

Gratitude – Parent of all virtues



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on current research and future directions.

Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues, but the parent of all of the others – Cicero (106–43BC)

A noble person is mindful and thankful of the favours he receives from others – The Buddha

GRATITUDE is an emotion that most people feel frequently and strongly (McCullough *et al.*, 2002). The Gallup Organization conducted a representative telephone poll of around 1000 people (as cited in Tsang & McCullough, 2004), and found that 67 per cent endorsed the statement ‘all of the time’ when asked how often they feel gratitude, and 60 per cent said that this made them ‘very happy’. This prevalence does not seem to be limited to Western countries – with some cultural variations, gratitude seems to be experienced in countries around the world (Naito *et al.*, 2005). Gratitude has also been a focus of recent public attention, with many people reporting increased gratitude and appreciation of life following vicarious exposure to the 11 September terrorist attacks (Peterson & Seligman, 2003).

Throughout history, gratitude has been given a central position in religious and philosophical theories (Emmons &

Crumpler, 2000). The importance of gratitude has been a fundamental focus of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Almost all of the Biblical psalms focus on the expression of gratitude towards God, and a representative Islam saying is ‘the first who will be summoned to paradise are those who have praised God in every circumstance’. From a secular perspective, Adam Smith, better known for his economic treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, also wrote extensively on gratitude. He believed that gratitude was essential for society, motivating reciprocation of aid when no other legal or economic incentive encouraged its repayment.

Despite this recognised importance, the study of gratitude has been neglected by psychology (McCullough *et al.*, 2001). This may be part of a larger neglect of the positive aspects of life (see the special issue of *The Psychologist*, March 2003, at www.bps.org.uk/34y7; Linley *et al.*, 2006), and a lack of focus on character strengths (Linley & Harrington, 2006). However, this picture is rapidly changing, with a substantial amount of research published in the last few years. This article considers the current research into gratitude as both an emotion and as a personality trait, and the implications of this knowledge for applications in applied settings. In particular, we aim to stress what is and is not known about this area, to encourage intellectual and personal exploration of this new but fertile field of study.

State of the art

Gratitude can be conceptualised as an affect, a behaviour, or a personality trait. Much as Adam Smith speculated, current research suggests that gratitude operates as ‘moral’, or prosocial affect. Specifically, it acts as a moral barometer, drawing attention to help received; a moral

motivator, encouraging a prosocial response to help; and as a moral reinforcer, where the expression of gratitude makes the benefactor more likely to provide help in the future (McCullough *et al.*, 2001).

Behaviourally, research has suggested that gratitude occurs both as a function of culture (Naito *et al.*, 2005) and as a function of the amount of imposition on the benefactor (Okamoto & Robinson, 1997). However, there are many unanswered research questions in this area, such as when and why the emotion of gratitude leads to helping behaviour, the nature of the social and psychological forces that lead to the expression of insincere gratitude, and the cultural factors that shape if and when it is acceptable, and when it is expected, to express gratitude.

The grateful person

Most recent research has focused on gratitude as a personality characteristic. Some people feel much more gratitude than others, reporting gratitude which is more frequent, more intense, and involves appreciation of a wider range of people and events (McCullough *et al.*, 2002). Multiple studies now suggest that people who feel more gratitude are much more likely to have higher levels of happiness, and lower levels of depression and stress (e.g. McCullough *et al.*, 2004; Watkins *et al.*, 2003). However, many personality traits are related to levels of mental health, so what is it that makes gratitude unique?

