a positive impact on subjective well-being**, improving the affectivity till four weeks after the experiment, in comparison to the participants who experience the Christmas and New Year's Eve period but not the experimental manipulation (control group).
- The **gratitude ritual provokes a decrease in negative affect, being greater the impact in the group in which participants recalled help received when experiencing a difficulty** (negative event). This outcome is consistent with the general rule stating that negative events influence stronger unhappiness than positive ones happiness (18). As far as affect balance is concerned, no significant differences were found, mostly due to the high dispersion within the control group data.
- The **positive affect decreases when participating in the gratitude ritual**, with greater effect regarding negative experience than positive one. The decrease in the positive affect can be explained considering that participants were coming back from holidays, period when their positive affect probably increased. It could be hypothesised that participants of the gratitude ritual experienced changes in their positive affect, which decreased when it became evident the comeback to the reality is inevitable. The affectivity variation in the control group was almost none.

Limitations of the study and future investigation

The main limitations of this study are the small sample size and related difficulty with recruiting the control group. It resulted detrimental to the data analysis planned to be conducted and to the scope of conclusions, as multiple intervening variables could not be considered and analysed as one factor with the aim of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon.

For this reason, although the present study can be considered an innovative one, future studies including a greater sample are necessary, which would enable more profound analysis of existing relations between intervening or moderating variables (like family or Christmas rituals related variables), gratitude and subjective well-being.

On the reverse, with the purpose of going in depth in the topic of relevance which participants attribute to the rituals, it could result interesting to go inside the content of what participant wrote during the emotional induction task and to perform qualitative analysis based on this material.

Finally, in future investigation, it would be also interesting to compare the effect of time discrepancy between recalled event and experimental manipulation or the effect of intensity of this experience.

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