

The Effect of Gratitude Journaling on Conflict Resolution in Intimate Dyadic Relationships

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This study examined the effect of a gratitude journaling intervention on conflict resolution in intimate dyadic relationships via an experimental design. It was hypothesized that mindfully eliciting daily awareness and experiences of gratitude would produce a significant decrease in the adoption of negative conflict resolution styles and an increase in positive conflict resolution strategies. Participants randomly assigned to either a treatment or placebo group were tasked to complete a 15-day gratitude journaling intervention or a 15-day placebo journaling exercise, respectively. All participants answered the Conflict Resolution Style Index (CRSI) immediately before and after the journaling intervention, and at a follow-up posttest another two weeks after. Differences between placebo and treatment groups were analyzed via independent samples t-tests and changes across testing phases within groups were evaluated via repeated measures ANOVA. Thematic analyses of journal entries and interviews with treatment participants further explored the scope of the gratitude experience. Between-group and within-group analyses indicate that participation in a gratitude journaling intervention resulted in increased adoption of more positive conflict resolution styles and decreased adherence to negative conflict resolution styles. The broaden-and-build phenomenon is inferred as the underlying mechanism that produced these positive effects.

Keywords: gratitude, conflict resolution, intimate relationships, positive psychology, gratitude journaling

It is well-documented in empirical research that intimate dyadic relationships or romantic relationships significantly impact individuals' psychological health and well-being (Gordon, Arnette, &

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Smith, 2011). As such, it is imperative to optimize such relationships by enhancing mechanisms that increase constructive elements and relating patterns (Grant & Gino, 2010; Schueller, 2009), and mitigate destructive elements (Gottman, 1993; Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2000). Positive psychology and gratitude scholars suggest that experiences and expressions of gratitude are vital in the development and maintenance of social bonds, be they among cooperative, nonkin relations or romantic and family relationships (Gordon et al., 2011). The current study aims to examine whether the experience of gratitude itself, even if not related to or directed towards one's partner, enhances the dyadic relationship. This question is examined via an experimental gratitude journaling intervention that aims to improve conflict resolution strategies in couples.

Defining Gratitude

Literature defines gratitude as a positively-valenced emotion with three basic elements: benefits, beneficiaries, and benefactors (Emmons, 2004; Tsang, 2006). Specifically, the gratitude experience is described as someone having “a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of a benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another” (Tsang, 2006, p. 139). This asserts gratitude as both positive and social in nature. Moreover, this experience is dependent on perception, mindfulness, and subjective value, as it is “a state resulting from having awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself” (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009, p.6). Studies also highlight various components of the gratitude experience: *attribution* is the direction towards which gratitude is ascribed, the *actor* is the grateful person, the *object* is what one feels grateful for, and *intensity* is the amount of thankfulness felt (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Bartlett & De Steno, 2006; Grant & Gino, 2010).

Various studies have shown gratitude to be an available positive resource in all relationships. In particular, there is a distinctive ease in triggering the gratitude experience for intimate dyads, as the love component uniquely facilitates increased perception and valuation towards gratitude (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). Being part of a person's everyday routine increases

opportunities for gratefulness. Couples are also uniquely appreciative of one another's mere existence, and significance is assigned to seemingly unremarkable things, thus allowing this appreciative reaction for minimal acts of support, validation, and even simple everyday participation.

Enhancing the positive effects of gratitude. Gratitude has been linked to numerous positive interpersonal effects such as prosocial and support-seeking behaviors. It has also been linked to positive personal outcomes including awareness of positive resources, increased positive emotion and subjective well-being, decreased depressive symptoms, better coping, and better health (Cheng, Tsui, & Lam, 2015; Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). As a result, an increasing number of studies have focused on inducing and enhancing this positive resource.

Fredrickson (2009), for example, recommends "counting one's blessings," and allowing recognition of them to trigger an extended gratitude experience, with further attribution and increased intensity. This was followed by recommendations to systematize the process of recollection, inducement, and recording of these "blessings" through gratitude journaling. Recording gratitude experiences in this way has been shown to increase positive appraisal, access to positive memories, and perceptions of positivity, as well as encourage gratitude expression (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

The gratitude journaling intervention applied in the current study is based on the combined protocols of the "Three Good Things in Life," where participants kept a week-long daily diary of at least three things they were thankful for, as well as the "Gratitude Visit," which required participants to write and deliver a letter of gratitude (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). More information on the experimental protocol is provided in the method section.

The Broaden-and-Build Phenomenon

The current study employs a gratitude journaling intervention to elicit and sustain the experience of gratitude, so it can be utilized as a primary positive emotion that will launch the broaden-and-build cycle (Fredrickson, 2001). The broaden-and-build phenomenon posits that

the two elements of positive emotions and positive actions mutually influence and build from and onto one another to create infinite upward spirals. As a primary positive emotion such as gratitude is introduced into a system, it is thought to increase (broaden) the tendency towards positive action, which then reciprocally produces increased positive emotion, and so on, until passing behaviors and moods create and build more long-term positive states.

