

Development of a Vignette–Based Gratitude Journaling Methodology and Analysis of Gratitude Lists

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While gratitude journals have been shown to promote positive emotions by encouraging individuals to record aspects of life that they appreciate, it remains unclear whether people can also express gratitude even for neutral or negative experiences. The present study sought to examine this possibility using a vignette–based methodology. A vignette consisting of 10 consecutive everyday events (four positive, three negative, and three neutral) was developed, and 133 online university students were instructed to imagine experiencing the scenario and to write six to eight items in a gratitude journal. The participants' responses were matched with vignette sentences and analyzed for frequency. Results indicated that gratitude was expressed not only for positive events (e.g., 'meeting an old friend') but also for neutral (e.g., 'rainy morning') and negative events (e.g., 'being late to work'). In some cases, participants reframed adverse experiences in a positive light (e.g., 'I was late, but only by ten minutes'). These findings demonstrate that individuals are capable of identifying aspects of gratitude even in unfavorable circumstances, suggesting that gratitude functions as a flexible cognitive–affective process that facilitates the reframing of diverse life events.

Keywords: Gratitude, Gratitude journaling, Vignette

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Introduction

Gratitude has been the subject of extensive research in positive psychology. According to Froh, et al. (2008), Gratitude can be conceptualized as a virtue or an emotional state. As a moral virtue, gratitude can be seen as a human strength that enhances personal and relational well-being (Alden, et al., 1990; Kim, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As an emotion, gratitude is an attribution-dependent state that results from two stages of information processing: (a) recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome, and (b) recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Froh, et al., 2008). Research on gratitude has shown that it is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including increased life satisfaction, improved relationships, greater resilience, and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Emmons, & McCullough, 2003; Emmons, & Stern, 2013; Watkins, et al., 2003; Wood, et al., 2010). Moreover, gratitude has been associated with improved social support, better coping mechanisms, and improved resilience in the face of adversity (Kashdan, et al., 2006; Wood et al., 2010).

In particular, with regard to coping with adversity, gratitude interventions are known to help reduce the emotional impact of negative events. It enhances resilience and the ability to cope with traumatic events, thereby contributing to survival in such situations (Klibert, et al., 2019). Many researchers have examined the effects of gratitude interventions, gratitude exercises, and gratitude-based interventions on a variety of outcomes, such as positive emotions, subjective

well-being, social relationships, and mental health (Boehm, et al., 2011; Emmons & Stern, 2013; Froh et al., 2008; Seligman, et al., 2005).

One of the most popular and studied methods for cultivating gratitude is through gratitude journaling, which involves regularly writing down a list of things you appreciate (Emmons, & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude journaling has been found to be an effective way to increase gratitude emotion, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improve overall well-being (Emmons, & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005; Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Watkins, et al., 2003). Other studies have shown that gratitude journaling is associated with improved physical health indicators such as reduced symptoms of illness, lower blood pressure, better sleep quality, and enhanced immune function (Huffman, 2019; Kini, et al., 2016).

The general method of keeping a gratitude journal is to identify and record things one is grateful for. The instruction used in the study by Froh et al. (2008) was: ‘*Think back over the past day and write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.*’ This instruction continues to be widely used in many studies. Upon examining this instruction, it becomes evident that the focus is not on documenting the event itself but on recording aspects that the individual has interpreted with a sense of gratitude. This raises the question of whether, in the practice of keeping a gratitude journal, individuals may also develop gratitude toward negative or adverse experiences.

Theoretically, it sounds plausible enough. As an emotional state, gratitude is marked by active

attempts to mindfully notice and appreciate positive aspects of life (Wood et al. 2010). All life events involve both positive and negative dimensions, and even those that appear adverse on the surface may contain elements that can be construed positively. Individuals with a dispositional tendency toward gratitude are more likely to attend to and acknowledge these positive elements, thereby fostering a sense of thankfulness. This perspective is supported by a substantial body of research demonstrating positive associations between gratitude and adaptive coping with adversity (Klibert, 2019; Wood, et al., 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest that gratitude may serve as a cognitive–affective resource that enables individuals to appraise challenging circumstances in a more positive and constructive manner.

