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ARTICLE

Resilience, masculinity, and hedonic-eudaimonic dynamics: An autoethnography of an extended gratitude intervention

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Abstract: This autoethnography explores a 23-day gratitude project, focusing on the experiences, challenges, and outcomes of writing and sending daily gratitude letters. Analysis of audio transcripts recorded before and after each letter reveals several key themes: the dynamic interplay between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being; the significant role of gender and perceptions of masculinity as obstacles to gratitude expression; the value of benefit-triggered gratitude expression; and the development of resilience through communicative acts of gratitude. Despite the considerable benefits observed, the findings recommend prioritizing the quality of gratitude expressions over their frequency in future interventions. This work provides a nuanced understanding of the emotional journey in gratitude practices and its impact on personal growth and resilience.

Keywords: gratitude; resilience; masculinity; autoethnography; gratitude intervention

1. Introduction

*It is February 8th, 2021- in the middle of the day. I am standing in my apartment, looking down at my desk and there's a letter in a sealed, stamped, and addressed envelope. I cannot stop staring at it. I'm staring at it. I'm staring at it. I'm staring at it. I grab the letter and I walk towards the door. I stop. I turn around and I come back to my desk, and I go back to the door, and I come back my desk again. I do this for the next 20 minutes. I can feel frustration building and boiling. I feel like I'm going insane. "Just do it, Matt. Just do it. Just do it, just do it. Oh my God! Just do it!" Finally, I go outside to the mailbox and I look at the outgoing mail slot. I stare at it, and I stare at it, and I stare at it. I am standing there, in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at the mailbox, hardly moving, for what feels like an eternity. My mind is pacing at a rate that seems unbearable. I am on the edge of an anxiety attack. "Just do it. No, don't do it. No, don't do it. You want to do it? No, you don't. Yes, you do. No, you don't. Yes, you do. Oh my God! Why is this gratitude such bulls***?! It's not hard!" I muster some strength and I get the letter halfway into the outgoing slot. I am frozen. I cannot complete the mailing of this letter. I look up at the sky, hoping a phantom lightning bolt will emerge from the blue expanse, strike me down, and end this madness. All I can see is the sun – there's no lightning bolt saving me today. I tap the letter into the mailbox one centimeter at a time, then furiously storm back into my apartment. I want to be mad. I want to be frustrated. But the fact of the matter is I am not. The back-and-forth battle in my mind is gone, without a trace, like it never existed. "Oh!" I think to myself, "This gratitude is hard, but this gratitude is worth it."*

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This is an autoethnographic essay about the experience of gratitude. Specifically, it is about a project in which I wrote and mailed a gratitude letter to a different person every day, for 23 consecutive days. This is a story about gratitude, what I learned, why expressing gratitude was hard, and why expressing gratitude was worth it. The project began as an exploration of gratitude, progressed through joy, anger, and burnout, before concluding as an experience of resilience to grief.

One month prior to the day I preferred a lightning bolt over mailing a letter, I asked myself, "*What do I want to do for my birthday?"* My birthday was six weeks away and my first, instinctual thought is to do a gratitude project. My second thought was "*That's silly. That's cheesy, that's dumb. I'm not doing it*." I move on and start pondering typical birthday ideas: parties, foods, events. No idea is appealing so I drop it. Days later, I ask again, "*What do I want to do for my birthday?"* Again, my instinctual, first, unobstructed thought is do a gratitude project. "*No. It's dumb. It's silly. It's cheesy. It's emotional. I want no part of it.*" I move on. On January 31st, I asked myself again, *"What do you want to do for your birthday?*" And again, my instinctual thought is to do a gratitude project. I pause. It strikes me that this is the third time that my first idea is to do a gratitude project. To me, this means something. This has value or importance that I do not quite understand but do not argue with. Since my instinct, three separate times, is to do a gratitude project, I decide that I will do one. However, I don't know what to do and I don't know what I mean when I think of a *gratitude project*. What I do know is that talking out loud helps me understand things. So, I pull out my phone, open my recorder, and start talking. After several minutes of unencumbered rambling, I conclude; I'll send one gratitude letter every day of February leading up to my birthday on the 22nd. I want the letters to be short and specific. I have sent many gratitude letters in my life, and I tend to scribe long and expressive multi-page letters. I don't want to do that. I want to write half-page letters and mail them immediately. *"I like this idea."*

I start generating the list of recipients and I get about 10 or 11 people on the list and then hit a wall. I can't figure out any more people right now, but I know they'll come later. I notice that I'm enjoying the planning process, and especially the recordings, so, I decide that I'm going to document the project with audio recordings, taken before and after every gratitude letter written and sent. I am curious and want to see what happens with the project and the recordings will help. However, the decision to record the project brings about a sense of trepidation. Through studying the work of key gratitude researchers, like Robert Emmons and Michael McCullogh (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; McCullough et al., 2001) and conducting interventions such as gratitude journaling, gratitude reflection, and gratitude letters and visits for colleges, sports teams, community centers, and small organizations, I am well aware of the multitude of benefits that come from gratitude. However, I wonder "*Am I doing this for the benefits?"* I'm afraid I may be turning the expression of gratitude into a meaningless hedonic exercise in which I am forcing gratitude to reap the rewards. Nonetheless, I move forward with the project with excitement.