This study adopts the broaden-and-build phenomenon as the proposed mechanism that allows the experience of gratitude to eventually affect conflict resolution styles among intimate relationships. The literature on gratitude as part of larger social exchanges supports this inference. These studies demonstrate the two elements of broaden-and-build in cyclical causation, demonstrating that the pursuit of positive feelings can drive positive actions, and that positive actions can trigger further positive emotional reactions. For example, benefactors report intrinsic motivations for their helping, like *communal* (i.e., feeling connected to, valued, needed, and accepted by others) and *agentic* feelings (i.e., feelings of competence, esteem, and efficacy), both of which encourage them to help further and again (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Grant & Gino, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000; White, 1959). Beneficiaries, meanwhile, experience social debt and then render payment through direct or upstream reciprocity (Algoe et al., 2008; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Such studies show how gratitude can transcend the primary experience, thus supporting the supposition that it can produce extended effects, possibly including improved conflict resolution strategies.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Dyadic Relationships

Interpersonal conflict is defined by Mackey et al. (2000) as a state of disharmony that develops because of natural differences between relationship partners on roles, communication, needs, expectations, etc. Understandably, there is general aversion to conflict situations, which are subconsciously linked to feelings of vulnerability and hostile or aggressive behaviors. However, an aversion to conflict can impede resolution and promote more destructive conflict, where perpetual

negativity can result in chronic defensiveness, dissatisfaction, and estrangement (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Mackey et al., 2000). By contrast, psychological studies assert that conflict is not only inevitable but necessary to building healthy relationships. Conflict can be constructive in that it can create clues and opportunities for growth in relationships, as well as beneficial adaptation, as when couples learn to process negative affect and negotiate differences (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Gottman, 1998; Mackey et al., 2000).

Various models show that conflict resolution styles are enacted when *assertiveness* (self-concern or concern for results) and *cooperation* (concern for others or concern for the relationship) intersect (Kurdek, 1994; Zhang, 2007). Kurdek (1994) posits four distinct styles: positive problem-solving, compliance, conflict-engagement, and withdrawal. Individuals adopt a dominant approach and employ the other styles in varying degrees. This aggregate style affects everyday couple interactions and are thus integral to predicting a couple's relationship success (Zhang, 2007).

Positive problem-solving is both assertive and cooperative. It uses collaboration and compromise, with an "I win, you win" or "I win and lose some, you win and lose some" position (Kurdek, 1994). It is described as the most constructive style because it promotes resolution while maintaining positive affect and requiring consideration to and from both parties.

Compliance is cooperative but unassertive, using accommodating or obliging techniques, with an "I lose, you win" position (Kurdek, 1994; Zhang, 2007). It is partially constructive because it prioritizes resolution, but with destructive aspects as compliant parties usually concede their best interests and miss opportunities to promote adaptation. If embraced as a pattern, compliant parties usually experience emotional fatigue, feelings of rejection, potential withdrawal, fear, depression, and aggression or passive-aggression (Rossler, Ting-Toomey, & Lee, 2007).

Conflict-engagement is highly assertive but uncooperative with an "I win, you lose" position, and uses competing or dominating techniques (Zhang, 2007). It is described as partially destructive with some positive aspects because it seeks to communicate, but involves aggressive strategies, inflexibility, and an adversarial position (Cai &

Fink, 2002). As a pattern, it tends to degrade the other party's concerns (Rossler et al., 2007), which cultivates dissatisfaction and resentment.

The fourth style, withdrawal, uses ignoring, denial, and avoidance and is described as the most destructive as it neither asserts nor cooperates, with an "I lose, you lose" position (Kurdek, 1994; Zhang, 2007). Severed communication disqualifies dialogue, which is integral to restoring connection and paving the way for active listening, better understanding, and adaptation (Mackey et al., 2000). Chronic withdrawal precludes understanding and forgiveness, and allows unresolved issues to fester into chronic relational tension and dissatisfaction (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

Testing an Organic Intervention for Conflict Resolution

Disintegration of relationships is linked not just to the number of conflicts, but also to deficiencies in problem solving. Chronicity in negative conflict resolution, for example, can result in communication breakdown and even separation (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Third-party interventions, like psychotherapy, are always an option for helping problematic relationships, but third parties are still deemed intrusive by some, which makes attrition more likely (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010). The current study tests a readily available positive resource, namely, gratitude experiences, to effect positive change in relationship conflict resolution without the need for intrusion. It examines an intervention that may serve as a simple, private, and organic means of enhancing positivity, that may aid in solving and preventing relationship problems through improved conflict resolution strategies. Whereas other studies have established the effectiveness of similar journaling interventions on various target participants (Cheng et al., 2015; Geraghty et al., 2010), the current study aims to examine its usefulness and benefit to intimate dyadic relationships, in particular, and in the process broadens the knowledge on what extended gratitude experiences can achieve.

