

Stepping Stones: Using letter writing to build human connection

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Abstract

This study used letter writing to explore how human connections between groups develop over time. Qualitative analysis of over 600 pages of letters exchanged between pairs of Master of Social Work (MSW) students and community participants engaged with anti-poverty organizations revealed topics, transitions, and outcomes. «Outcomes» were identified when material was coded as human connection. Elements of reciprocity became more evident within transitional themes. Further analysis of human connection codes revealed vulnerability and intimacy, as indicated by elements of understanding, validation, and caring. Letter writing served as a research tool to examine the development of human connection within groups as well as a useful intervention to address loneliness in communities.

Keywords

Letter writing, loneliness, qualitative research, human connection, relationships.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we began an experiential learning project where we created opportunities for social work students to interact face-to-face with people living in rural poverty. As part of that project, we interviewed community members who shared stories of persistent, rural loneliness (Frank et al., 2021b). We found that social isolation and loneliness were serious concerns in rural areas. As with many other social issues, the pandemic increased loneliness for many people, and intensified it for those who were lonely already (Weissbourd et al., 2021). Loneliness has well-documented negative impacts severe enough that it has been identified by the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murphy, as a public health issue (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

Despite COVID-19, we persisted in efforts to connect social work students with community members living in rural poverty by launching a letter writing project. We used various technologies (e.g., Zoom, D2L, Google Drive) to exchange personal letters between Master of Social Work (MSW) students at a local university and community members for a full year. Through this project, we watched as strangers started and established relationships. Some relationships stayed at a surface level, but many became deep relationships with personal information shared and mutual support offered by both students and community members. This letter-writing project, which we called The Stepping Stones Pen Pal Project, allowed us to explore the following research questions: *What do people write about when they get a chance to write to correspond with a stranger? What can letter writing tell us about the formation of human connections?*

Human communication in modern times can vary greatly. We have the ability to communicate in-person with just one person or many. We can text, email, or make use of other apps that allow us to communicate with a person who may be around the corner or around the world. People can use various mediums to engage in new relationships, from «old-fashioned» social outings (e.g. bars or sports venues), to digital apps that allow users to «swipe» on a person of interest. However, we chose letter writing so we could observe the topics discussed and evaluate a growing relationship. Because of the loneliness and stresses of the pandemic, our findings may offer insight into practices with the potential to reduce loneliness and social isolation, whether during the next global shutdown, or for the everyday needs of people who may be isolated due to health, geography, or lack of technical skills. Letter writing is a useful practice that can be implemented by social work agencies large or small.

Literature Review

The Devastating Effects of Social Isolation & Loneliness

As we noted in a prior publication (Frank et al., 2023), social isolation and loneliness are sometimes conflated in everyday jargon. Social isolation is more objective and

is constructed as an absence of social connections (Fakoya et al., 2020, 2021). Social isolation refers to a measurable construct that looks at the «size of one’s social network, level of social integration, and whether one lives alone or is partnered» (Frank et al., 2023, p. 557). Loneliness is more subjective and is defined by Fakoya et al. (2021) as an «undesirable subjective experience related to unfulfilled intimate and social needs» (p. 2). Some people may be isolated but not lonely and some people may feel lonely but are not isolated. However, when people experience both loneliness and social isolation simultaneously, they experience health risks similar to those posed by smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure (Fakoya et al., 2020). And, while social isolation and loneliness may be harmful to all, older adults living in rural areas may be at increased risk (Averill, 2003). In fact, Kaye and Singer (2019) found that rural social isolation for elders can be lethal. Further, Huang et al. (2023) found a statistically significant link for dementia among isolated older adults. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has been raising the alarm about the negative effects of social isolation for several years (Frank, 2018). In 2020, AARP joined with the United Health Foundation to study the increased risk of isolation and loneliness (AARP Foundation, 2020). This study confirms the above findings and adds that certain groups appear to be at greater risk (e.g., women, people with lower incomes). The culmination of scientific scholarship and anecdotal reporting led to the U.S. Surgeon General’s declaration of social isolation as a public health emergency in May 2023.

Understanding Human Connection

Several theories are useful in attempting to craft an understanding of the ways in which human beings create and engage in social interactions and to what ends. Based upon Aristotle’s assumption that human beings are social beings with inherent needs (Maslow, 1943), and that life-giving connections with others in a social relationship are needed (Morris, 1934), understanding how those relationships form and persist is both a theoretical and a pragmatic concern. According to the Symbolic Interactionist work of Mead and Blumer (Blumer, 1969), human interactions are the result of an interpretive exchange of meaning. However, the nature of human connection remains subjective and challenging to describe. Here, we assembled a framework of the constructs of reciprocity, vulnerability, and intimacy to begin to describe some of the elements of authentic human connection.

