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The Virtual Gratitude Visit (VGV): Using Psychodrama and Role-Playing as a Positive Intervention



Daniel J. Tomasulo

Abstract Gratitude has been established as one of the leading interventions that can lead to sustainable happiness. This paper describes the virtual gratitude visit (VGV) selected for the inaugural Avant-Garde Clinical Intervention award at the 2017 International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA) conference in Montreal, Canada. The technique activates many therapeutic elements contained in the literature on gratitude, role-playing, and storytelling and is described for use by clinicians and coaches in both individual and group settings. The VGV uses role-playing with an empty chair, and a role-reversal to enact a gratitude visit. This extends the applicability of an expression of gratitude to include people who are unavailable; those who have passed on; “parts” of ourselves we have gratitude toward (such as a time when we had more resilience, grit, or joy in our lives); or expressed gratitude toward a higher power or entity. Additionally, the usefulness of the VGV as a non-reading and non-writing positive intervention could have tremendous value for the typically under-represented individuals of more than 775 million adults in the world who are illiterate.

Keywords Gratitude · Role-playing · Psychodrama · Empty chair · Positive clinical intervention

1 Introduction

Expressing gratitude as a positive intervention has been central to the positive psychology movement. The gratitude visit, where participants write and deliver letters of gratitude to people they feel they have not properly thanked, was one of the first positive interventions studied (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). In the initial report, when compared to other interventions, those who performed the gratitude visit were found to be the least depressed and the happiest of all the participants. As

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discussed by Tomasulo (2014), gratitude has also been found to enhance self-esteem (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), life satisfaction (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006), prosocial behavior (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008), and better interpersonal relationships (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Tsang, 2007). It was also found to directly influence the capacity to broaden and build positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004, 2009) and was noted by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) as one of the main interventions that can lead to sustainable happiness, and by Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) to enhance relationships. But not all gratitude exercises are the same and there have been some surprising results of such. Boehm and Lyubomirsky (2009) studied participants who savored positive events by writing in a gratitude journal five things they were grateful for either once a week or three times a week, and then compared them with a control group that did not keep journals. Pre- and post-measures on well-being revealed that gratitude journaling worked better once a week rather than three times a week, and better than the control group. In fact, the once a week approach was the only condition in which improvement in well-being was noted. The authors theorize that the success of a positive intervention depends not only on what the intervention is, but also how it is delivered.

When looking at delivery and assessment procedures there is a gap in the literature when it comes to practices used in the research to express and measure gratitude. Beginning with the original delivery of letters of gratitude (Seligman et al., 2005) researchers have almost exclusively used writing as a way of expressing gratitude be it in journals (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2009) or in the collection of data from the participants (Algoe, et al. 2010).

Expanding on the method of delivery is where the Virtual Gratitude Visit (VGV) finds applicability. The term “virtual” is being used here in its alternate definition to mean an approximation of something that is not exact in every way. The technique uses imagining someone in an empty chair and then role-playing that person. They are there ‘in effect’ rather than ‘in person’.

New research by O’Connell, O’Shea, and Gallagher (2017) focuses on the enhanced power of expressing gratitude to others. They compared a gratitude journal group to a similar group that, in addition, verbally expressed their gratitude. The researchers found the expressive group did better than gratitude journaling alone or the control group. In the expressing-to-others group, negative emotions and depression decreased, which provided greater emotional balance. The authors concluded that other-oriented gratitude is enhanced when it is outwardly expressed. It is the deliberate verbal expression to others that has relevance to the VGV.