However, one may still question whether people can genuinely feel grateful for negative events. In the context of gratitude journals, it is common for individuals to record appreciation for positive experiences, such as personal achievements, acts of kindness, or moments of joy (Ma, et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2010). While it is natural to express gratitude for positive events, a more intriguing question is whether individuals are also able to experience gratitude in response to negative events. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that some people can indeed express gratitude in the face of adversity, this phenomenon has rarely been subjected to experimental verification. Motivated by this question, the present study sought to examine whether individuals could generate expressions of gratitude even when presented with neutral or negative events.

So, in the present study, we sought to directly examine the proposition that even seemingly negative events can be received with gratitude by analyzing the content of gratitude journals. We are interested in general tendencies, so we need to examine a large body of data, not just individual cases. Ideally, this kind of examination could be accomplished by having all participants undergo the same negative event and then write gratitude journal entries, which is not feasible for all participants to undergo the same real-life event. Therefore, we employed an alternative approach in which participants were presented with a specific vignette and asked to write gratitude journal entries based on it.

Of course, when participants are instructed to compose gratitude journals based on vignettes, it is possible that they may not fully experience gratitude, as the events do not pertain directly to their own lives. Nevertheless, the methodological advantage of being able to systematically control the journal content may outweigh this limitation. Furthermore, by constructing the vignettes to include both positive and negative scenarios, researchers can more effectively compare the frequency of gratitude expressed across different situational contexts.

In summary, the primary objective of this study is to demonstrate that individuals are capable of identifying and appreciating aspects of gratitude even in the context of negative events. By analyzing gratitude lists written in response to vignettes encompassing various types of events, this research seeks to extend the existing literature on gratitude and deepen our understanding of its potential benefits and limitations. In addi-

tion, the findings may offer valuable implications for interventions and therapeutic practices aimed at fostering gratitude.

Method

Participants

The study included 133 Korean participants, who were current students and graduates of an online university located in Seoul. Of the participants, 34 (25.6%) were men and 99 (74.4%) were women. Because online universities in Korea primarily serve adult learners, the participants' ages were widely distributed. The age ranged from 20 to 69, and the average was 42.8 years ($SD=12.4$).

Measures

To analyze patterns of gratitude responses, it was necessary to first control the content of participants' gratitude journals. For this purpose, the vignette methodology was employed. A vignette is essentially a short story or scenario that can reproduce real-life events when carefully constructed and pre-tested. Atzmüller and Steiner (2010) define a vignette as a concise, deliberately designed description of a person, object, or situation, presented in textual or live form. Similarly, Hill (1997) describes it as a brief written or pictorial scenario intended to elicit responses to typical situations. In this study, we developed a vignette composed of ten sentences, including four positive events, three negative events, and three

neutral events. The vignette was as follows: "*It rained this morning (neutral). I got up late and was in a hurry (negative). After getting ready, I ran to the bus stop (neutral). Luckily, the bus was on time (positive). I was 10 minutes late when I arrived at the office (negative). The manager smiled at me as I hurried to my seat (positive). I was unable to complete the task due today during regular work hours (negative). I continued working beyond office hours and eventually finished it (positive). I had a late dinner at a snack bar near my workplace (neutral). There, I met an old friend (positive).*"

We gave the participants the following instruction: "*Imagine that you experienced this scenario yourself and write at least six items for a gratitude list.*" Since they were free to write in their own words, many participants added their own thoughts and created new sentences. For example, they wrote things such as "*I am grateful because it was a rainy day I like*" or "*Although I was late, I am grateful that it was only by ten minutes.*"

For reference, we conducted an additional validation procedure to confirm the affective valence of the 10 sentences included in the vignette. Specifically, we asked five psychology professors (all holding doctoral degrees) who were not part of the research team to independently evaluate whether each sentence represented a positive, neutral, or negative event. Table 1 presents the evaluation results along with the inter-rater agreement indices.