Several prior components informed our theoretical framework for understanding of authentic human connection. These include reciprocity, which was explicated through the work of Gouldner (1960), vulnerability, as based on the work of Wallace (2020), and intimacy, as based on the work of Reis and Shaver (1988). Below, we expand upon each of these constructs.

Reciprocity

In this project, reciprocity is a written connection that seemed to cultivate or evidence a human connection. Gouldner (1960) described reciprocity as another aspect of human connection and as a principal component of a moral code. Based on shared social expectations, it is a norm in which a benefactor intentionally gives a benefit to a beneficiary and contributes to personal relationships through feelings of indebtedness and gratefulness (Adams et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2018). Reciprocity is unique because it is an integral part of building trust in social relationships, yet it is a voluntary and uncertain phenomenon. A mutual dependence, reciprocity entails social partners giving each other favors or services (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocal interactions are an integral part of family and friendships, but they also belong in more formal relationships (Molm et al., 2012). Reciprocity is a mutually satisfying experience, and like an exchange of goods or services, it is one which contributes to stable and rewarding human relationships (Gouldner, 1960).

Vulnerability

Reciprocity in relationships has a nature of exchange, and in that exchange, vulnerability is shared and responded to. Vulnerability can create new meaning in the reciprocal exchange (Wallace, 2020). One study which evaluated the mental well-being of health care workers during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic identified vulnerability as a key component of supportive, emotionally connected relationships (Bender et al., 2021). This «sharing of the self with others... can allow and create space for loved ones to do the same in return» (Bender et al., 2021, p. 449). It may be that vulnerability results from the ways in which the meaning and value of our actions depend on other people's responses to us.

Intimacy

Another component of human connection is intimacy, which is fostered by consistent reciprocity in communications. Reis and Shaver (1988) explored intimacy as a developmental and transactional process, and noted the relationship of intimacy with health, well-being, and human relationships. It is intimacy that creates a sense of social connectivity, and the lack of intimacy can lead to loneliness. In fact, the authors purport that the lack of intimacy is a better predictor of loneliness than other measures, such as frequency of social interactions, time spent with others, or number of social partners. They identified the role of responsiveness in the development of intimacy. Specifically, they

explained that the regulation of one partner's «responsiveness to the other's expressed or inferred needs can increase or decrease the intimacy of a given interaction» (p. 374). A member of a relationship validates and indicates care for their partner's inner self and can do so with complexity and depth. By responding with warmth and sympathy, one partner validates another's experiences, and so deepens the relationship and encourages returned affection and support (Reis et al., 1988).

According to Reis and Shaver, a response will be received as intimate if it holds several qualities: it must contain understanding, validation, and caring. These characteristics imply that formerly private elements of the self have been expressed, knowledge has been shared that allow partners to respond appropriately to each other's needs, and finally, that the heard partner feels like the responder values and appreciates their inner self just as they do. This form of relationship mitigates loneliness by allowing individuals to feel accepted and cared for, to feel sure of their relationship partner's esteem, to have their needs met, and to experience validation of hidden aspects of the self, such as fears, vulnerabilities, and regrets from the past (Reis et al., 1988).

Letter Writing as a Conduit

Letter writing is a medium with the potential to promote the kind of reciprocal sharing that could promote intimacy and human connection. Letter writing has proven beneficial in various educational and therapeutic settings (Hinsliff-Smith et al., 2022), crossing cultural and national boundaries to foster learning, connection, cultural awareness (Riley et al., 2022), and the dismantling of cultural stereotypes (Kirshner et al., 2016). The use of pen pals and letter writing has contributed to improvements in literacy and reading achievement for school children (Teale et al., 2007). In a cross-cultural project between Malawi and the US, school children received benefits beyond the project's purpose of practicing written language, such as sharing information about participants' lives and emotions (Barksdale et al., 2007).

Letter writing is a transformative process (Bromberg, 2014). Letter writing encourages self-reflection in a safe and nourishing space. As an explicit invitation to start and continue conversations, letter writing may embody the qualities of narrative storytelling: reflection, shared learning, reciprocity, or according to Bromberg (2014), «a meeting of minds» (p. 22). A more relaxed time frame preceding a response may lead to more thoughtful development of the self and more attunement in communication exchange (Frank et al., 2021b). Letter writing affords the letter writing pair time to consider stories and cultivate a response in a way that the immediacy of face-to-face interactions fail to offer. A letter exchange tends to proceed on a more generous time frame, one where the participants can ponder and reflect on their responses, and recipients can savor the content of the received letter (Frank et al., 2021a).