2. Rationale and methodology

I am a PhD student studying positive psychology, with a research focus on resilience, meaningfulness of work, and well-being. My academic background and research interests are rooted in qualitative research, particularly in studying individual processes and experiences of resilience and flourishing. The idea for this gratitude letter project arose after I completed the VIA Character Strengths assessment just months prior. The assessment revealed gratitude as one of my top strengths, which was unsurprising but

kept the concept of gratitude at the forefront of my mind. Having previously studied the impacts of gratitude letters, I was well aware of their benefits, which significantly contributed to the idea for this study. Although I have been writing gratitude letters for years, I had never approached gratitude expression in such a structured and purposeful manner. This project provided an opportunity to explore gratitude more systematically. The decision to document the process with audio recordings was driven by curiosity, as I thought it would add an interesting dimension to the experience. Initially, I did not intend to turn this project into a formal research paper, but the insights gained from the process inspired me to share my findings through this autoethnography.

The data for this project, the audio recordings and reflections, were collected in a manner akin to experience sampling method (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). Experience sampling method is a research methodology in which participants report on their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and environment immediately after a particular event (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). In the case of this study, audio recordings were used to record the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with writing and sending each gratitude letter. The audio recordings were then transcribed for further autoethnographic analysis. While self-reports are common in research on gratitude, self-analysis is uncommon due to the limitations of bias and subjectivity. However, there are self-analytical approaches that are not unprecedented or invalidated, such as autoethnography, which is a systematized method for analyzing and writing about past experiences (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines the elements of autobiography and ethnography to analyze personal experiences within a cultural context. Autoethnography allows researchers to reflect on their personal experiences and connect them to broader social, cultural, and theoretical frameworks (Adams et al., 2015; Adams et al., 2017; Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). This approach was chosen for its ability to provide a deep, introspective examination of the nuanced and personal nature of gratitude expression and its effects.

Autoethnography was selected for several reasons. Firstly, it enables an in-depth exploration of personal experiences (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011), which is crucial for understanding the subjective and emotional dimensions of gratitude. Secondly, autoethnography facilitates the integration of personal narrative with academic analysis (Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011), making it a suitable method for investigating the intersection of personal growth, emotional vulnerability, and social norms. Thirdly, autoethnography's reflective nature allows for a comprehensive examination of the evolving dynamics of gratitude over time (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011).

This study employed a pragmatic approach to autoethnography, specifically focusing on positive autoethnography. Pragmatic autoethnography emphasizes practical outcomes and the applicability of research findings to real-life situations (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). Positive autoethnography, a subset of this approach, aims to highlight positive experiences and outcomes, thereby contributing to the understanding of resilience, personal growth, and well-being (Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). The

choice of positive autoethnography aligns with the study's focus on the benefits of gratitude and its potential to foster resilience and well-being.

The analysis of the transcripts was guided by reflective self-examination, a core component of autoethnographic research (Ellis et al., 2011; Gonot-Schoupinsky et al., 2023). This involved an iterative process of writing, reflecting, and revising to uncover the deeper meanings and implications of the experiences described. It is important to note that autoethnography typically does not utilize the standard results-discussion format found in academic articles, and instead weaves personal experience and extant literature together (Adams & Hermann, 2023). The narrative presented in this study integrates personal anecdotes with theoretical insights, providing a multi-layered account of the gratitude project.

3. The four phases of my gratitude project

3.1 Reaping the rewards: February 1-5

The first days of the gratitude project feel like a success - the letters seem to be writing themselves and I am having fun writing and sending them. I feel great after sending the letters, as evidenced by the excerpts below.

> Day 1 – *"I feel better than I did eight minutes ago when I sat down to write it."*
>
> Day 3 – *"I just finished my letter. And I feel pretty good. I didn't feel bad before, but I am still noticing a nice little boost."*
>
> Day 4 – *"I sent my gratitude letter. But my mood is better after that."*

Immediately after sending the gratitude letters, I feel happier, regardless of my prior mood or state. If I am feeling low, I send a letter and feel less depressed. If I am feeling happy, I send a letter and feel happier. This boost in happiness is in line with the extant research that has linked gratitude to increased feelings of happiness, reduced stress, depression, and anxiety, and a greater sense of overall well-being (Seligman, 2011; Watkins et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2010). For example, the letters are having a direct impact on my wellbeing through the reduction of school-related stress, as seen on Day 2.

