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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

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ABSTRACT

The following article would affirm the fact that gratitude is the best attitude. Gratitude is a feeling, emotion or attitude in acknowledgment of a benefit that one has received or will receive. Religions and philosophies have long embraced gratitude as an indispensable manifestation of virtue, and as an integral component of health, wholeness, and well-being. Scientists are latecomers to the concept of gratitude. The systematic study of gratitude within psychology began only around the year 2000, possibly because psychology has traditionally been focused more on understanding distress rather than understanding positive emotions. However, with the advent of the positive psychology movement (Linley *et al.*, 2006), gratitude has become a mainstream focus of psychological research (Wood, Joseph and Linley, 2007). Of all the areas studied in the relatively young field of positive psychology, gratitude has perhaps the widest body of research.

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Gratitude as an emotion

Gratitude is an emotion that occurs after people receive help, depending on how they interpret the situation. Specifically, gratitude is experienced if people perceive the help they receive as (a) valuable to them, (b) costly to their benefactor, and (c) given by the benefactor with benevolent intentions (rather than ulterior motives) (Wood *et al.*, 2008; Lane and Anderson, 1976). When faced with identical situations where they have been given help, different people view the situation very differently in terms of value, cost, and benevolent intentions, and this explains why people feel differing levels of gratitude after they have been helped (Wood *et al.*, 2008; Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver, 1968). People who generally experience more gratitude in life habitually interpret help as

more costly, more beneficial, and more beneficially intended; and this habitual bias explains why some people feel more gratitude than others (Wood *et al.*, 2008).

Comparison with indebtedness

Gratitude is not the same as indebtedness. While both emotions occur following help, indebtedness occurs when a person perceives that they are under an obligation to make some repayment of compensation for the aid (Greenberg, 1980). The emotions lead to different actions; indebtedness can motivate the recipient of the aid to avoid the person who has helped them, whereas gratitude can motivate the recipient to seek out their benefactor and to improve their relationship with them (Watkins *et al.*, 2006; Tsang, 2006).

Gratitude as a motivator of behavior

Gratitude may also serve to reinforce future prosocial behavior in benefactors. For example, one experiment found that customers of a jewelry store who were called and thanked showed a subsequent 70% increase in purchases. In comparison, customers who were thanked and told about a sale showed only a 30% increase in purchases, and customers who were not called at all did not show an increase (Carey, Clique, Leighton, and Milton, 1976). In another study, regular patrons of a restaurant gave bigger tips when servers wrote "Thank you" on their checks (Rind, and Bordia, 1995).

Major theoretical approaches

The link between spirituality and gratitude has recently become a popular subject of study. While these two characteristics are certainly not dependant on each other, studies have found that spirituality is capable of enhancing a person's ability to be grateful and therefore, those who regularly attend religious services or engage in religious activities are more likely to have a greater sense of gratitude in all areas of life (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, J., 2002; Carey, Clique, Leighton and Milton, 1976). Gratitude is viewed as a prized human propensity in the Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu traditions (Emmons, Robert and Crumpler, 2000). Worship with gratitude to God is a common theme in such religions and therefore, the concept of gratitude permeates religious texts, teachings, and traditions. For this reason, it is one of the most common emotions that religions aim to provoke and maintain in followers and is regarded as a universal religious sentiment (Emmons, Robert, and Teresa Kneezel, 2005).

Empirical findings

Association with well-being

A large body of recent work has suggested that people who are more grateful have higher levels of well-being. Grateful people are happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and social relationships (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang, 2002; Wood, Joseph and Maltby, 2008; Kashdan, Uswatte and Julian, 2006). Grateful people also have higher levels of control of their environments, personal growth, purpose in life, and self acceptance (Wood, Joseph and Maltby, 2009). Grateful people have more positive ways of coping with the difficulties they experience in life, being more likely to seek support from other people, reinterpreted and grow from the experience, and spend more time planning how to deal with the problem (Wood, Joseph and Linley, 2007). Grateful people also have less negative coping strategies, being less likely to try to avoid the problem, deny there is a problem, blame themselves, or cope through substance use (Wood, Joseph and Linley, 2007). Grateful people sleep better, and this seems to be because they think less negative and more positive thoughts just before going to sleep (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd and Atkins, 2009).