Loneliness and Poverty

Social isolation and loneliness are troubling concerns and the effects of each devastate communities and individuals. In America, the Surgeon General of the United States has identified them as epidemic health concerns that harm both the individual and society (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Our prior paper (2023) found that letter writing effectively decreased the loneliness of participants. Using the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale with a pretest posttest design, loneliness scores were significantly lower after participation in this 12-month long letter writing project (Frank et al., 2023).

In order to gain insight into the lower loneliness scores, we examined the letters to see if human connection through reciprocity and intimacy occurred. We theorized that if they did then we have additional evidence that the letter writing contributed to the reduction of loneliness in the writers. This study qualitatively analyzed the content of the letters themselves as primary data using the framework of intimacy as demonstrated through understanding, validation, and caring (Reis et al., 1988). Initially, our hypothesis was that the development of human connection in the of a pen pal relationship may be an antidote to loneliness.

Loneliness and social isolation are of increasing concern, specifically to people in rural poor communities. Further, Gazso et al. (2016, p. 460) found that the negative effects of social isolation may be made worse by poverty due to a lack of «durable support networks» (especially kin and fictive kin) for people experiencing poverty.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a narrative inquiry approach through letter writing to gather insights about human relationships (Chase, 2018). We examined the content of pen pal letters as data (Frank et al., 2021a) to understand what strangers talk about when given the chance to exchange letters with little guidance as to what to discuss and to explore how these letters foster the development of human connection. We conducted a 12-month long letter writing exchange between graduate social work students and community members who utilize services at anti-poverty social service agencies.

Sample

Twenty-one community participants and 28 students voluntarily participated in this research over a period of 12 months (for characteristics of the sample see Table 1, 2 and 3). We partnered with three community social service agencies and recruited by invitation

community participants who use their services to participate in the letter writing project. Students from an MSW program were recruited by invitation to participate in the letter writing program by email and then through an informational session held virtually during an online course. Flyers were distributed to both groups with information about the program to encourage participation (Appendix A). Inclusion criteria were being a current MSW student or a client of a partnering agency. All recruited participants who chose to participate were included. Both community participants and student participants completed an informed consent prior to writing their first letter to their pen pal. To attend to the concern that students might assume they should settle into a role of «helper», we provided students with a brief training at the outset to ensure that they understood that their role in the letter writing exchange was not to be therapeutic in nature. Instead, we directed students to approach the pen pal exchange as simply a human person and not in a professional role.

Ages	Students	Community Members	Totals
21-30	7	1	8
31-40	5	4	9
41-50	11	3	14
51-60		5	5
61-70		6	6
71-80		3	3

Table 1 Age

Race & Ethnicity	Students	Community Members	Totals
Black or African American	4	0	4
– Hispanic or Latino	2	0	2
– Not Hispanic or Latino	2	0	2
White/Caucasian	19	22	41
– Hispanic or Latino	0	2	2
– Not Hispanic or Latino	19	20	39

Table 2 Race & Ethnicity

Gender	Students	Community Members	Totals
Male	6	16	22
Female	4	19	23

Table 3 Gender

Data Collection

Recruited participants were listed in an Excel sheet and randomly assigned to a pen pal. The first letters were written with the prompt of being introductory in nature. Aside from the initial instruction to students to not show up as a «professional helper» no other prompts were given to the letter writers about what the letters should contain. Letters were handwritten or typed and of varying lengths. Letters from community participants were collected by agency personnel and uploaded to a secure online folder on Google suite. Student letters were collected using the assignment folder on D2L, the university's online learning platform. Screening of the letters was conducted by agency personnel and research assistants prior to analysis. Any letters that contained concerning information were referred to the team for discussion. Letters were then uploaded to Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis software. Dedoose software was useful in that both typed and handwritten letters were able to be analyzed in the same way.

Data Analysis

The letters were the primary source of data for this project, with over 600 pages of letters collected. The letters were compiled and coded in two batches, one for the first six months of the project and one for the second six months of the project. Each letter was coded via Dedoose by multiple independent coders. The first level of analysis was conducted through open coding on the first six months of letters followed by the second six months of letters. This first level of analysis generated approximately 400 initial codes from the first six months of letters. The second batch of letters from the second six months also were coded independently by multiple coders who used the preexisting coding tree created from the first batch of letters. Fifteen new initial codes were added to the initial codes with the second batch of letters and a total of 415 individual codes were created. These codes were applied to 2,288 individual pieces of data. Some pieces of data were coded multiple times, in different ways, for a total of 5,732 code applications.