Table 1. Valence evaluation of the sentences in the vignette and agreement percentage

Sentence	Eval. 1	Eval. 2	Eval. 3	Eval. 4	Eval. 5	Agreement(%)
Rained in the morning (0)	0	0	0	0	–	80%
Got up late (–)	–	–	–	–	–	100%
Getting ready and run (0)	–	0	0	0	0	80%
Bus on time (+)	+	+	+	+	+	100%
10 min late at office (–)	–	–	–	–	–	100%
Manager smiled at me (+)	+	+	+	+	+	100%
Couldn't finish work (–)	–	–	–	–	–	100%
Ended up finishing (+)	+	0	+	+	+	80%
Late dinner (0)	–	0	0	+	0	60%
Met an old friend (+)	1	1	1	1	1	100%

Note. (+) = positive / (0) = neutral / (–) negative

Data collection and Analysis

For this study, participants were recruited from an online university in Seoul, Korea. The research purpose and procedure were announced on the student bulletin board, and participation was voluntary. Participants accessed the study through the Google Survey platform, where they first read the vignette. They were then instructed to write a “gratitude journal” by freely listing between six and eight items for which they felt grateful. Responses were entered in short sentences within eight available fields, of which at least six were required. This requirement was based on the initial valence evaluation, in which only four sentences in the vignette were positive. Thus, if participants listed more than six items, it could be inferred that they expressed gratitude for neutral or negative sentences as well.

All responses were then matched with the corresponding sentences in the vignette. Because participants listed their gratitude items freely and

in no particular order, each response sentence was compared individually with the vignette sentences. Finally, the frequency with which each vignette sentence was mentioned was calculated.

Results

The results showed that participants expressed their gratitude for all the positive, neutral, and negative sentences of the vignette. 46 participants (34%) expressed their gratitude for the neutral event of ‘rain in the morning’, while 36 participants (27%) expressed their gratitude for the negative event of ‘getting up late’. In addition, 25 participants (19%) expressed their gratitude for the neutral event of ‘getting ready and run’, 127 participants (95%) expressed their gratitude for the positive event of ‘bus arriving on time’, while 49 (37%) expressed gratitude for the negative event of ‘being 10 minutes late to work’. Besides, 121 participants (91%) expressed their gratitude for the positive event of ‘manager smiled at me’,

19 (14%) expressed gratitude for the negative event of ‘couldn’t finish work’, 107 (80%) expressed gratitude for the positive event of ‘ended up finishing work’, 107 (80%) expressed gratitude for the neutral event of commented ‘late dinner’,

and 129 (97%) expressed gratitude for the positive event of ‘met an old friend’ in their gratitude journal. Below is the % of the sentences mentioned in the gratitude journal shown in Figure 1.

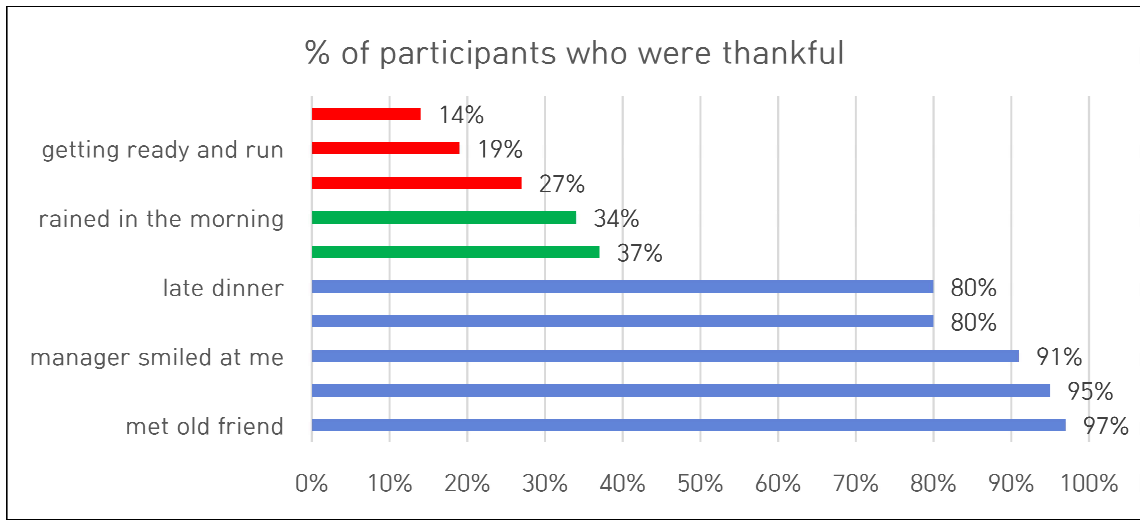


Figure 1. Percentage of the participants who were thankful for each sentence

The results are more readily understood by analyzing participants' gratitude responses for event categories. Table 2 below re-presents the percentage of gratitude responses categorized by the emotional valence of the vignette sentences.