The first reason that gratitude may be an important personality trait is because it seems to have one of the strongest links with mental health of any personality variable. A recent paper (Park *et al.*, 2004) looked at how 24 representative personality strengths related to life satisfaction. Gratitude was more strongly related to this measure of happiness than all but two strengths, even after controlling for several

WEBLINKS

Assess your levels of gratitude, and participate in research: www.personalitystrengths.com

European Network for Positive Psychology: www.enpp.org

Positive psychology: www.positivepsychology.org

Bob Emmons' gratitude website:

<http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/labs/emmons/>

Centre for Applied Positive Psychology:

www.capppeu.org

demographic variables. Gratitude related to life satisfaction at $r = 0.43$, suggesting that around 18.5 per cent of individual differences in people's happiness could be predicted by the amount of gratitude they feel. Increasingly, a large body of research is building which is consistent with this conclusion (e.g. McCullough *et al.*, 2002).

Secondly, gratitude may be uniquely important in social relationships. The 'moral' effects of emotional gratitude (McCullough *et al.*, 2001) are likely to be as important in maintaining individual relationships as in maintaining a smooth running society. People who feel more gratitude in life should be more likely to notice they have been helped, to respond appropriately, and to return the help at some future point. If the grateful person reciprocates the favour, then the other person is more likely to reciprocate the new favour, causing an upward spiral of helping and mutual support. Similarly, an ungrateful person is less likely to notice help, and less likely to reciprocate the help, making their benefactor less willing to provide further aid.

It therefore seems likely that grateful people will have better social relationships, characterised by greater closeness and heightened reciprocal social support. The latter may be particularly important, given the strong relationships between social

support and physical and mental health (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). We feel this is one of the most exciting directions for gratitude research, and are currently conducting research in this area. Early indications suggest that gratitude does indeed operate in this way. For example, McCullough *et al.* (2002) obtained self and peer ratings for 238 people on gratitude and a host of other personality variables. Peer ratings showed that grateful people were seen as more empathetic, agreeable, and extraverted. Peers also reported grateful people as possessing more prosocial traits, endorsing generalised measures (e.g. 'Is helpful and unselfish with others'), as well as reporting more actual prosocial acts the grateful person had preformed. These relationships existed independently of whether dispositional gratitude was measured based on self ratings, or other people's perceptions of the target person's gratitude.

The grateful situation

As reflected above, most research has considered the short-term effects of the grateful emotion, and the longer-term effects of having a grateful disposition. Some research has focused on the distinct characteristics of help-giving situations that elicit gratitude. Cognition and emotion researchers have made substantial advances in modelling the situational elements and

cognitive attributions which cause such emotions as anger, fear or disgust (Power & Dalgleish, 1997), but have made little progress in understanding gratitude.

The best indication comes from Tesser *et al.* (1968), whose work suggested that around 65 per cent of the gratitude felt in a given situation was predicted by attributions regarding the value of the help, how costly it was to provide, and whether it was altruistically intended (rather than with an ulterior motive). We are currently running replications of this study, and also investigating whether dispositionally grateful people are more likely to make these attributions, in an attempt to integrate situational and personality variables in the future study of gratitude.

Gratitude in the consulting room

Given the seemingly strong benefits of having a grateful disposition, the question readily arises regarding the potential of gratitude interventions (Bono *et al.*, 2004). Such research is also academically interesting, as it can inform the development of experimental designs with the power to show whether the grateful personality trait has causal relationships with mental health and social relationships.

Early indications suggest that gratitude interventions may have considerable applications to coaching and psychotherapy. Seligman *et al.* (2005) randomly assigned people to one of six therapeutic intervention conditions. The biggest short-term effects were seen for the 'gratitude visit', where people wrote and delivered a letter to someone who had helped them substantially at some time in their lives. On average, people's happiness scores rose by 10 per cent, and their depression scores also fell significantly. Relative to a placebo condition, these effects were seen to last up to a month later, where they dissipated. In this study, the longest-lasting treatment effects also involved gratitude. People were asked to make a list every day of three good things about their life, and had increased levels of happiness and decreased levels of depression each time they were tested, with the biggest benefits seen six months after treatment. This is remarkable, as people had only been asked to complete the exercise for one week. Subsequent investigation suggested that the exercise had been self-reinforcing, with people choosing to continue with the exercise long

Adam Smith believed that gratitude was essential for society

after the intervention ended. This may be a particularly important factor in the use of gratitude in coaching and therapy settings. Similar findings were obtained by Emmons and McCullough (2003), and by Lyubomirsky *et al.* (2005) also using an approach that involved asking people to 'count their blessings'.