After the first level of codes was applied, the research team discussed and analyzed these first level codes. The 415 first level codes were categorized and tucked into second level codes accordingly. There were 23 second level codes that resulted from this process. These 23 second level codes were collapsed into three broad overarching themes. As the research team analyzed the 23 second level codes, we initially classified them in the following overarching themes: *topics, transitions, and outcome*. The research team consulted together to make decisions about how and why to collapse codes into particular themes. When disagreement occurred between the researchers, which was rarely the case, these data were excluded from the analysis.

Because our quantitative analysis of loneliness in this project (Frank et al., 2023) found a significant decrease in loneliness after the letter writing intervention, we hoped to further explore the mechanism by which this was made possible. As previously noted, our hypothesis then was that the development of human connection in a relationship may be an antidote to loneliness. In looking deeper at our outcome codes, we noticed that reciprocity was often contingent on an exposure of vulnerability. In other words, vulnerability appeared to work as a currency for the relational exchange of reciprocity. What emerged appeared to be a model of human connection. In our second level of analysis, we looked again at the letters using our model of human connection, coding vulnerability, reciprocity, and intimacy, demonstrated by understanding, validation, and caring (Reis et al., 1988) to see how the letters reflected these constructs.

Findings

Initially we discovered incredible diversity in what types of things strangers would discuss in letters to each other. Letters generated conversation about family, religion, hobbies, pets, and hopes and dreams. We discovered that many of the second level codes represented «topics» that pairs would chat about. Much of the material in these «topics» began as surface-level discussion, the retelling of events, and the sharing of interests and ideas. Next, we found many second level codes appeared as what we called «transitions». «Transitions» were more delicate and sensitive pieces of discussion that involved stepping out of one's comfort zone and into the realm of the partner through advice-giving, the sharing of emotions, or sharing deeper notions such as hope for the future or reflections of the past. We differentiated these from simple «small talk». Material coded as «transitions» seemed to represent some type of middle ground between topics and outcome, but it was not possible through our analysis to establish the temporal order. Finally, we coded «human connection» as our outcome. Human connection was coded by the research team as an «outcome» as these passages indicated some kind of connection that appeared to be conducive to human thriving. Appendix B provides a chart of codes that were folded into the overarching themes. The number next to each code indicates the number of times this code was used. Below we will share some examples and excerpts from the data to demonstrate these themes.

Our second level of analysis looked more deeply at the material coded as an outcome of human connection. While we found some of these indicators of human connection (reciprocity, vulnerability, and intimacy) at the *topics* level, the incidence of indicators of human connection increased dramatically at the *transitions* level and the *outcome* level. In the findings below, we highlight examples of topics, transitions, and outcomes as well as indicators of human connection from our model. Further, we explored intimacy by looking for Reis and Shaver's (1988) description of understanding, validation, and caring where applicable.

Theme #1: Topics

Music & Restaurants

Many passages coded at the topics level stayed at the base level of safe information exchange. For example, one pair shared music suggestions repeatedly through their letters and one writer indicated, «All I ask of the YouTube thing is if you look something up and totally love it, please tell me about it!» (P4). Other pairs learned more about one another by sharing past hobbies and their experiences raising children: «I played clarinet in elementary school. Three of my four kids are very talented musicians... Do your kids play any instruments?» (S16). Other recommendations had to do with television and restaurants such as one pen pal pair that shared, «I can't seem to find the list of [TV] recommendations. Would you mind telling me again? I would love to start watching some during my break» (S7). And later, «I haven't had the opportunity to try out one of the restaurants you've recommended, but I hope to within the next couple of weeks!» (S7).

Food & Holidays

Food was another seemingly accessible topic in early letter exchanges. «I hope your kids like vegetables, because mine not so much. I think it is a quest for a lot of parents» (S5). «My daughter just started girl scouts so that's been exciting [...] I'm more excited about the cookies she will be selling in January» (P5). Food preferences offered a way to connect: «this leads me to another question... the most important of them all... how do you feel about candy corn?» (S3).

By Thanksgiving and Christmas, most pairs had exchanged 5-6 letters, and talked at length about family traditions and holiday plans. «My dad was famous for his canned, homemade sauerkraut. He made it every year... it was the best ever» (S1). One writer shared her baked corn recipe (P11). «We had a lot of food leftover which is unusual for my family. My mom thinks everyone was on a diet since we had so much food leftover!» (S12).