Table 2. Percentage of the gratitude responses to sentences

Affective valence	Sentence	% Participants
Negative	Got up late	27%
	10 min late at office	37%
	Couldn't finish work	14%
Neutral	Rained in the morning	34%
	Getting ready and run	19%
	Late dinner	80%
Positive	Bus on time	95%
	Manager smiled at me	91%
	Ended up finishing	80%
	Met an old friend	97%

Affective valence	Sentence	% Participants
Negative	Got up late	27%
	10 min late at office	37%
	Couldn't finish work	14%

As shown in Table 2, the high percentage of gratitude expressed toward positive events is readily comprehensible. For instance, a typical response to a positive event was, ‘I am thankful for meeting my old friend.’

Meanwhile, the responses to the neutral and negative events included ‘I got up late, but I had more sleep’, ‘Though I had to run, my legs are healthy’, ‘I was late but not so late’, ‘I couldn’t finish my work but thankful for the work itself’

and ‘I am glad it didn’t get worse.’ These responses demonstrate that some participants are able to find aspects of gratitude even in neutral or negative events.

There were several other noteworthy findings. 80% of participants included ‘Late dinner’ in their gratitude lists. Although this item was rated as neutral by the professor raters, the participants’ actual perception significantly differed. Additionally, some of the gratitude responses did not match the vignette sentences; for example, 28% of the participants responded with ‘I am thankful for having a job.’

Discussion

Using the vignette methodology, we found that individuals were able to identify aspects of gratitude not only in positive but also in neutral or negative events. These findings suggest that gratitude is flexible enough to encompass negative events, but also highlight the role of individual competence in accessing this resource.

Gratitude functions not only as a positive emotional state but also as an ability to find something to be grateful for in diverse circumstances. This ability may serve as a psychological resource that enables individuals to navigate challenges and setbacks more effectively (Emmons, 2019; Klibert et al., 2019; Wood, et al., 2007). In response to negative or neutral events, participants’ gratitude journal entries included reflection on personal growth, lessons learned, or even gratitude for lack of more serious outcomes, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of gratitude and its potential to thrive even in less favorable

conditions.

It would also be of great significance to confirm the usefulness of the vignette methodology for the gratitude study. We believe that this is the first study to show that people can be grateful in a variety of different situations, using the vignette methodology. However, when using this vignette methodology, we have encountered several problems. Originally, we created a 10-sentence vignette to streamline the process of coding the thank lists. Quite often, however, participants wrote down something that was not on the vignette, such as “I thank everything”, “I thank I am alive”. In such cases, We could not classify the gratitude item into any of the specified categories, leaving us no option but to use our own coding discretion or to exclude the item.

One important thing to discuss is how the researcher’s request to write the gratitude journal had influenced it. Because we requested at least 6 responses, the gratitude responses may have been manifested under pressure. However, what if the number of lists was not set and participants were allowed to write a gratitude journal freely? There is a possibility that only couple of lists were produced and only positive events have been mentioned in the gratitude journal. If so, the following questions may arise. Is the gratitude journal written under pressure meaningless? Does the effect of gratitude journaling appear only when writing about positive events? Does the effect of gratitude journaling appear only when appreciating positive events? It seems difficult to draw a clear conclusion to these questions yet. Therefore, in future studies, it will be necessary to examine how participants respond when they freely write

gratitude journal entries concerning purely negative scenarios. It would also be meaningful to examine the relationship between the participants' gratitude lists and gratitude tendencies or gratitude-related emotions.

We need to remember that the mechanism of gratitude journaling is to focus on the positive aspects of life, not on the positive life events per se. As mentioned in the instruction, most life events have both positive and negative aspects. A gratitude journaling helps us focus more on the positive aspects of our lives. Consequently, for the purpose of enhancing a gratitude attitude, keeping a gratitude journal in the face of neutral or negative events might prove more effective than focusing solely on positive events. In order to maximize the benefits of a gratitude journaling, you need to learn how to write a gratitude journal properly.