Study Aims and Hypotheses

The study seeks to determine how the independent variable of gratitude experience, as elicited in gratitude journaling, could result in positive changes in the dependent variable of conflict resolution in intimate dyadic relationships. The study tested two hypotheses:

- 1) Participation in a gratitude journaling intervention will lead to increased adoption of positive conflict-resolution styles; and
- 2) Participation in a gratitude journaling intervention will lead to decreased adoption of negative conflict-resolution styles.

METHOD

The current study employed an experimental design. Individuals who are part of intimate dyadic relationships were randomly assigned to treatment (gratitude journaling) or active control (generic journaling) groups. The effects of gratitude journaling on self-reported conflict resolution styles were determined via comparisons of pretest, posttest, and posttest-follow up scores of each conflict resolution style, between and within the two groups. Qualitative analyses of journal entries and semi-structured interviews were conducted to support the quantitative findings, explore the gratitude intervention experience, and strengthen inferences regarding the mechanisms of intervention effects.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling given inclusion criteria for age and length of relationship, providing some control for variability in individual development and relationship stages. The family life cycle theory (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005) describes the initial partnership (“coupling”) stage as the period where independents learn interdependence outside their family of origin. Its scope of experiences contains the current study’s main variables of interpersonal gratitude and conflict, while the stages before and after it focus more on passion and care for offspring, respectively. This perspective posits that those in the coupling stage are most likely young adults, characterized by

Erikson (1950) as between 19 to 35 years old. He posits their main developmental task as intimacy vs. isolation, wherein the goal is to achieve mutually satisfying relationships. This bracket has a 17-year age range, and it is reasonable to assume that contextual variances create significant differences within the period (e.g., 18-year olds are dependent and still in school, 30-year olds are employed and financially independent) (Boyd & Bee, 2010). As such, the current participant pool was constrained to include young adults ages 24 to 35 ($M = 28.79$, $SD = 2.44$), who have been in their current romantic relationship for at least 12 but less than 36 months ($M = 21.03$, $SD = 6.13$), and still without offspring.

Measures

Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI). Participants' conflict-resolution styles were assessed via Kurdek's (1994) Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI), a 16-item self-report test that uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, to 5 = *always*). Here, respondents indicate how frequently they use four styles: positive problem solving (e.g., "Finding alternatives that are acceptable to each of us"), compliance (e.g., "Not defending my position"), conflict engagement (e.g., "Throwing insults and digs"), and withdrawal (e.g., "Tuning the other person out"). Four items corresponded to each of the four styles, thus creating 4 subscales: Conflict-engagement (CRSI-CE), Positive Problem Solving (CRSI-PPS), Withdrawal (CRSI-W), and Compliance (CRSI-C).

All four CRSI subscales showed moderate to high internal consistency in the current sample, with Cronbach's alphas of .85, .86, and .85 in conflict engagement; .79, .76, and .81 in positive problem solving; .74, .70, and .77 for withdrawal; and .90, .82, and .78 in compliance, for their pretests, posttests, and follow-up posttests, respectively.

Interview protocol. To validate and unpack some of the quantitative results, randomly selected treatment group participants and their partners participated in semi-structured interviews after the intervention and posttests were completed. Intervention participants were asked about their experience of the journaling exercise and what

they liked and did not like about it, as well as any changes they noticed in themselves, their partner, and their relationship, as the intervention proceeded. Partners were asked whether they had noted any changes in their partner (the participant) in the period of the intervention. For both, they were asked about any changes they had noticed in how they dealt with conflict in the relationship and their levels of satisfaction in the relationship.

Procedure

Screening of participants. The researcher recruited participants using social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter), referrals, and cold calls. All interested parties were interviewed to determine if they fit the inclusion criteria, and then given a preliminary screening test in order to exclude individuals who may have extreme scores on gratefulness or conflict. The screening tool used was the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), which is a 7-item measure of satisfaction in romantic relationships that uses a 5-point Likert response scale (5 = *most satisfied*) (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). It was utilized because of its brevity and ability to cover many aspects of relationship satisfaction: how well the relationship compares to others, how well needs are met, etc. (Hendrick et al., 1998). Studies report high internal consistency for the RAS, with Cronbach's alpha = .86 (Fischer & Corcoran, 1994).

The first author provided detailed information about the study, and all respondents provided their informed consent. An initial pool of 117 participants answered the RAS and produced an RAS group mean of 26.55 with a standard deviation of 2.35. Respondents who scored two standard deviations above and below this group mean were excluded from the study as this suggested that their relationships are extremely positive or negative. This resulted in an initial pool of 83 participants. Four females were randomly excluded using the fishbowl method to obtain an approximately equal number of males and females in the sample. This resulted in a final sample size of 79, with 39 males and 40 females. The fishbowl method was again employed to randomly assign participants to the treatment group (T-group) or to the active control group (C-group). The T-group consisted of 20 females and 20 males,

while the C-group included 20 females and 19 males.