> *"I could feel my stress and frustration going away. I just had class and I was angry in class. I was sitting there mad and frustrated at class because I didn't quite understand the statistics and that stuff, but that went away too! That frustration and confusion and worry and doubt; those things went away and I could feel them going away while writing the letter."*

On Day 4, I realized the consistent expression of gratitude is helping me savor the small things and appreciate the beauty around me. On Day 4 I recorded:

> *"But my mood is better after that. It wasn't [just the letter], but it did help. I also went on a walk outside, said hello to the mountains, I had lunch – a breakfast burrito, which is actually the first thing I'd had to eat today. So, yeah, the gratitude helped. But the other things did too. So, gratitude in addition, in concordance, in step, in movement with other things – it's pretty nice."*

From my experience running gratitude-based wellbeing interventions and doctoral education in positive psychology, I knew about the extensive benefits from expressing gratitude, such as reduced depression and anxiety (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) a greater sense of well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001; Seligman, 2011, Wood et al., 2010), increased resilience in the face of stress and adversity (Frias et al., 2011; Watkins et al., 2021; Wood

et al., 2010), improved relationships (Obeldobel & Kerns, 2021), and greater pro-social behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Grant & Gina, 2010). While I knew gratitude expression could lead to such benefits, I was still surprised to see and feel that positive impact in the moment. The gratitude feels good, and overall, I feel good. However, on Day 6 the tides begin to change as I start experiencing obstacles to the expression of gratitude: *"I did write it and it felt pretty good. It was also kind of hard. I had a difficult time articulating my thoughts and feelings."*

3.2 Phase 2: The gender wall: February 6-10

My first obstacle in this gratitude project is men – rather, masculinity. By chance my first five letters were to women: academic advisors, friends, former professors. And the next five people on my list are men, mostly from my career as a basketball coach. These are men I consider responsible for my coaching career, and key contributors to some of my most cherished accomplishments. However, I am having a hard time sending these letters. Reflecting on the norms of athletic culture, I find myself reluctant to express vulnerability. Athletic culture is highly influenced by masculine culture (Eveslage & Delaney, 1998) in which a central tenet is stoicism; the controlled, measured, and restricted expression of emotion (Jansz, 2000; Levant & Kopecky, 1995). I feel like I'm violating cultural norms of emotionality by saying thank you.

Prior to writing the letter on the seventh day, I find myself up against a mental wall and I just can't write the letter. I can say the words, but I cannot put them on paper.

> *"Are you kidding me? All I want to do is say thank you to these men and I can't. I'm going crazy. This gratitude is bulls***!"*

As evidenced below, the language of these experiences is defined by confusion, frustration, and anger. This is the only portion of the gratitude project that is described with such negatively charged emotion. For example, after writing the letter on the 7th day, I record,

> *"I was very angry and I felt insane and I was mad and sad and everything."*

On Day 8, I exclaim with frustration and defeat:

> *"One of the harder things about these gratitude letters is the masculinity. I hate how uncomfortable I am sending gratitude letters to men. I hate it. I hate how weak it makes me feel. I hate how I think it's going to make me seem weak to them. I hate how I feel like I'm violating cultural norms by expressing gratitude."*

In this instance, I am referring to masculine culture and the emotional restrictions incumbent to it. While there is not extensive work regarding gender and gratitude, the bit of research that does exist helps explain this experience. Because men and women are socialized differently, they often hold different values regarding the expression of certain emotions (Jansz, 2000; Kashdan et al., 2009; Levant & Kopecky, 1995) such as gratitude (Froh et al., 2009; Kashdan et al., 2009). Due to this socialization, men often have a negative perception regarding the expression of gratitude. The entry from Day 8 shows the restrictive and inexpressive impact of masculine identity (Froh et al., 2009; Jansz, 2000; Kashdan et al., 2009; Levant & Kopecky, 1995) on the expression of gratitude.

This phase of the gratitude project highlights tension between my desire to express gratitude and the social expectations associated with emotional expression. The barriers around gender were not just a product of my own masculine identity. The expression of gratitude was obstructed by my perceptions of the recipients' masculine ideology, which is "the degree to which a man agrees with traditional societal beliefs about masculinity" (Kashdan et al., 2009, pg. 697). Further, Kashdan et al., (2009), found that those higher in masculine ideology are more likely to view emotional expression, including gratitude, as a sign of weakness. Studies of both athletic and

basketball culture have found them to be heavily influenced by masculine culture, with rigid adoptions of stoicism and inexpressiveness (Eveslage & Delaney, 1998; Higgins, 2022). Two of the recipients had careers in coaching basketball that dated back to the 1980's and this long dedication to the sport led me to perceive them to be enmeshed in, and committed to basketball culture. Consequently, I assumed these men would have strong alignment with masculine ideology. I felt these men would judge me to be weak if I expressed gratitude to them, in addition to the sense that expressing gratitude would violate a societal norm. This perception was a formidable obstacle, causing intense frustration, confusion, and a desire to quit the project all together (as well as an embellished preference to be struck by lightning.)