There are three ways the traditional methods and research of a gratitude letter and visit can be re-envisioned and restyled with the VGV. First, most evidence-based interventions concerning gratitude involve writing and/or reading through the use of journals, letters, and sharing of the same. As O’Connell et al.’s (2017) article highlights, expressive writing is only one means by which a therapeutic improvement can happen. The VGV uses an enactment of feelings of gratitude in a role-play with an empty chair. Importantly, the VGV format liberates the technique from a written procedure, as the enactment with the empty chair is unscripted. This unscripted enactment has the potential to reap the benefits of expressing gratitude toward oth-

ers, yet can be accomplished without them present. Drama therapy (Tomasulo & Szucs, 2016), psychodrama (Fong, 2006; Yazdekhasti, Syed, & Arizi, 2013), and role-playing (Nikzadeh & Soudani, 2016) are all methodologies that have shown to offer therapeutic gains (Kipper & Ritchie, 2003), and delivering gratitude with such enactment methodologies is worthy of further investigation. Additionally, the usefulness of the VGV as a non-reading and non-writing intervention could have tremendous value for the more than 775 million adults in the world who are illiterate (List of countries by literacy rate, 2017). Interventions that can address the need to deliver the advantages of expressing gratitude to these individuals deserve research and application attention. People with concomitant intellectual and psychiatric disabilities who have no or low literacy are a primary clinical interest to the author, and the use of VGV in this context for the interested reader can be found elsewhere (Razza & Tomasulo, 2005; Tomasulo, 2014; Tomasulo & Szucs, 2016).

Second, the delivery of a gratitude letter as originally intended involves the availability of a live recipient. As the VGV uses role-playing with an empty chair to enact a gratitude visit, the intervention can include others who are unavailable. Using this empty chair approach may be helpful in four ways:

- The person one has gratitude for may no longer be living and an enactment would be one way to activate the positive effects of the relationship.
- The person may be alive, yet unavailable. As an example, it may be a person from childhood who has moved or a friend one has lost contact with.
- As internal family systems have shown, there may be “parts” of ourselves that we have gratitude toward (such as a time when we had more resilience, grit, or joy in our lives). An enactment with these parts may be helpful in activating strength from another memory point in time. Role-playing allows this type of intra-psychic exploration of gratitude to take place.
- Expressing gratitude toward a higher power or entity through an enactment may be particularly helpful.

Research by Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen, Galler, and Krumrei (2011) has shown (as others have either provide references here or leave the bracketed section out) that gratitude is significantly correlated with religious commitment. But their research also found that the relationship between these two variables is fully mediated specifically when gratitude is directed toward God. With the VGV, using an unscripted monologue of God-directed gratitude toward an empty chair highlights this specific intention. It has also been demonstrated that when there is spiritual content in an enactment, mental health, happiness, and joy can be positively affected (Yazdekhasti et al. 2013).

Finally, a VGV performed in vivo in the therapist’s office allows for both immediate feedback about its effectiveness and integration of the experience with the therapist. Accordingly, the client may be inspired to continue the work with more traditional positive clinical interventions beyond the session. In fact, recent research by Shahar, Bar-Kalifa, and Alon (2017) has shown specifically that the use of empty chair role-playing will help do just that.

2 VGV Technique¹

For this technique, two chairs are arranged, one for the protagonist and the second (auxiliary) empty chair for the unavailable/other. The protagonist arranges the chairs in a way that symbolically depicts the relationship; that is, are the chairs close? Far apart? Side by side? One behind the other? The chairs' arrangement sets the emotional tone for the encounter, which is a procedure drawn from standard psychodrama practices. The protagonist then sits in his or her chair and expresses gratitude toward the imagined unavailable/other in the empty chair. Typically the look at the empty chair directly and express to the imagined individual statements of appreciation. To give an example of an exchange in a recent session the protagonist began: "Dad, you always made me feel special. I know you weren't always home because of work, but you made sure we spent time together and you always wanted to know what I was doing." Following this, (and perhaps several other statements deepening the expression of gratitude) the protagonist reverses roles and becomes the auxiliary. In doing so, the protagonist responds as if the gratitude had just been expressed to him or her. In the above example the protagonist reversed roles and became his father and responded: "You were such an easy kid to love. Spending time with you was one of my favorite thing to do. I wish I didn't have to work so much when you were growing up." This auxiliary role is then relinquished (usually after a few other statements in responding to the protagonist's statements) and the protagonist returns to the original chair, saying a closing remark to the empty chair. This ends the enactment.