Protocol for gratitude journaling intervention and placebo journaling exercise. The current study's gratitude journaling intervention protocol utilizes the Gratitude Visit and the Three Good Things exercises (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The design allows for both the induction of gratitude by refocusing attention towards things participants feel grateful for, as well as recording of the gratitude experience, in order to facilitate remembrance and deeper gratitude.

In this study, the researcher provided each of the T-group participants with a standard notebook wherein they were to write entries daily for 15 days regarding things, events, people, or anything that they are grateful for. To ensure a gratitude trigger, the accompanying prompt at each page of the journal was, "Today, I am thankful for...". Participants were to write about at least three things or events they felt grateful about on that day. The participants were also instructed to write a letter of thanks to their partners at the end of the 15-day journaling period.

This protocol was pretested to evaluate the effectiveness of the directive, and if enough useful data can be collected from the resulting journal entries. The pretest required two individuals fitting the inclusion criteria to participate in the exercise for five journaling days, after which they participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis showed that the protocol yielded pertinent themes, but adjustments were made to make the instructions more specific in describing the nature, length, language, and limits of the expected text. Appendix A presents the gratitude journal instructions.

The C-group, on the other hand, was given a control journaling exercise to control for the possibility that the practice of reflection and journaling, in itself, can induce significant changes. The researcher gave each of the C-group participants a standard notebook wherein they would write daily entries for two weeks. The instructions asked them to list "the first three things they can think of", thus excluding any explicit focus on positivity and gratitude. Refer to Appendix B for the control journaling exercise instructions. All T- and C-group participants were given regular reminders to keep on journaling through daily text messages in the 2-week intervention period.

Testing and intervention phases. The final 79 participants

answered the Conflict-Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) three times: during pretest (PRE), the first posttest (POST1), and the follow-up posttest (POST2). Each test was administered approximately two weeks after the previous one. Though participants were scheduled individually according to their convenience, all of them followed this testing timetable, and all tests were conducted within the same 3-month period. Prior to the pretest, participants were asked to sign consent forms and were briefed about the study's requirements. At each testing phase, participants answered the CRSI in a quiet testing room and were given as much time as they needed to complete it. They submitted the CRSI to the researcher upon completion.

The first CRSI testing yielded their baseline or pretest (PRE) CRSI scores, after which the T-group engaged in the gratitude journaling intervention for two weeks, while the C-group engaged in the placebo journaling exercise. The CRSI posttest (POST1) was administered after the 2-week intervention period. After the posttest, participants went through two weeks with no activity or directive from the researcher, before undergoing the follow-up CRSI testing (POST2).

The fishbowl method was used to randomly select T-group participants who were invited to bring their partners when they came to the venue to respond to POST2, until 5 T-group participants agreed. They and their partners participated in semi-structured interviews at the end of POST2 testing: first, the researcher conducted brief individual interviews with the participants, followed by their partners, before interviewing them together. After POST2 testing, all participants were debriefed, thanked, and given baked goods as compensation for their participation.

RESULTS

Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons were applied to both the between-subjects (independent samples t-test) and within-subjects analyses (repeated measures ANOVA), to control for Type I error. A manually applied Bonferroni correction resulted in an alpha level of 0.003 (.05/15 for 15 t-tests) as the significance threshold in the independent samples t-tests, while the Bonferroni correction was applied automatically for the post hoc tests in the repeated measures

ANOVA.

Analyses of PRE scores across the T and C groups indicated that there were no significant differences between groups in the four conflict resolution strategies, validating the random assignment of participants to groups. The PRE scores also showed that CRSI-PPS produced the highest mean score across both T and P groups, followed by CRSI-W, demonstrating that withdrawal was the most dominant negative conflict-resolution strategy for the sample.

Consistent with the main hypotheses, the results show that participation in a gratitude journaling intervention increased the adoption of positive problem-solving techniques and decreased the use of conflict-engagement and compliance compared to the control group. Participation in the intervention also effected immediate significant decrease in the adoption of the withdrawal techniques, and though there was no further significant decline in the withdrawal scores, the change was sustained in the expected direction. Figures 1 to 4 illustrate the effects of the intervention on the T- and C-groups.

Comparisons Between Treatment and Control Groups

Independent samples t-tests were used to explore the differences between the two groups at each testing phase, and the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested at each analysis. The figures in Table 1 are in accord with whether the assumption was supported or violated. Results showed significant differences between T- and C-groups at the two posttest phases. Table 1 shows significant immediate post- and follow-up differences between groups in their tendencies to adopt each conflict-resolution style, with the sole exception of CRSI-C POST1. Significant differences in this variable were evident, however, in POST2.