What inspired the writing and mailing of the letters was the genuine sense of gratitude – I was acutely aware of how my time working for these coaches contributed to meaningful achievements that extended beyond my basketball career. Because men tend to view expressions of gratitude as a form of vulnerability and weakness (Froh et al., 2009; Kashdan et al., 2009; Levant & Kopecky, 1995), when they do express gratitude, it is typically focused on achievement related events (Froh et al., 2009; Kashdan et al., 2009; Scherer et al., 1986). Focusing on achievement when writing the gratitude letters to men helped me climb the gender wall, which in turn, helped me feel an immediate benefit of gratitude – positive affect (McCullough et al., 2001). After mailing the letter on the 8th day - the day in which I hoped to be struck by lightning and proclaimed gratitude to be bulls*** – I record,

> *"There's always a bit of hesitation sending gratitude letters to men like that, that stigma of emotions and feelings. I don't know - I felt like I tapped into the right elements of masculine culture to send a meaningful gratitude letter in the right way. I feel pretty good."*

While the gender wall was large and created significant frustration, I still feel the immediate benefits of gratitude each time I drop a letter in the mailbox. The moment I see a letter slide into the outgoing slot, I feel a boost of happiness. As I walk away from the mailbox, I can feel the described anxiety and frustration ease. I don't feel the same heavy sense of dread that persisted throughout the process of writing the male-targeted gratitude letters. I feel relief, and I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. The feeling of accomplishment and benefits of gratitude felt stronger than the challenges and this motivated me to press forward. Committed to the project, I send each letter and after each one I feel a little bit better than I did when I sat down to write. But the emotionality and required vulnerability begins to take a toll.

3.3 Phase 3: From burnout to buy in: February 11-20

By the 11th day, I am emotionally burned out. It feels like I am experiencing something like gratitude fatigue. While an extensive search of the existing literature yielded no direct results on gratitude fatigue, there is research on constructs such as compassion fatigue and empathy fatigue that might provide insights into my experience. Empathy and compassion fatigue are often described as a result of physical or emotional exhaustion, leading to a diminished ability or desire to empathize (Figley, 2002; Najjar et al., 2009; Stebnicki, 2000), which has implications on the expression of gratitude.

Emmons and McCullough (2003) suggest that expressing gratitude generally includes an element of empathy, as it involves recognizing and appreciating the intentional efforts and kindness of others – necessitating an understanding of their perspective and emotions. Additionally, expressing gratitude entails acknowledging the positive impact others have on one's life, which further calls for an empathetic understanding of their actions and intentions (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). This connection implies prolonged empathetic engagement, such as from

a gratitude project or intervention, could lead to emotional strain and a form of fatigue specific to gratitude expression.

However, reflecting on my transcripts from this period, it seems my fatigue was more specifically related to the vulnerability inherent in expressing gratitude, particularly towards men. The transcripts reveal that my exhaustion stemmed from the emotional effort of overcoming gender norms and expressing vulnerability to male recipients. On Day 11 of the project, I stated, "*I just don't feel like being vulnerable and sharing my emotions, even gratitude.*" This indicates that my gratitude fatigue was not merely about empathy or compassion but was tied to the emotional labor of expressing gratitude in a context that challenged social norms. This unplanned consecutive focus on expressing gratitude to men made the process feel burdensome and draining. Consequently, the sense of fatigue I experienced appears distinct from general empathy or compassion fatigue. It was the emotional effort required to navigate these complex social dynamics and the vulnerability involved in expressing gratitude that led to this specific form of fatigue.

Due to this fatigue, I skip the letter on the 11th. On the 12th, 13th, and 14th days I send gratitude letters to businesses that I frequent because it's less personal, more anonymous, and requires less vulnerability. While the idea of sending gratitude letters to businesses I regularly use is initially exciting and energizing, the excitement fades as quickly as it arises. The idea feels like it is just gauze bandaging on top of fractured bones – it is wholly insufficient for the intensity and severity of my fatigue. I do not have the capacity for this continued emotional expression. Existing literature shows the quality of gratitude expressions are more important than the quantity; a smaller dose of meaningful gratitude has a greater impact on well-being than higher quantities of gratitude (Seligman, 2011). Further, in this project, the higher quantities of gratitude expression decreased the motivation to express gratitude. On February 13th, 2021, my audio recording begins with: *"I am losing gratitude steam."* I am still sending the letters but I'm forcing the gratitude. I'm no longer sending gratitude letters for the sake of the gratitude; I'm sending them for the sake of the project. This isn't right – it seems hollow to send gratitude letters as part of a project rather than from the motivation of thankfulness. But I keep laboring through because I'm committed to the project.