Based on the findings of this study, two directions for future research can be suggested. First, the connection between dispositional gratitude and the present findings should be explored. Specifically, are individuals with stronger dispositional gratitude more likely to express thankfulness even for negative events when writing vignette-based gratitude journals? This question could be answered through correlational analyses with gratitude disposition.

Second, can people feel gratitude in response to much more severe negative events than those included in the present vignette? The negative events presented here, such as waking up late or working overtime, are indeed adverse but relatively mild. Would individuals still be able to express gratitude in scenarios involving major acci-

dents, cancer diagnosis or the loss of a close person? Further research in this area is warranted.

Finally, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The first relates to the vignette methodology described above. A significant methodological limitation involves the consistency of the neutral vignette items. As evidenced by the low inter-rater agreement (e.g., 60% for 'Late dinner'), the intended neutrality was not strictly maintained. We acknowledge that the emotional valence of these items is susceptible to individual differences and context, potentially leading participants to perceive them as positive or negative. Future research should implement more stringent item selection criteria, such as increasing the number of expert raters and conducting a pilot study with participants to confirm that the average emotional valence of selected items is objectively close to zero.

In this study, one single total vignette was used that combined positive, negative, and neutral situations. However, presenting separate vignettes for each type of situation may better reflect real-life experiences. The vignette employed here could instead be regarded as largely neutral in tone. Future research should aim to construct vignettes in a more systematic manner. Alternatively, multiple vignettes could be developed and compared. For instance, researchers might compare gratitude responses written after reading a vignette composed solely of positive events with those written after reading a vignette composed solely of negative events.

It also seems necessary to improve the way participants' gratitude lists are matched with and classified according to the vignette. Although we

expected the participants' responses to be systematically classified, some lists were difficult to classify.

Another limitation is the sampling of participants in this study. Since this study was conducted only on adult sample of one online university, a generalization problem may arise. In the future, a wider range of community samples will contribute to the generalization of research results.

Similarly the high proportion of female participants and the older average age of the sample may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Previous research indicates that females tend to exhibit a higher dispositional gratitude than males (Kashdan, et al., 2009), and the experience of gratitude often increases with age (Chopik, et al., 2019). Consequently, the high frequency of gratitude expression across diverse events observed in this study may have been overestimated compared with the general population. Therefore, subsequent research should ideally be bolstered by studies that control for the influence of these demographic factors, or that compare the patterns of gratitude expression between different groups, such as males and females, or younger and older adults.

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비네트-기반 감사일기 작성 방법론의 개발 및 감사목록 분석

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감사 일기는 삶에서 소중히 여기는 측면들을 기록함으로써 긍정적 정서를 증진하는 것으로 알려져 있으나, 사람들이 중립적이거나 부정적인 경험에 대해서도 감사를 표현할 수 있는지는 여전히 불분명하다. 본 연구는 비네트(vignette) 기반 방법론을 활용하여 이러한 가능성을 검토하고자 하였다. 일련의 일상생활 사건 10개(긍정 4개, 부정 3개, 중립 3개)로 구성된 비네트를 개발하였고, 온라인대학교 재학생 133명에게 해당 상황을 경험한다고 가정한 뒤 감사 일기에 6~8개의 항목을 작성하도록 하였다. 참가자의 응답은 비네트 문장과 매칭하여 빈도 분석을 실시하였다. 연구 결과, 감사는 긍정적 사건(예: '오랜 친구를 만남')뿐만 아니라 중립적 사건(예: '비 오는 아침')과 부정적 사건(예: '지각')에도 표현되었다. 일부 경우, 참가자들은 부정적 경험을 긍정적으로 재구성하기도 하였다(예: '지각은 했지만, 10분만 늦었다'). 이러한 결과는 개인이 불리한 상황에서도 감사의 요소를 발견할 수 있음을 보여주며, 감사가 다양한 삶의 사건을 재구성할 수 있도록 촉진하는 유연한 인지-정서적 과정으로 기능함을 시사한다.

주요어: 감사, 감사일기, 비네트