The empty chair technique with a role reversal has the potential to activate two important therapeutic elements. First, it allows for an unscripted expression of gratitude. There is no reading or writing involved. This would be a significant shift in how gratitude is studied and delivered. The research on expressing gratitude in written form demonstrates the power of expression. The VGV extends the method of expression, which appears to be both a necessary and natural extension of the ways gratitude can be used effectively in a clinical setting.

Secondly, the understanding accrued by reversing to the other role employs elements of empathy and learning of the other through theory of mind (Goldstein & Winner, 2012). This role-reversal allows for an amplification of the positivity of gratitude and integration as it is experienced as both sender and receiver. This learning helps to facilitate what Moreno referred to as a catharsis of integration: "Mental catharsis is here defined as a process which accompanies every type of learning, not only release and relief but also a catharsis of integration" (Moreno, 1953/1993, p. 206).

¹A version of this description was first published in Tomasulo (2014).

3 Use of the VGV in Group Therapy

As a member of a group using a VGV, a member can not only enact his or her gratitude, but also witness the expression of gratitude by others. Thus, even in an audience or participant/observer role, a client may derive benefit. Group therapy has traditionally provided a dynamic, low-cost treatment opportunity. By adding the VGV to the toolbox for group therapists, the collective well-being of the group can be enhanced. There are three primary reasons this approach is a valid and fruitful avenue for future research. First, psychodramatic role-playing has been shown to be effective within a wide variety of clinical conditions (Hurley, Tomasulo, & Pfadt, 1998; Kipper & Ritchie, 2003). Second, at its core, the VGV is a narrative, which is one of the most pervasive and promising elements of positive interventions. As discussed by Tomasulo and Pawelski (2012), stories play a significant role both in psychological research and application. The expression of gratitude is a narrative of the benefits of the relationship. Several key positive interventions use participants' narratives as a component in the research (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997, 2004; Seligman et al., 2005). Furthermore, three of the first five positive interventions reported on by Seligman and his colleagues (Seligman et al., 2005) involved the use of autobiographical narratives: the gratitude visit, you at your best, and three good things in your life. Storytelling was also a central feature in the teaching of positive psychology as Seligman and Chris Peterson began their first course with "serious introductions," where each person tells a story about being his or her best self, and Paul Zak (Future of Storytelling) has articulated the biochemical changes that take place during an engaging story (Zak, 2013).

Other major positive intervention programs and research use storytelling as a central element in the means to deliver or facilitate the intervention. In fact, the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), the world's most widely researched program for the prevention of depression (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009), includes storytelling as a central component. Haidt (2006) believe there is great power in the use of story as a vehicle to extend empathic understanding. They believe the development of empathy using story may be part of the core dynamic inherent in why stories and psychodramas work.

The VGV also offers a uniquely practical implication for multi-cultural contexts. The specific type of gratitude being expressed by the protagonist, be it familial, interpersonal or spiritual, allows the cultural specifics relevant to the protagonist to be expressed and shared with the group. This does two things simultaneously. First, it allows the protagonist to bring in the rich experiences from their life and culture into the group to be appreciated. Secondly, it helps demonstrate the universality of the power of gratitude regardless of its different forms of expression.

There is also an opportunity for the protagonist to use their native tongue during the VGV, which (as argued in Tomasulo, 2000) allows for a greater emotional expression of the emotion while still conveying the powerful expressive elements of conveying gratitude. Expressing gratitude in one's native tongue even when the group does not speak it doesn't diminish the power of the exercise. The emotive and expressive

elements of the gratitude come through the enactment and can activate the group to discuss their own activation while witnessing the drama.