On the 15th day, I experienced benefit-triggered gratitude and the downward trajectory and fatigue of the project begins to reverse. Researchers have identified two types of gratitude: general gratitude and benefit-triggered gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009). Benefit-triggered gratitude is in direct response to a triggering benefit, whereas general gratitude is an awareness and appreciation for what is valuable or meaningful (Lambert et al., 2009). What pulled me from the gratitude burn-out was realizing I was experiencing the distinction between generalized gratitude and triggered-gratitude.

I begin the recording on the 15th day with an exhausted sentiment: *"I had originally planned on taking the day off because I was just a little burnt out on the gratitude project."* I'm in my apartment and I see and acknowledge all my house plants – I have dozens of them, and I love them all. They have names, like Laser, Meryl Streep, and Clementine. I talk to them every day. They genuinely make me smile and I am grateful for the value that these plants add to my residence and my life. In this moment of acknowledgement, I remember that four years prior, I didn't have any house plants. I visited a friend's home, and there were plants everywhere. It was the first time I'd seen this level of home botany, and it amazed me. I told my friend it was inspiring and that I wanted to replicate it. Without hesitating, my friend gave me a couple plants and some cuttings and since that day, I have grown my indoor garden. As a result, my home environment has become more pleasant, lively, and lovely. While I am thinking about all of this, it hits me: *"Oh my God!"*

Gratitude!" My gratitude was just triggered by the benefit of my plants. This gratitude feels sincere, it feels meaningful, and it is joyful and exciting. I write a gratitude letter to my friend as fast as I can and it's in the mailbox before I can think twice.

The gratitude is flowing again because I am not forcing it. I am no longer searching for people from my life that I like and coming up with something they did that I could express gratitude for. Rather, I am finding things in my life that I am grateful for, and connecting it to the actions of a person, and thanking them for that. In this project, the expression of gratitude has changed from a hedonic task to a eudaimonic endeavor. Hedonic well-being refers to a sense of well-being that comes from pleasure and enjoyment (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993) and is characterized by positive emotions and the pursuit of pleasurable experiences (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). This type of well-being is often associated with activities that are enjoyable and fun, such as engaging in leisure activities or indulging in sensory pleasures (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). Eudaimonic well-being, as conceptualized in psychology, refers to a sense of well-being that comes from living a life that is meaningful and fulfilling (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993) and is characterized by a sense of purpose, autonomy, and personal growth (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993). This type of well-being is often associated with activities that are meaningful and challenging, and that contribute to one's personal development or the greater good (Henderson et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993).

Outside of this purposeful project, the expression of gratitude, for me, has historically been both hedonic and eudaimonic – enjoyable and meaningful. However, the sustained and purposeful daily expression of gratitude led to a complex dynamic between these two dimensions. The hedonic treadmill, also known as hedonic adaptation (Diener et al., 2013; Viegas de Lima et al., 2019), suggests that, after positive or negative events, people quickly return to a baseline level of happiness comprised of subjective well-being, presence of positive affect, and absence of negative affect. While I initially experienced a temporary boost in happiness from expressing gratitude, the emotional fatigue from daily practice began to outweigh those benefits. As the days wore on, I dreaded writing each letter, feeling utterly exhausted by the process; the emotional toll of forced gratitude left me drained and reluctant to continue. This fatigue made it difficult to appreciate the eudaimonic aspects that I experienced in the early days of the project, such as personal growth and deeper connections. However, when I focused on benefit-triggered gratitude rather than generalized gratitude, I found a renewed sense of motivation, purpose, and meaning. This approach helped me overcome the fatigue and reconnect with both the hedonic and eudaimonic benefits of gratitude, revitalizing my commitment to the project and driving me to the 21st day.

3.4 Phase 4: Grappling with grief: February 22-23

I took a break from the letters on the 21st day because day 22 and day 23 are terrifying me. Early in the project, I decided that on the 22nd, my birthday, I would write a letter to myself, and on the 23rd to my father. It feels right to write a letter to my father on the 23rd day because of the symbolic meaning of the number 23. As a college basketball coach, my life has revolved around basketball, and in the world of basketball 23 is a number of greatness. 23 was the jersey number of Michael Jordan and he is widely considered the greatest player of all time. In my eyes, my father was the greatest man of all time. To write him on the 23rd day makes sense. I am afraid of these letters to myself and my father because they are about grief. Specifically, they are about my grief from *his* passing. I'm afraid of this moment. After he died, the pain was unbearable. I relied on stoicism too much, taking every emotion I felt and burying deep inside. I'm afraid that if I

write these letters, I'm going to feel it all again. But at the same time, I'm afraid that if I write these letters, I'm going to heal. Contrastingly, I am afraid to feel and I am afraid to heal.