Gratitude has been said to have one of the strongest links with mental health of any character trait. Numerous studies suggest that grateful people are more likely to have higher levels of happiness and lower levels of stress and depression (McCullough, Tsang and Emmons, 2004; Wood, Alex, Joseph and Linley, 2007). In one study concerning gratitude, participants were randomly assigned to one of six therapeutic intervention conditions designed to improve the participant's overall quality of life (Seligman *et al.*, 2005). Out of these conditions, it was found that the biggest short-term effects came from a "gratitude visit" where participants wrote and delivered a letter of gratitude to someone in their life. This condition showed a rise in happiness scores by 10 percent and a significant fall in depression scores, results which lasted up to one month after the visit. Out of the six conditions, the longest lasting effects were caused by the act of writing "gratitude journals" where participants were asked to write down three things they were grateful for every day. These participants' happiness scores also increased and continued to increase each time they were tested periodically after the experiment. In fact, the greatest benefits were usually found to occur around six months after treatment began. This exercise was so successful that although participants were only asked to continue the journal for a week, many participants continued to keep the journal long after the study was over. While many emotions and personality traits are important to well-being, there is evidence that gratitude may be uniquely important. First, a longitudinal study showed that people who were more grateful coped better with a life transition. Specifically, people who were more grateful before the transition were less stressed, less depressed, and more satisfied with their relationships three months later (Wood *et al.*, 2008). Second, two recent studies have suggested that gratitude may have a unique relationship with well-being, and can explain aspects of well-being that other personality traits cannot. Both studies showed that gratitude was able to explain more well-being than the Big Five and 30 of the most commonly studied personality traits (Wood, Joseph and Maltby, 2008, 2009).

Relationship to altruism

Gratitude has also been shown to improve a person's altruistic tendencies. One study conducted by DeSteno and Bartlett (2010) found that gratitude is correlated with economic generosity. In this study, using an economic game, increased gratitude was shown to directly mediate increased monetary giving. From these results, this study shows that gracious people are more likely to sacrifice individual gains for communal profit (DeSteno and Bartlett, 2010). A Study conducted by McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, (2002) found similar correlations between gratitude and empathy, generosity, and helpfulness. (DeSteno, David, and Bartlett, 2010; Emmons, Robert and McCullough, 2010).

Psychological interventions

Given that gratitude appears to be a strong determinant of people's well-being, several psychological interventions have been developed to increase gratitude (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Wood, Joseph and Linley, 2007). For example, Watkins and colleagues (Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts, 2003) had participants test a number of different gratitude exercises, such as thinking about a living person for whom they were grateful, writing about someone for whom they were grateful, and writing a letter to deliver to someone for whom they were grateful. Participants in the control condition were asked to describe their living room. Participants who engaged in a gratitude exercise showed increases in their experiences of positive emotion immediately after the exercise, and this effect was strongest for participants who were asked to think about a person for whom they were grateful. Participants who had grateful personalities to begin with showed the greatest benefit from these gratitude exercises.

Conclusion

According to Cicero, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues but the parent of all others." Several studies have shown the correlation between gratitude and increased well-being not only for the individual but for all people involved (McCullough, Tsang and Emmons, 2004; DeSteno, David and Bartlett, 2010). The positive psychology movement has embraced these studies and in an effort to increase overall wellbeing, has begun to make an effort to incorporate exercises to increase gratitude into the movement. Although in the past gratitude has been neglected by psychology, in recent years much progress has been made in studying gratitude and its positive effects. Furthermore, efforts to make people more grateful have their own benefits. Gratitude is clearly an important part of a "good life", and it therefore demands further careful research. Each of the studies profiled here has strong scientific merit, and their results should give us a sense of cautious optimism as we move forward in the study of thanksgiving.

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