Further, many people minding Covid-19 safety precautions (in Fall 2021) expressed missing out on «normal» holiday activities in order to protect their own health or the health of others. «I am so over Covid-19! Hopefully Christmas will be better, and I'll get to spend more time with my boys» (S1). «Unfortunately, we had to miss out on a New Year's party because my fiancé was feeling under the weather. Thankfully it turned out to just be a cold, but we didn't want to put anyone else at risk» (S14).

However, some pairs also expressed more complex reactions to the holiday season, which appeared to reflect some of the loneliness and social isolation concerns which inspired the project. Here, we noted several examples of *vulnerability exposure*:

«However, this Thanksgiving both my parents are gone, and I just have a younger sister. She is struggling with the loss of our dad and did not want to do anything... it was hard because I missed my family traditions» (S6). «Over the holidays were the hardest, to me it was very hectic and caotic [sic]» (P5). «Holidays for me are not the same since I moved to the United States because my family is not around. But I always try to enjoy it» (S13).

Christmas was always my mom's favorite time of the year. She loved it so much that she used to leave some of her Christmas decorations up all year. She passed away from cancer 17 years ago. Some years are better than others. I find myself going back and forth from enjoying the holiday season to feeling sad and missing my mom (S16).

Pets

Family pets were also a popular topic. One letter writer began her introductory letter with «Hello, my favorite color is purple. I have 2 dogs and 1 cat. They keep me busy» (P9). «I'm curious about the cats you mentioned you have. Do you spend a lot of time with them?» (S4). «That is so nice that you have a loving cat also. What is your cat's name?» (S9). After one enthusiastic exchange, a pen pal added a postscript with instructions: «P.S. pet Barkey for me» (P8).¹

Similar to Food & Holidays, however, many stories about pets revealed human connection indicators from our model. At times, pets evoked deeply felt losses experienced by letter writers. «Like you I have an elderly dog. He was my parents' dog and became my inheritance when my dad passed away [...] it will be really hard to say goodbye to him when he decides to move on. He keeps me feeling connected to my parents» (S1). Another writer expressed *vulnerability* noting: «All of our children had 4 legs. We would have loved to have children (with 2 legs), but it didn't happen» (P15). One letter writer expressed her sadness of losing a lifelong companion animal:

I do have a pet named Charles.² She is an Umbrella Cockatoo. She just turned 27 this week. I picked her out as an egg [...] She has been in my husband's possession for the last four years since I filed for divorce» (P11). And another noted that «[My cat] lived for 16 years. I still miss him terribly! (P7).

As in our model, these expressions of *vulnerability* provided an opportunity for *reciprocity*. Further, expressions of *vulnerability* and *reciprocity* were followed by *validation*, an essential component of *intimacy*. For example:

I would agree death of pets are difficult. We invest a lot of time with our pets, care for them and they are a part of our families. I don't think we could ever not have dogs. They are always so happy to see us when we get home and offer unconditional love (S10).

¹ Names have been changed to protect innocent pets.

² Names have been changed to protect innocent pets.

Theme #2: Transitions

Reflections of the Past

Our second level theme, «transitions», had a bit more potential for emotional content. We noted a lot of pairs told stories about their families, holidays, and traditions. At times these were happy memories but at other times they represented vulnerability exposure in the form of regret or sadness. As a result, at this level, we coded more human connection indicators. Sharing stories about familial relationships seemed to be a useful way to connect. «You are a delightful inquirer. MEMORIES! Some sad, some unearthed from the deep, some happy. Thank you» (P6). This same pen pal, shared her sensitive life history indicating that:

A Catholic, never to divorce. Bonded almost with chains and super glue. It ended years later when he went minutes away to visit his parents. When he called the next morning, I told him he did not have to come home. He did not. He left everything. There was no arguing, visits to his daughters and in a year, no finances (P6).

Sadness permeated some tales of the past. One pen pal shared that:

I am very sorry to hear about your loss. My husband passed away on December 30th. I usually can hold it together until after Christmas but the end of December and the New Years holidays are especially hard. Grief is so unpredictable (P16).

And in response:

Yes, grief is the worst. Rose Kennedy once said «It has been said that time heals all wounds. I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens, but it is never gone». Rose lived to be 104. She sure knew a lot about loss (S16).

Here, when the memory represented a vulnerability exposure it was met with reciprocity that took the form of understanding, validation, and caring, our indicators of intimacy (Reis et al., 1988). This seemed to come in the form of advice or encouragement, which was another one of our transition themes.