That fear is from my second voice. My "second voice" is the same one that told me not to do the gratitude project – that voice that said it was dumb and cheesy and too emotional. My instinctual voice said to write the letters, to make them short, and to send them. So, on the 22nd day, I write a gratitude letter to myself. I make sure it's triggered gratitude; I find something specific that I did to help me through my grief, and I thank myself for it. I fold the letter and I put it on the table. The next day, I write a gratitude letter to my father. I find something specific that he taught me that helped me through my grief, and I thank him for it. I fold the letter and I put it on the table. My fear was justified. This process opens all the old wounds. I am hurting, but I move forward. That night I asked myself, *"What do I do with these?"* I'm not mailing a letter to myself. How do I send a letter to somebody who's no longer physically here? My instinct says to burn them. My second voice says,

> *"That's dumb, dude. That's cliche. This isn't a Hallmark movie. This is real life. What are you going to do?"*

I retort,

> *"No! It's not about the second voice. It's about the instinctual voice. Go outside and you burn them."*

I put on my jacket and venture into the cold night. I put in my headphones to play my dad's favorite songs and find a secluded spot behind my apartment building. I put the letters in a small tin bucket and I light them on fire. Instantly, I am crying. I am crying the hardest I have cried since he passed. Strangely, I'm also smiling.

I feel horrible. I feel neutral. I feel good. I feel like I'm healing. The letters burn quickly and as soon as their flame is out, my tears subside. But to be honest, I thought I would feel more. I thought I would feel like some sort of metaphysical champion of all emotion. I did not. I just felt confused. It was one of the most anti-climactic yet cathartic moments of my life. I feel good. I feel like I healed. But I also feel a sense of familiarity. I go back inside, sit down, and think:

> *"Hmm. Okay. I guess it's done*?"

That's the end of the project.

For months after the project, I reflected on my experience and the impact of the gratitude. My appetite for gratitude is gone, but I feel a sustained sense of improved wellbeing, which is a documented benefit of gratitude interventions (Seligman, 2011). In addition, I feel a greater sense of resilience in relation to my grief. In the months after the project, I am ruminating less about my father and his passing, and I feel greater self-confidence. While I am not experiencing the immediate hedonic boosts of writing and sending gratitude letters daily, the longer eudaimonic benefits, such as a renewed sense of meaning in life, a more wholesome form of self-acceptance, and a boost in life-satisfaction linger for months. It is quite pleasant.

Table 1. Findings from analysis of audio transcripts recorded during gratitude project

Phase	Days	Theme	Key takeaways	Example from transcripts
Phase 1	February 1st – 5th	Feeling the benefits of gratitude	Increased happiness immediately after sending letters. Sense of improved wellbeing.	*"I just finished my letter. And I feel pretty good. I didn't feel bad before, but I am still noticing a nice little boost." – Day 3*
Phase 2	February 6th – 10th	Obstacles	Gender as an obstacle to expression.	*"I hate how I feel like I'm violating cultural norms by expressing gratitude." – Day 7*
			Gender norms as a tool for expression.	*I felt like I tapped into the right elements of masculine culture to send a meaningful gratitude letter in the right way." – Day 8*
Phase 3	February 11th – 20th	Gratitude fatigue and emotional exhaustion	Exhausted from the project and feeling trapped on a hedonic treadmill with diminishing returns.	*"I just don't feel like being vulnerable and sharing my emotions, even gratitude." – Day 11*
		Eudaimonic rejuvenation	Experiencing benefit-triggered gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009), resulting in a more meaningful and eudaimonic benefits.	*"I had originally planned on taking the day off because I was just a little burnt out on the gratitude project." – Day 15*
Phase 4	February 22nd & 23rd	Grief	Writing gratitude letters to myself and my father for coping with grief.	
		Resilience	Experiencing a longer-term sense of well-being and resilience.	

4. Discussion

Although autoethnography often avoids the conventional structure of journal articles: introduction, literary review, methods, findings, and discussion, this discussion section was incorporated to offer a deeper reflection on the gratitude project and the insights gained during the writing process. This includes personal reflections and insights gained from the analysis and writing process and incorporates extant literature for empirical support. By exploring these reflections, the narrative offers a comprehensive understanding of the emotional dynamics and transformative potential of sustained gratitude practices. The discussion will explore the impact

of the project and writing process and resilience, highlighting the interplay between personal experiences and broader theoretical frameworks.

4.1 Resilience

Researchers of the benefits of gratitude frequently find a relationship between gratitude and resilience (Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar & Theron, 2020; Watkins et al., 2012). Research shows that gratitude builds resilience, through the associated wellbeing-boost (Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar & Theron, 2020), or through an appreciation of the good things in life (Watkins et al., 2012). Analysis of the transcripts revealed a connection between gratitude and resilience that can be explained with three theories. The first is Frederickson's Broaden and Build Theory (2004), which posits that positive emotions, such as gratitude, broaden one's mindset and build one's psychological, physical, and social resources. In turn, the process of broadening and building increases our behavioral and cognitive responses for long-term survival, or resilience. In the case of the gratitude project, the expression of gratitude consistently broadened positive emotions.