Finally, a positive emotional enactment, as would be demonstrated by a VGV, has the power to activate *elevation* as defined by Haidt (2003) as an emotion elicited by witnessing virtuous acts of human goodness. Watching others express their gratitude is such an act, and there is direct evidence that elevation can uplift depressed clients. Through the established elements of elevation and clinical role-playing in groups, a VGV can elicit a positive emotional response simply by watching others express their gratitude. It is elevation that makes the expression of a positive emotional experience in a group setting an important feature for psychodramatists to amplify in enactments. The research of Haidt (2003, 2006) on elevation shows that we are wired to notice human goodness. He notes there are three main features of elevation: First, we are drawn to those scenes and stories that are elicitors, such as acts of courage, kindness, loyalty, or any other act of human goodness. Second, there is often a phenomenological and physiological reaction, such as a calm/relaxed, a warm/open/pleasant feeling in the chest, sometimes getting “choked up.” Finally, we are motivated by the elicitors to emulate and self-improve. Haidt (2003) noted that the motivational tendencies that elevation produces include merging with, opening to, and helping others. Psychodramatists are in a particularly good position in a group to use the methods of enactment to take advantage of the natural benefits of elevation. In Haidt’s words, we “inspire to rewire.”

4 To Summarize

- A VGV uses an unscripted enactment with an empty chair to express gratitude.
- It uses a role–reversal with the empty chair to integrate the emotional experience.
- It extends the method by which the positive intervention of a gratitude visit is delivered.
- Since an empty chair is used, gratitude can be expressed to individuals no longer alive.
- The empty chair also allows for an encounter with other stronger parts of the self.
- It can be used with people with low or no literacy.
- It can be used for spiritual growth by expressing gratitude toward a higher power or entity.
- It is an intervention that can be delivered face-to-face with the therapist during the session.
- VGV also offers a uniquely practical implication for multi-cultural contexts including allowing the protagonist to express his or her gratitude in their native tongue.
- In a group, it can benefit the protagonist and members due to the phenomenon of elevation.
- A VGV is a narrative intervention, a storytelling approach, amplified through role-playing. It could best be labeled as a narrative enactment.

5 Future Directions and Conclusion

As recent research and publications have confirmed (Rashid & Seligman, 2018), the need to extend positive interventions, particularly to difficult populations, such as those with chronic and persistent mental illness and intellectual and developmental disabilities, is necessary. Psychodrama has the tools to deliver new and modified versions of positive interventions as audiences and group participants are powerfully moved by watching the psychodramatically enacted vignettes of human goodness.

At the one end of the spectrum would be the use of VGV for people who cannot profit from the existing interventions requiring reading and writing, and at the other end for wide-scale impact through the use of video for broadcast on the TV and internet (Ben-Shahar & Tomasulo, 2017). VGV is but one example of using evidence-informed interventions in newly configured ways. Practitioners should continue this effort in extrapolating from the wealth of interventions proposed by making adaptations as is needed to fit the various cognitive, availability, and cultural needs of those being served. Outside of the clinical environment using broadcasted enactments of VGV would allow for audiences to profit through elevation from witnessing the protagonist. With such an abundance of negativity, violence, and sensationalized reality TV expanding a positive reality alternative could be both helpful and refreshing.

Paramount to this is the need for research on the VGV using different methodologies. Effectiveness in improving gratitude and subjective well-being when the VGV is employed, efficacy in a randomized control study when compared to alternate methods, and qualitative approaches such as case study, introspection, phenomenological, narrative, autoethnography, and performative approaches are just some of the procedures that need investigation. Historically, adequate research has been the greatest stumbling block in more widespread use and understanding of psychodramatic and role-laying methods. The next phase of growth in incorporating role-playing techniques will be meeting the demand for evidence-based practices. Not to do so, not to show the effectiveness of such powerful and impactful techniques will hide a potent light under a bushel—and these contributions have too much potential to let this happen.

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