Advice Giving & Encouragement

We also found evidence of shared *intimacy* all throughout this theme. A strong example of intimacy, reflecting all of these indicators, was:

You are not needed to apologize for feeling down; you, like everyone else, have the right to feel down from time to time; but you must avoid allowing your negative mo-

ments to become your normal. I hope that by the time you receive this letter, you are experiencing significant emotional and physical improvement. I am sorry you couldn't spend time with your children (S13).

The response to this was an example of advice-giving with evidence of validation: «I want to thank you for your thoughtful and kind words. You are so right about not letting the negative become my normal, although that is exactly what has happened to me for the last 3 weeks or so» (P13).

Some responses to advice-giving, had deeper emotional effects. For example, one pen pal who noted that after going through a hard time shared (vulnerability): «I will eventually pick myself up and dust myself off and move forward. Be myself again. Whoever that is» (P11). Another pen pal was able to clearly articulate her emotional needs (vulnerability) and shared that she was:

Just ready for things to be settled down. I need calmness and peace. This mental shit needs to go away. Dealing with anxiety and depression too much. I'm sorry for my sloppy handwriting and for this letter being so short. I will write longer and better next time (P2).

Emotions & Feelings

Empathy seemed to permeate the letters. One pen pal wrote, in an excerpt that included understanding, validation, and caring: «I'm sorry to hear about your friend, that must have made the holidays hard. I find not being alone helps me cope» (P5). Similarly, another shared that they were «Sorry to hear there's an empty seat at the table» (S10). And another that «I'm so sorry it's been such a hard month for you. Please don't ever feel bad about complaining. As humans, sometimes we just need to vent. Besides that, you've had a really rough month!» (S1). Yet another, «I'm so sorry to hear of your hospitalization and am very happy for you to be back at home. Heart issues are something I'm very familiar with as many people in my family suffer from them» (S15). Another pair did the same in discussing illness and stress.

It sounds like you got caught up this month and couldn't write a letter. No worries at all, I can totally empathize with that. I am spread very thin myself. I just hope you are well, happy, and healthy. I am in full swing of my Fall internship, which I am doing at my place of work. It's been a little frustrating because I can't seem to find enough time to step away from normal work duties in order to do the extra stuff (S14).

Vulnerability & Reciprocity

Reciprocity appeared consistently as a transition theme and often in response to vulnerability. We coded an excerpt as reciprocity when one writer showed kindness in

a direct response to the vulnerability of their counterpart. In exposures of vulnerability, letter writers were sharing a hurt, a soft spot, or sensitive histories. They were requests for support, calls for connection, and an indication of some level of trust experienced by the writer. What often followed was a reciprocal exchange.³ For example:

I love my job that is overnight. I think I get a little stressed out because I don't have a day off sometimes during the week. But I emailed my boss and asked her to cut back a shift for me, and I think that will help me even though I will miss the hours and pay (P9).

And in response:

Thank you for your kind words about me being a little burned out. I agree that Covid definitely had something to do with how I was feeling. It was tough missing the 1st 2 weeks of my classes. But everything is good now and I'm feeling much better about everything... (S9).

Reciprocity presented as encouragement such as «That sounds absolutely wonderful! I would love to see pictures from your time in Japan! I can only imagine how it felt to experience the culture in person. Hopefully I will be able to do that as well in the future» (S7). And «I hope you are feeling well and the cooler weather is agreeing with you. I love hearing your stories. You make me smile» (S1). One pen pal encouraged her pen pal by saying:

I'm so glad you have good friends who know you enough to pick up on clues. It is always a blessing to have people like that in one's life. I have two of my best friends whom I know for over 20 years... Sometimes the desire to have a cup of coffee with them is overwhelming (S5).

Often letter segments that involved advice giving reflected reciprocity, as advice giving implied that someone shared a problem and then received a connected response. For example:

Finding a new home is always painful, and it's made much more challenging when we're on a budget. However, avoid allowing your frustration to fuel your negative thoughts, since this will not benefit your health. Rather than that, you will deteriorate. Simply relax. I understand that it might be tough to avoid negative thinking at times but practicing optimism can help make things a little bit simpler. And I am aware that you want happiness (S13).

Other times this meant asking really good open-ended questions such as, «How about you? What do you think it means to be 100% unapologetically yourself» (S4). Or other less important but equally attuned questions such as:

³ Community members and student participants appeared equally likely to initiate a reciprocal exchange.