Treatment Group Within-Group Analyses Across Testing Phases

Repeated Measures ANOVA tested for differences within each group in PRE and POST1 (Pair 1), PRE and POST2 (Pair 2), and POST1 and POST2 (Pair 3) scores. The assumption of sphericity was tested at

Table 1. Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and *t*-values for the Independent Groups Comparisons Between Control and Treatment Groups in CRSI-CE, CRSI-PPS, CRSI-W, and CRSI-C for PRE, POST-1, and POST-2

| | Control Group M(<i>SD</i>) (N = 39) | Treatment Group M(<i>SD</i>) (N = 40) | <i>t</i> -values |
|--------------------------|--|--|------------------|
| Conflict Engagement | | | |
| PRE | 9.41 (3.26) | 7.97 (2.89) | -2.07 |
| POST-1 | 9.58 (3.33) | 6.00 (1.78) | -5.94* |
| POST-2 | 9.56 (3.20) | 5.45 (1.13) | -7.57* |
| Positive Problem Solving | | | |
| PRE | 14.28 (2.02) | 15.20 (2.39) | 1.84 |
| POST-1 | 14.28 (1.95) | 17.42 (1.72) | 7.58* |
| POST-2 | 14.33 (1.93) | 18.37 (1.14) | 11.24* |
| Withdrawal | | | |
| PRE | 9.56 (2.10) | 9.67 (2.75) | 0.20 |
| POST-1 | 9.94 (2.10) | 7.52 (1.86) | -5.42* |
| POST-2 | 10.02 (2.12) | 6.95 (1.69) | -7.13* |
| Compliance | | | |
| PRE | 7.38 (3.57) | 9.12 (3.58) | 2.16 |
| POST-1 | 7.46 (3.17) | 6.70 (1.71) | -1.32 |
| POST-2 | 7.69 (2.82) | 6.07 (1.38) | -3.22* |

Note. PRE = pre-test, POST-1 = first post-test, POST-2 = follow-up post-test. * $p < .003$.

each analysis for both groups and the figures reported in Tables 2 and 3 accord with whether the assumption was supported or violated.

Results for the within-groups analyses of the T-group were consistent with the hypotheses that participation in the gratitude intervention significantly increased the adoption of positive problem-solving strategies, and significantly lowered tendencies to adopt negative problem-solving behaviors, though effectiveness in decreasing withdrawal tendencies was more short term (see Table 2, Figures 1-4). Significant main differences were established across all pairwise comparisons of all subscales of the dependent variable. Post hoc tests showed all pairwise comparisons to be significant, except for CRSI-W Pair 3 where POST1 ($M = 7.52, SD = 1.86$) and POST2 ($M = 6.95, SD = 1.69$) and $p = 0.053$.

Control Group Within-Group Analyses Across Testing Phases

Results for the C-group within-groups analyses also supported the main hypotheses. No significant differences were found for the pairwise comparisons of CRSI-CE, CRSI-PPS, and CRSI-C scores. These results (see Table 3) imply that unlike participation in the gratitude intervention, participation in the control journaling exercise had no significant effect on the dependent variable. Though a significant effect was found in the C group scores for CRSI-W with $F(2,76) = 4.868$ and $p < .05$, post hoc tests revealed that C-group CRSI-W actually increased at Pair 1 and Pair 2 comparisons (see Table 3).

Supplementary Qualitative Data

Qualitative data was collected to supplement the quantitative findings and explore the process, context, and scope of the participants' gratitude experience during the intervention. The data was obtained from seven randomly selected journaling days each from 10 randomly selected gratitude journals, as well as from postintervention semi-structured interviews with five randomly selected T-group participants and their partners. The journal entries and interviews were broken into meaningful individual units. Two hundred eighty-nine gratitude

Table 2. Treatment Group Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for PRE, POST1, and POST2, *F*-values and Pairwise Comparisons Between PRE and POST1, PRE and POST2, and POST1 and POST2 for CRSI-CE, CRSI-PPS, CRSI-W, and CRSI-C

| | p Values of Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------|--------------|-------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| | PRE M(SD) | POST1 M(SD) | POST2 M(SD) | F | PRE-POST1 | PRE-POST2 | POST1-POST2 |
| Conflict-Engagement | 7.97 (2.89) | 6.00 (1.78) | 5.45 (1.13) | 45.98 | .00** | .00** | .01* |
| Positive Problem Solving | 15.20 (2.39) | 17.42 (1.72) | 18.37 (1.14) | 57.45 | .00** | .00** | .00** |
| Withdrawal | 9.67 (2.75) | 7.52 (1.86) | 6.95 (1.69) | 41.18 | .00** | .00** | .05 |
| Compliance | 9.12 (3.58) | 6.70 (1.71) | 6.07 (1.38) | 35.77 | .00** | .00** | .01* |