Gratitude in the consulting room shows great potential for various client groups.

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Can (and should) gratitude interventions become part of mainstream clinical practice?

Why has the study of gratitude been neglected by psychology?

How would you study gratitude from a multi-disciplinary perspective?

Is Adam Smith right that emotional gratitude is essential for the smooth running of society?

What is the role of gratitude in your own life?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

For example, in addition to chronically low affect, people with depression commonly experience considerable social problems, which can lead to a downward spiral and impair progress towards higher levels of mental health (Segrin, 2000). Similarly, people living with a variety of medical illnesses and health complaints often experience low mood, and their physical status and quality of life is often aided through the provision of social support (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Increasing gratitude seems a uniquely beneficial approach for these clients, given its potential to increase both happiness and social support. Finally, as the research of Seligman *et al.* (2005) shows, gratitude interventions may be particularly suitable for people in the general population who want to increase their levels of happiness and well-being, and decrease their levels of depression – an important consideration for psychologists who self-consciously aim to balance research and practice towards improving the negative and fostering the positive aspects of life (Linley *et al.*, 2006).

Grateful because of success, or vice versa?

Compared to other personality traits, research into gratitude is still in an embryonic stage, and much of the existing research has been correlational. One of the most important and exciting questions for future research will ask about the direction of causality; having a grateful personality could lead you to develop better friendships and enjoy greater psychological well-being, or gratitude could arise from already having high mental health and good social relationships.

The experimental evidence discussed earlier suggests that increasing people's levels of gratitude leads to greater well-being. This is logical because if you feel more gratitude you are likely to see the world as a more friendly and hospitable place in which to live. Equally, as suggested above, grateful people may see the social world through a 'rose-coloured lens', perhaps seeing help they are given as more valuable, costly and altruistic, with strong implications for the quality of their

The importance of gratitude has been a fundamental focus of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam

social relationships. Further research is likely to uncover new mechanisms, perhaps including more positive coping styles when faced with adversity, or as with other positive emotional dispositions, grateful people may have better immune systems and physical health (and a further open question is whether or not these associations may be mediated by positive affect; see Pressman & Cohen, 2005). Such research will have to use both longitudinal and experimental designs to test the causality of these relationships.

It also seems logical that people who have more success in life will feel more gratitude. This is not as clear cut as it seems, as considerable research has shown that people very rapidly adapt to new circumstances, and return to their baseline emotional levels: lottery winners are no happier one year after their win, wealth is only slightly related to happiness, and people with paralysis are not as unhappy as may be expected (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005). This process may apply to gratitude; good life events may create gratitude in the short term, but may not be sufficient to alter long-term dispositional gratitude. However, it is our belief that there will be no clear direction of causality between gratitude, well-being and social relationships. Rather, it may operate as an interactive upward spiral (cf. Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), whereby being grateful leads to greater success, which in turn leads to gratitude, perpetuating the cycle (Fredrickson, 2004). A major challenge of future research will be the empirical exploration of these processes.

Poised for the second wave

Empirical evidence is fast accumulating that gratitude is involved in various social processes, and is an important part of

mental health and well-being. Such evidence is fully consistent with traditional treatments of gratitude by theologians and philosophers. Gratitude seems poised for a 'second wave' of research; focus will increasingly turn to the processes behind these relationships, investigations into questions of causality, and to developing a

strong evidential and theoretical basis for applying this research in diverse settings.

Ideally this will occur with input and collaborations from people across psychology and from other disciplines. Research discussed in this article has come from experts in personality, cognition and emotion, clinical, health, coaching, and positive psychology. Collaborations between these professionals can only strengthen gratitude research, and we hope that this article will aid such a process of integration.

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