I also have to ask... what's it like at Game Stop on Black Friday? I'm only asking because I'm curious, but I have to imagine it probably gets super super busy! Reading about your plans for gifts for your friend Matteo made me so happy! I have a feeling you very well might be giving him his favorite gifts of all time (S3).⁴

Ultimately, pairs with reciprocity indicated in their letters were also eventually coded with evidence of human connection, our final outcome code.

Theme #3: Outcome

Our last theme dealt with what we called the «outcome» of human connection. Pairs that we considered to have made a human connection cultivated a sharing and listening routine that carved out a friendship and authentic connection. In fact, all of the things we discussed above in our transitions theme (e.g. emotions, vulnerability, reciprocity) evidenced varied indicators of human connection and the desire to continue the relationship.

In many instances, we found clear indication of human connection between the pen pals when they began to call each other «friend» directly in their letters. Some started their letters off with «hello friend» or «Dear New Friend» or signed them «your friend.» One noted, «I'm so excited to have you as a pen pal!» (P9). Another, «I am thankful we met. I very much enjoy getting to know all about you» (P6).

Some pen pal pairs seemed to long for more or wished for the relationship to continue past the project, which indicated that a human connection was made. One noted that, «If you're up to it, maybe we can stay in touch occasionally. I'll give you my address. I enjoyed your letters! Til then, stay safe and always smile... it drives other people crazy» (P8). Another said, «I wish we could talk on the phone» (P6). And another «I hope that you can come to the dinner! Maybe they will pick you up or let me come pick you up. OR I'll skip the dinner and just bring a fishing rod and picnic dinner and come visit you — ha ha!... either way, I'll be glad to stay in touch by letter and would really love to visit in person some time» (S8). Connections in the letters seemed to help them connect with others outside of the letters. For example, one writer noted to her pen pal that «You've inspired me to think up a thoughtful gift to mail over to her this holiday season!» (S3). But another cheered on long lives with «Congratulations to turning 80! I can only hope I live that long as well» (S6).

Limitations

The same types of limitations associated with qualitative research persisted in our study, such the limits on external generalizability. In our study, a small amount of

⁴ Names have been changed.

attrition occurred, primarily among student participants, and in these cases, additional students were recruited to assume the empty pen pal slots. Selection bias might have led the types of participants interested in cultivating human connections to voluntarily participate in such a study. Additionally, as we are humans too, our own bias in the nature of relationships might have filtered through in what we saw in the letters and how we coded what we found. While we tried to attend to this by the use of multiple coders, it might have been our shared understanding of the nature of reciprocity or human connection that urged us to find it in a similar way. We were also somewhat guided by our shared understanding and assumption that human connection would be the end goal or a positive thing for pen pal pairs. Therefore, we even called this an «outcome.» However, that is not to say that pairs might not have been content and happy to remain on the topic-level for the entire project without the end goal of a close, reciprocal relationship. Further, our deeper analysis revealed that many transition-level themes shared multiple elements of human connection, which might have made that outcome code of «human connection» redundant.

Discussion

In this project we sought to better understand human relationships by exploring what people wrote about over time to a pen pal. Using pen pal partners who were strangers at the outset, we explored their correspondence to understand what strangers would talk about if given the opportunity and what could be gleaned from the types of communication that unfolded.

In the end, we learned much about the types of things that people discuss. Given minimal prompts, people talked about family, traditions, food, music, and pets. They sometimes talked about more emotionally-laden material such as advice, emotions, the past, and hopes for the future. We found connections between letter writers that shared interests and experiences and others who seemed to enjoy highlighting their differences. Others worked hard at encouraging each other through tough times. The encouragement aspect seemed to hook letter writers into the relationship in a way that might have generated a meaningful connection.

Using the schema that we developed in our analysis, we coded transitions as moving from facts and events, to material with a more personal connection. Further, we identified elements of vulnerability and intimacy, such as understanding, validation, and caring (Reis et al., 1988). Ultimately, most pairs were coded at some point in the letter writing relationship with what we consider to be the outcome code of «human connection».

Evidence of human connection emerged in our study that demonstrated elements of Reis and Shaver's (1988) elements including understanding, validation, and caring. As a result, these human connections contained essential components of intimacy. Accord-

ing to Reis and Shaver, understanding, validation, and caring in sum were evidence of intimacy in a human connection. Letter writing was a medium that allowed for the space and time to facilitate these components. As knowledge and experiences were shared between pairs, personal needs were identified, and responses provided. Human connection facilitated in this way allowed for the mitigation of loneliness (Reis et al., 1988). We also saw the start of fictive kin relationships, as noted by Gazso et al. (2016). The letter writing exchange built reciprocal relationships over time, led by the paired writers who developed their own understanding of what it meant to be vulnerable with another person. The sharing of self with others creates space for others to do the same. Vulnerability may be a key component of supportive, emotionally connected relationships (Bender et al., 2021).