Note. PRE = Pretest, POST1 = Posttest 1, POST2 = Posttest 2. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Control Group Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for PRE, POST-1, and POST-2, *F*-values and Pairwise Comparisons Between PRE and POST1, PRE and POST2, and POST1 and POST2 for RAS, CRSI-CE, CRSI-PPS, CRSI-W, and CRSI-C

| | PRE M(SD) | POST1 M(SD) | POST2 M(SD) | F | p Values of Post Hoc Pairwise Comparisons | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------|---|-----------|-------------|
| | | | | | PRE-POST1 | PRE-POST2 | POST1-POST2 |
| Conflict-Engagement | 9.41 (3.26) | 9.58 (3.33) | 9.56 (3.20) | 0.68 | .59 | .00 | .00 |
| Positive Problem Solving | 14.28 (2.02) | 14.28 (1.95) | 14.33 (1.93) | 0.07 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| Withdrawal | 9.56 (2.10) | 9.94 (2.10) | 10.02 (2.12) | 4.87 | .05* | .02* | .00 |
| Compliance | 7.38 (3.57) | 7.46 (3.17) | 7.69 (2.82) | 1.10 | .21 | .27 | .15 |

Note. PRE = Pretest, POST1 = Posttest 1, POST2 = Posttest 2. **p* < .05.

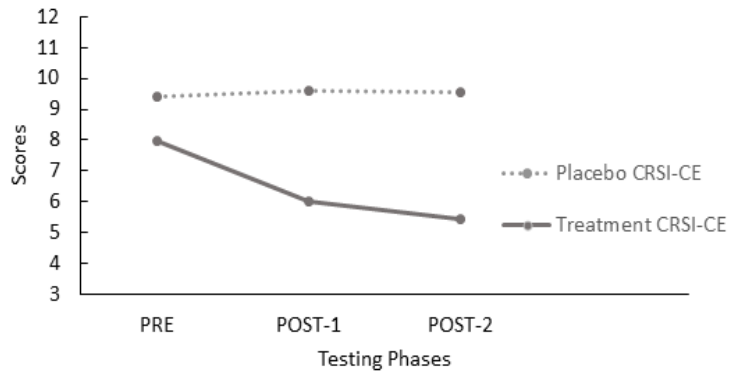


Figure 1. Control and Treatment Group Scores for Conflict-Engagement

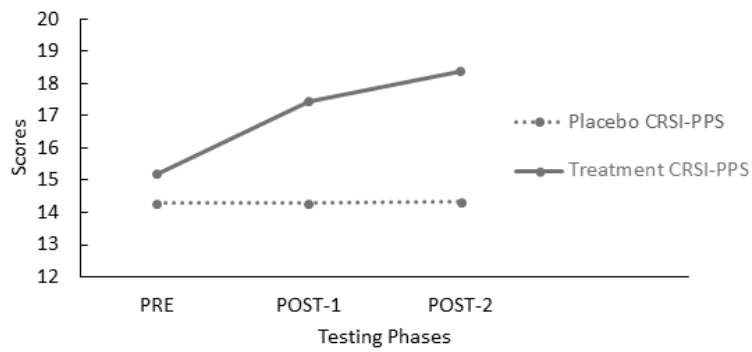


Figure 2. Control and Treatment Scores for Positive Problem-Solving

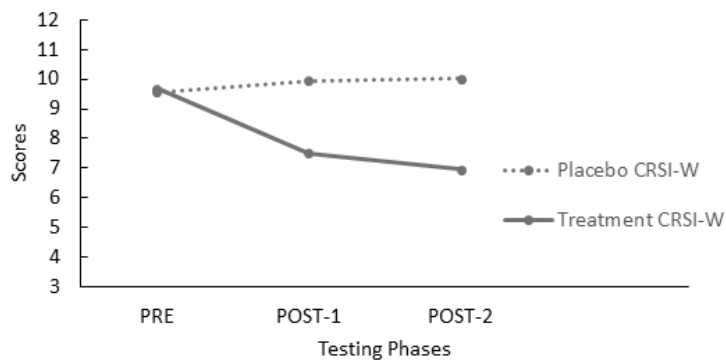


Figure 3. Control and Treatment Group Scores for Withdrawal

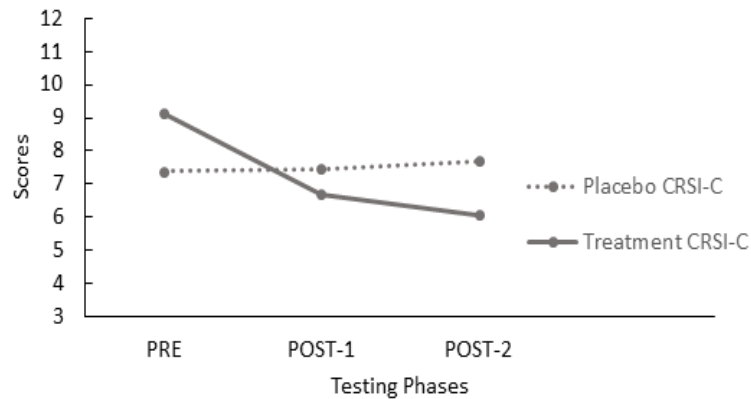


Figure 4. Control and Treatment Group Scores for Compliance

journal units, as well as 385 meaningful interview units were thematically analyzed and categorized into five levels (from first-level meaningful units, to second-level codes, to third-level subordinate themes, to fourth-level superordinate themes, and into final fifth-level categories). Another researcher was asked to code a random sample of the qualitative data sets in order to establish inter-rater validity. The final categories can be found in Tables 4 and 5.