Audio recordings that were recorded immediately after sending gratitude letters, there are consistent references to feeling emotionally better than before sending the letter. On the first day of the project, after sending the letter, I said *"I feel better than I did eight minutes ago when I sat down to write it."* On the seventh day, I said *"I just sent my letter [and] I feel better."* After sending the letter on the 13th day of the project I exclaimed *"That felt pretty good. I feel better."* Additionally, there are references to the building component of the theory; after expressing gratitude on day 20, I share, *"I definitely feel more capable than I did 20 days."* This entry is in direct reference feeling as though it has become easier to express gratitude to a more diverse group of people. The building of gratitude capabilities allowed me to express gratitude towards myself for how I coped with my grief. As some researchers have found that one does not typically express gratitude toward the self (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), this was a novel and creative use of gratitude that resulted in catharsis and easing of the grieving process. I argue this self-gratitude and corresponding resilience may not have been possible without the broadening and building that occurred from the previous 20 days of gratitude practice.

The second theory that explains the connection between the gratitude project and resilience is Watkins' amplification theory (Watkins & Schiebe, 2018; Watkins et al., 2021). Amplification theory finds that gratitude amplifies what is good in one's life (Watkins & Schiebe, 2018; Watkins et al., 2021), enhancing one's subjective wellbeing. This was evident across the duration of the gratitude project. After 23 days of expressing gratitude, I was more aware of the good in my life, breaking the habit of ruminating on grief. Through the expression of gratitude, I experienced positive emotions that broadened my positive experiences and built the skills used to express gratitude in new and meaningful ways. Similarly, through the expression of gratitude I amplified my focus on the good while simultaneously coming to terms with adversity of grief, thus, building resilience in the process.

The third theory that explains the connection between gratitude and resilience is the Communication Theory of Resilience (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). The communication theory of resilience posits resilience as a process facilitated through interaction, constituted by five processes of communication. Findings show the gratitude letters operated as a communicative mechanism for my resilience. The first communication process of resilience is *crafting normalcy*, in which we use communication to normalize our life post-adversity (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). The gratitude letters crafted a sense of normalcy through acknowledging to myself the good that is in my life after my father's passing. The gratitude letters normalized the friendships and the achievements and the small pleasantries and the lovely moments of my life. *Affirming identity*

anchors is the process of performing specific identities and unique characteristics that provide meaning and guidance after adversity (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). Gratitude has consistently been a trait and strength of mine, and the writing and mailing of gratitude letters helped me affirm that identity to others and to myself.

The third communication process of resilience is *maintaining communication* networks, which involves connecting with one's social network for support (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). The people who received gratitude letters are key pieces of my communication network and by sending the gratitude letters, I am strengthening those relationships (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Grant & Gina, 2010; Obeldobel & Kerns, 2021). In the fourth communication process, *reframing*, we use communication to acknowledge our legitimate right to feel bad about a situation while simultaneously foregrounding productive action (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). In the transcripts, this process is prominent in the final days of the project when I am writing letters to myself and my father about my grief. I acknowledged my fear of creating pain by addressing my grief and his passing, but I chose to move forward with writing the letters.

The final communication process of resilience is *putting alternative logics to work;* adversity changes life and we use communication to put new ways of functioning into action (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017). My father was my mentor and hero, and with every important life decision, I started by asking the question, *"What would Dad do?"* And as I'm going through these transcripts, I see a shift in my thinking, going from "*What would Dad do?"* to *"What would Matt do?"* I see this alternative logic taking place when trusting my intuition to do the project rather than listen my own second and doubting voice. Amplification theory explains how the gratitude letters helped me see more of the good in my life which facilitated the productive-action element of the reframing process. The three theories discussed above, Broaden and Build (Fredrickson, 2004), Amplification Theory (Watkins & Schiebe, 2018), and the Communication Theory of Resilience (Buzzanell, 2010; 2017) highlight the positive impacts of gratitude, but also illuminate the development of resilience through gratitude. Considering the theories together reveal gratitude and resilience are not just interpersonal processes, but are also intra-personal processes.

It is important to note that the expression of gratitude did not create resilience to grief and I am not arguing that one simply needs to express gratitude to become resilient. Resilience is a complex and dynamic process and experience (Buzzanell, 2010; Higgins, 2022; Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar, & Theron, 2020) that cannot simply be 'thanked' into existence. Admittedly, my resilience to grief includes many elements and is an ongoing process to this day. However, the gratitude project allowed me to engage in the communication processes of resilience to myself and contributed another piece to the resilience puzzle. The project gave me an opportunity to engage in new actions that contributed to my resilience. The point is not to offer gratitude letters as the solution to the problem of adversity; rather the point is simply to offer my experience to highlight how gratitude expression functioned as a contributing piece to my own ongoing development of resilience.