Given that letter writing has the power to reduce loneliness (Frank et al., 2023), it is necessary to understand the mechanism by which this works. Here, we found that letter writing provides a platform for human connection to unfold through a process of shared vulnerability, reciprocity, and intimacy. We assessed that something special happens during the «in-between» space of sending and receiving a letter. It is possible that this «in-between», is where reflection and dialogue develop and might be more important than the writing or receiving of a letter (Brown et al., 2017). Perhaps it is the time and space — which allow the development of an engaged response — that contribute to meaning-making and deepens the richness of the exchange.

At the time of this writing, AI is a potential interaction mechanism with unknown outcomes. We wonder what the growth of AI will mean for human connections. Could AI be developed to provide appropriate reciprocal responses that would properly attend to loneliness, or would it make it worse? Our project provides the impetus for a very human argument for connection. In the letters, we saw the natural inclination of the writers to provide authentic, organic, reciprocal responses to expressions of vulnerability and these took the form of understanding, validation, and caring. These interactions had an incredible ability to attend to loneliness in a uniquely human way.

Implications

Our study provides insight for both social work practice and social work education. While coordinating a letter writing project can be time consuming and labor intensive in some ways, the minimal use of technology allows for maximum participation by many people at risk of loneliness. Individuals in rural and poor communities who lack broadband access and transportation may benefit from the implementation of an old-fashioned letter writing opportunity to enhance and establish human connections.

In our study, we noticed that both community participants as well as master's level students fully utilized the opportunity to connect with each other. This reciprocity is unique because it is an integral part of building trust in social relationships, and students practiced

communication in a slow and thoughtful manner. Both groups had the opportunity to learn from each other, hear stories, and appreciate similarities and differences in experience.

Letter writing is an example of experiential learning Timm et al. (2011) in that the learning takes place external to the classroom in ways create a bridge between explicit curriculum and social work practice.

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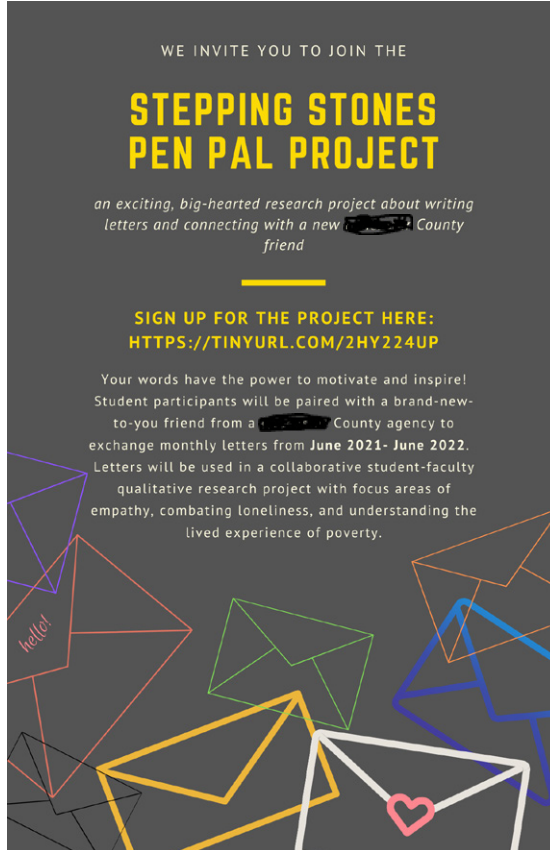
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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



Appendix B: Level 1 Coding & Thematic Analysis Chart

Topics	Transitions	Outcomes
Education (33)	Advice Giving (106 not including subcodes)	Human Connection (209)
Employment & Finances (95)	Emotions & Feelings (278)	
Family (331)	Hope & Future (90)	
Food & Holidays (146)	Reflections of the Past (69)	
Growing Older (9)	Troubles & Difficulties (225)	

Health (182)	Reciprocity (518)	
Hobbies & Interests (237)		
Opposite Sex (20)		
Pets (74)		
Politics (5)		
Relationship to Service Provider/Agency (19)		
Religion (49)		
Self-Improvement (22)		
Stepping Stones Letter Writing Project (108)		
Weather (23)		