

The role of gratitude in our life

Life



By definition gratitude means ‘ the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.’ However, this does not mean to say everyone perceives gratefulness in the same way or even goes by the same definition. Gratitude itself is such a broad and complex topic, we cannot simply take it at face value.

But how does gratitude affect us as a society and as an individual?

Throughout this essay we will explore the role gratitude has on our biology, such as neural correlates and neurotransmitters, and on our social interactions, such as relationships and prosocial behaviour, debating the possible positive and negative influence.

Gratitude certainly plays a significant role within our culture, influencing our relationships and prosocial behaviours, nevertheless, gratitude isn’t necessarily restricted to influencing external factors. As research has previously shown expressing or receiving gratitude can cause internal biological changes which can ultimately change our mental health/brain activity for the better. We shall be addressing this research later in the essay.

Biopsychology is a branch of psychology which is concerned with the biological aspects of human nature, including neural correlates, mental health, and the central nervous system (CNS) etc, which will be discussed in the context of gratitude in the following paragraphs. It is an important concept within the nature side of psychology thus it is very important to take the research into consideration. On the contrary, social psychology deals with social interactions, it is the scientific study of how people’s thoughts,

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feelings, and behaviours can be influenced by the presence and actions of those around them. In regard to gratitude, it may be investigated how those who receive it alter their behaviour towards others. This could potentially be in a positive or negative regard.

A common theme reoccurred throughout articles investigating biology's association with gratitude, this theme was mental health. Explored on several occasions', depression appeared to have the strongest affiliation with gratitude. Research conducted by Lambert, Fincham, and Stillman (2012) completed 8 studies and all found supporting evidence that gratitude does decrease depressive symptoms. Additionally, they also found gratitude caused people to view possibly negative situations in a positive light. However, these studies were conducted on college students so may not be representative of the general population. It may also help if this particular research was supported by further exploration, especially into the levels of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and serotonin, both of which have been linked to depression (Levitan et al, 2017). Regardless, this research is still very valuable and provides possibly essential research support to the role of gratitude leading to psychological benefits. Assuming the research completed is high in validity and reliability, this may have practical applications for drug treatments. By further investigating what neurotransmitters increased and/or decreased during the time of receiving gratitude, drug treatments could benefit, by using these results to improve neurotransmitter levels within depression medication. Using these as form of therapy in combination with cognitive and behavioural treatments may

prove the most effective when dealing with mental health disorders such as depression leading to overall psychological benefits.

Although the study conducted by Lambert, Fincham, and Stillman (2012) revealed correlations between gratitude and depressive symptoms, they used questionnaires to assess these symptoms. Questionnaires often lack in validity due to external factors such as social desirability and demand characteristics, therefore studies which examine uncontrollable factors such as neurotransmitters could prove more useful. In 2015 a study conducted by Fox, Kaplan, Damasio, and Damasio, found that certain regions of the brain were activated when experiencing gratitude. Fox et al had twenty-three participants in their final sample, the method was to induce the participants with feelings of gratitude through mimicking the events of the holocaust. The participants watched four, two-minute documentaries about different stages of the holocaust, rating on a scale 1 – 4 how grateful participants would feel in the holocaust victims' position. Data was not collected during this time, once the documentaries were over the participants had a stimulus exposed to them which related to one of the four stages, at this time researchers collected fMRI data. Researchers hypothesized that gratitude ratings would correlate with area specific brain activity, especially those regions of the brain associated with moral cognition, value judgement, and theory of mind. Results supported their hypothesis as fMRI scans revealed brain activity increased in the anterior cingulate cortex and medial prefrontal cortex, both areas are often linked with the traits mentioned above.