Themes from the gratitude journals. The final categories derived from the gratitude journals elucidate the triggers of the gratitude experience, what and who the gratitude objects were, and to whom the gratitude is attributed. Actions, people, qualities in people, experiences and objects were all considered objects of gratitude.

The final categories here validated findings in research that gratitude can be attributed both to others and to the self. It is of note that the items specifically pertaining to the partner are numerous ($f = 43$) and included in all final categories, but that gratitude is ascribed to many more external entities than just the partner, including family members, friends, workmates, the group one belongs to, and God. Internal attribution of gratitude was also shown, as the data shows gratitude reaction for one's own pro-social behavior and positive personal practices.

Themes from the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to examine perceived changes in the

Table 4. Final Categories, Frequency Counts, and Exemplars From the Gratitude Journal Data Set

| Fifth Level Categories | <i>f</i> | Exemplars | Superordinate Themes Included |
|--|----------|---|---|
| 1 Attribution of Positive Things to Others | 79 | “My younger brother is humble and so patient” | Entities External to Me, People Around Me Have Positive Qualities |
| 2 Pleasure | 136 | “sesame dressing was yummy” | Pleasant Experiences, Objects that Provide Pleasure |
| 3 Positive Practices | 117 | “I was able to help a friend” | Positive Personal Practices, Pro-social Practices |

Table 5. Final Categories, Frequency Counts, and Exemplars From the Semi-structured Interviews

| Fifth Level Categories | <i>f</i> | Exemplars | Superordinate Themes Included |
|----------------------------------|----------|---|--|
| 1 Negative Baseline | 78 | “I was going through a really stressful time” | Recognizing That Relationship Baseline Has Some Negative Elements |
| 2 Effects of Journaling Exercise | 281 | “there was overall improvement in my mood” | More Positive Focus, Pro-social Behaviors, Positive Personal Effects, Self-Examination |
| 3 Criticism of exercise | 4 | “[writing by hand] is really tiring” | Negative Feedback About Exercise |

participant and in the dyad's relationship dynamics. The final categories reflect perceived changes both in the participants and in their relationships (see Table 5) from negative aspects of their relationship and in their personal tendencies prior to intervention, to positive effects postintervention. Specific themes under Effects of Journaling Exercise coincide directly with the primary goal of the journaling intervention, which was to refocus the mind towards more positive things. Superordinate themes reported included Self-examination, taking a More Positive Focus, Positive Personal Effects (e.g., positive feelings), and Pro-social Behaviors from the dyad (e.g., increasing expression of gratitude). Though the effects of the gratitude journaling intervention were reported to be dominantly positive, a third category, Criticism of Exercise, revealed some negative feedback on it, specifically that "writing [by hand] is really tiring." This may have implications for future applications of the intervention.

DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that inducing mindful experiences of gratitude can increase the use of positive conflict-resolution styles as well as decrease the adoption of negative styles in individuals who are part of intimate dyadic relationships. These hypotheses were tested through an experiment, wherein gratitude experiences were elicited through a gratitude journaling exercise.

Results showed significant increases in positive problem solving in both the immediate and short-term follow-up, which suggests that gratitude can cultivate a healthier pattern of conflict resolution. The qualitative findings indeed reveal couple dynamics that are indicative of positive problem-solving techniques and are consistent with the literature that relates positive problem-solving with communication, openness, flexibility, and consideration (Zhang 2007). Subordinate themes from the interviews that adhere to this include "decreasing negative tendencies", "improved interpersonal relating", "effects that facilitate dialogue", and "improved methods of problem-resolution".

The results also indicate that journaling about gratitude produced a significant decrease in the adoption of conflict-engagement, compliance, and withdrawal techniques. In other words, mindfully

experiencing gratitude diminished the tendency to engage in aggressive or hostile conflict resolution, submission and non-communication, and avoidance in the relationship. The qualitative analysis provides some support to these themes. For instance, interview codes included such observations in the couple as, “more open to listening”, “able to talk about problems”, and “became aware of what would set me off.” Overall, couples interviewed noted their “improved interpersonal relating”, “effects that facilitate dialogue”, and “improved methods of problem-resolution.” The theme Reciprocity highlights that when one partner engages in positivity, the other partner tends to respond with positivity as well.

The broaden-and-build framework asserts that a single positive experience can extend and intensify because positive emotions and positive actions circle and build from and onto one another, thus creating upward spirals (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). Gratitude is widely acknowledged in literature as a positive emotional reaction (Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968), and it is considered here as the primary positive emotion that activates the broaden-and-build cycle. This mechanism is posited as that which enables the gratitude experience—even ones unrelated to the relationship or to the partner—to produce an effect in conflict resolution styles specific to the relationship.