4.2 Integration of dual voices

In writing this autoethnography, I intentionally used two distinct voices throughout the narrative: the academic voice and the personal voice. This duality reflects my identity as both a scholar and an individual navigating the emotional complexities of the gratitude project, gender, grief, and resilience. The use of these two voices is not just a stylistic choice, but a fundamental aspect of the methodology (Chang, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011) and the findings related to the personal growth and self-acceptance achieved through this project.

The academic voice, which cites existing literature and theories, serves to ground my personal experiences within the broader context of gratitude research. It provides a framework for understanding the psychological and sociological dynamics at play, offering credibility and rigor to the analysis (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For instance, studies have shown that gratitude can significantly enhance well-being and resilience by fostering positive emotions and social connections (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010). Conversely, the personal voice captures the raw, unfiltered emotions and internal struggles I faced during the project. This voice brings authenticity and depth to the narrative, highlighting the real-world implications and challenges of practicing gratitude. The interplay of these voices exemplifies the complex, lived experiences that are central to autoethnographic research (Ellis et al., 2011).

By weaving these voices together, the autoethnography not only documents the outcomes of the gratitude project but also illustrates the process of integrating different aspects of my identity (Chang, 2008). This integration is a significant eudaimonic benefit through self-realization, contributing to a deeper sense of self-acceptance and personal growth. Eudaimonic well-being, characterized by a sense of purpose and self-realization, is crucial for long-term happiness and resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The process of writing and reflecting on these experiences has allowed me to reconcile the academic and personal dimensions of my life, fostering a more cohesive sense of self.

In sum, the dual voices in this autoethnography are a deliberate methodological choice that enriches the narrative and analytical depth of the study. This approach underscores the transformative potential of gratitude practices and autoethnographic writing, not just in terms of emotional well-being but also in the broader context of identity integration and personal development (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2008). By integrating these voices, the study offers insight of how gratitude can facilitate both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, contributing to a more profound and sustained sense of fulfillment, while simultaneously providing opportunities for resilience development.

6. Conclusion

Gratitude is one of the single strongest contributors to an individual's wellbeing (Kashdan et al., 2009; Frias et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2010). The research of gratitude has, unsurprisingly, generated tremendous interest in boosting gratitude, both the trait and the state (Frias et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011; Wood et al., 2010). However, there are still questions regarding the best way to utilize gratitude interventions (Watkins et al., 2012). For example, research shows that gratitude is not effectively boosted through increasing the number of times gratitude is expressed. My experience, writing and sending gratitude letters every day for 23 days, supports this finding in the form of *gratitude fatigue.* For the expression of gratitude, the quality of the experience is more important than the quantity of expression (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, refinements in gratitude exercises should focus on eudaimonic approaches, as understood in psychology, which reduce the barriers to expressing benefit-triggered gratitude and improving the quality of the experience through fostering personal growth, meaning, purpose, and self-acceptance. This project highlights that the expression of benefit-triggered gratitude had a much stronger eudaimonic impact than the expression of generalized or pre-planned gratitude.

In addition to a eudaimonic and benefit-triggered approach, another viable option for improving the quality of gratitude interventions is reducing the barriers of expression. Consider below, from Wood et al. (2009, pg. 902):

> It could be the case that gratitude is always an adaptive emotion, in which case it is likely that evolution would have provided everyone with the inclination towards being grateful, and only through negative environments does this tendency become blocked. Alternatively, there could be costs associated with gratitude, which prevent it becoming completely widespread.

The authors argue the existence of barriers to gratitude that could stifle the experience and expression of the emotion, but do not offer examples of such barriers. During my gratitude project, I dealt with barriers, such as gender and burnout, whose reduction contributed to a more rewarding experience. The reduction or easing of the socio-cultural barriers to gratitude expression that an individual is facing would be a practical and useful addition to any gratitude intervention. There has been considerable research regarding what makes a person grateful (Watkins et al., 2021), yet there is a dearth of research regarding what inhibits gratitude. Barriers of gratitude are a robust avenue of research for the field and for improving gratitude interventions.

The above directions for further research are pulled from the project and existing literature and focus on refining the quality of gratitude interventions and barrier reduction. As a concluding note I ask we each challenge the research by expressing gratitude towards the self. Emmons and Crumpler (2000, pg. 57) write, "gratitude is profoundly interpersonal. One does not talk about being grateful to oneself." However, the one gratitude letter that was most memorable, impactful, and rewarding was the letter I wrote to myself on the 22nd day of the project. Acknowledging my own contributions to my wellbeing was profoundly inspirational and made the challenges of the gratitude project worth it. I encourage readers to take a moment to do so for themselves.

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