For instance, supporting the quantitative results, the qualitative findings demonstrate how the gratitude journaling intervention largely refocused participants’ attention towards existing positivity in their lives. It not only included overt themes of focusing on positivity (Remembered Positive Things), but also those of broadening one’s view of a situation as far as to see positive elements in a negative situation (Saw Positive Elements Also, Positive Thoughts Amidst a Negative Situation, Learning a Lesson From Negative). It also included attentiveness to positivity in otherwise mundane objects and events (Journal Made me Mindful of Positive Things), buffering for usual negative tendencies (Resisting Negativity), and increasing felt and expressed gratitude (Increasing Appreciation). The findings therefore suggest that journaling about gratitude: 1) intensified positive emotions, 2) reduced or tempered negative emotions, and perhaps 3) created positive resources such as openness, patience, etc.,

all of which are elements and outcomes of the broaden-and-build phenomenon (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson et al., 2008). Themes also exhibited how positives led to further positives—Reciprocity, for example, indicates that positivity engendered a positivity response from the partner. The research on agentic and communal rewards of gratitude also supports how such gratitude expression could have furthered the broaden-and-build cycle (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The decentering of the significant other in the overall gratitude experience is noteworthy and further supports the broaden-and-build phenomenon. Indeed, internal ascription of gratitude acts was found to be more predominant than external ascription, where the partner actually leads only in being a gratitude object (e.g., “[I] notice SO’s positive efforts”). The externally attributed gratitude was also not found to be predominantly towards the partner. These altogether support that the relationship benefits from a mechanism that confers positivity indirectly.

Limitations and Recommendations

It is recommended that the proposed broaden-and-build mechanism be tested directly and more rigorously. While the data supports the presence of its elements (i.e., positive mood and positive action), the process and mediating effects of the mechanism can only be inferred since it was not explicitly tested in the current experiment. Further studies could explicitly look for theoretically relevant mediators of the independent variable of the gratitude experience and relationship outcomes. Moreover, the cyclical nature of the phenomenon is such that there could have been many more positive effects that stemmed from gratitude as instigated in this study. Investigation is warranted into gratitude’s relationship to various other variables within and outside of the relationship sphere.

A truly dyadic analysis will further validate and extend the results. In this study, only one person in the relationship applied the intervention and the study does not provide any direct insight about how the dynamics of the partners changed as a result.

Some concerns on internal validity include aspects of controlling

the intervention process. Though instructions were comprehensive, reminders were given regularly and communication between the researcher and participants was well-maintained, it is uncertain how well the participants followed the protocol as it was intended (e.g., writing entries every day), given that they were largely left to complete the journaling exercise at their discretion. Control and consistency in the timing and setting for the testing phases can also be improved, since testing had to be done on different days to accommodate participants' schedules.

Conclusion

The current study confirms that participation in a gratitude journaling intervention can significantly affect conflict-resolution in intimate dyadic relationships. Enhancing awareness and experiences of gratitude effected an increase in adopting the constructive conflict resolution style of positive problem solving. It also decreased the adoption of negative conflict resolution styles, like compliance, conflict-engagement, and withdrawal. The study's results demonstrate that enhancing the gratitude experience via gratitude journaling can have remarkable utility in counseling and therapeutic interventions. It can be performed individually and privately, and may be recommended for cases where openness and dialogue are current issues. It is a novel, non-invasive and organic method of reinserting or amplifying positivity in a relationship.

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APPENDIX A

Instructions Included in the Gratitude Journaling Intervention

Thank you for participating in this exercise!

You are given this notebook so that you may use it to record your experience of good things. Please keep this notebook and write in it **EVERYDAY for 15 days (2 weeks)**. You may write in it at any time of the day or night you just feel like sharing a good experience.

In every entry, please:

- **list down** all the things, events, people, etc. that made you feel good.
- briefly **write about what caused it** and the events surrounding the experience.
- Try to write about **at least 3 things** in every entry.
- there is **NO limit** to how long, detailed and specific your entries should be, so please feel free to document every moment!
- Please try to use only English or Tagalog when writing.

After 15 days, you will be asked to write a thank-you note to your partner containing whatever you wish to thank you partner for. You may look over what you've written in your journal, if you wish. Please give that letter to him/her. The researcher will remind you of this, don't worry!

On every page will be a header:

Today, I was grateful for--- Date: Time:

APPENDIX B

Instructions Included in the Placebo Journaling Exercise

Thank you for participating in this exercise!

You are given this notebook so that you may use it to record every day experiences. Please keep this notebook and write in it **EVERYDAY** for **15 days (2 weeks)**. You may write in it at any time of the day or night you just feel like sharing something.

In every entry, please:

- list down the **first three things** you can think of.
- briefly write about your experience of that thing.
- Try to write about **at least 3 things** in every entry.
- there is **NO limit** to how long, detailed and specific your entries should be, so please feel free to document every moment!
- Please try to use only English or Tagalog when writing.