The relationship revealed due to this study uncovers that expressing gratitude could possibly have effects on brain activity. Even though we can't

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prove the effect of gratitude on neural correlates is either negative or positive this discovery supplies evidence gratitude does have a psychological effect opening potential gateways to further research. One major limitation of this study is the lack of ecological validity, as participants were only asked to imagine themselves within the situation and did not actually receive these 'gifts' themselves. On account of this we can't be sure how valid these results actually are, it is acceptable to assume the feelings of gratitude actually experienced by the holocaust survivors would have been a lot more intense than those imagined by the participants. In the final discussion Fox et al (2015) reached the conclusion gratitude improves moral cognition, value judgement, and theory of mind. These are all beneficial to the recipient therefore providing support for the argument experiencing gratitude does have psychological benefits.

A study completed by Zahn et al (2009) provided further supporting evidence when reviewing brain stimulation whilst inducing feelings of gratitude and social behaviour. Particularly in the mesolimbic reward pathways they predicted stimulation, they also hypothesised activation in the basal forebrain in affiliative rewards. The Zahn et al study revealed higher frequency of gratitude observed within the participants was directly linked with increased activity within the hypothalamus. It could be argued these results were due to individual differences, however no individual difference for anger/indignation was detected when the whole brain analysis was completed. Another study conducted by Zahn, Garrido, Moll, and Grafman (2014) found increase in proneness to gratitude directly correlated with increased grey matter volume within the right inferior temporal gyrus

and posteromedial cortices. Both studies give evidence for neural correlates being affected when an individual receives gratitude.

Although the studies mentioned above do provide supporting evidence for psychological benefits with gratitude linked with biology, most studies fail to recognise the possible social influencers that occur around us throughout day to day living. The following paragraphs will explore the prosocial behaviours and relationships which can be affected due to gratitude.

Everyday people are searching for new ways to improve their relationships, whether that be with a partner, friend, or family member, the importance of these interactions never alters. Which is why research is constantly carried out to find out ways in which we can help develop these relations. Gratitude is a fairly new prospect within the relationship department, however research has been carried out by Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, and Graham (2010) which investigates the possible change in perspective within a relationship when gratitude is expressed. The results from this study establish a clear correlation between increased communal strength in the relationship and expressing gratitude to a partner or close friend. Friendship networks can be extremely beneficial towards our mental well-being (Miething et al, 2016) thus improving psychological benefits. If gratitude therefore improves relationships, by extension we gain psychological benefits. However, similar to previously mentioned, research the study completed by Lambert et al (2010) their participants only consisted of college students, due to this we can not generalise these results to more diverse populations as their results only apply to a very specific group of people.

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Further studies have been completed in order to support the hypothesis that gratitude can help strengthen relationships. A study directed by Joel, Gordon, Impett, Macdonald, and Keltner (2013) investigated the possible increase in commitment when appreciation is expressed in a romantic partnership. Involving three studies interlinking experimental, longitudinal methods, and daily experience, they set out to test two hypotheses. Joel et al (2013) stated “ we hypothesized that people who perceive their partners as more invested will feel a sense of gratitude for their partners, which in turn will promote their own commitment to the relationship”. The final results of all three studies confirmed this assumption. Additional verification was provided by Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010).

Finally, in research carried out by Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, and Desteno (2012) they found support for gratitude facilitating behaviours that builds and strengthens relationships. Bartlett et al (2012) suggested “ These studies move us beyond gratitude’s known ability to facilitate prosocial reciprocity and begin to provide us with further evidence of gratitude’s positive behavioural impact on relationships.”

Pro-social behaviour is another element to be considered when discussing the possible psychological benefits of experiencing gratitude. Society as a collective may also lead to improvement in cognitive functioning as long as society is in consensus

(Harris, Barnier, and Sutton, 2012) which is why prosocial behaviour is such an imperative aspect. Much research has been carried out to explore gratitude’s effect on prosocial behaviour, a study carried out by Grant and

Gino (2010) conducted 4 experiments. In experiment one and two gratitude increased prosocial behaviour as well as maintaining it, additionally participants were more likely to help when asked a second time. Experiments three and four uncovered participants were more likely to persist longer when helping out without being asked. Amazingly in experiment one and two a simple show of appreciation more than doubled the chances of participants helping out a second time. Grant and Gino (2010) reporting “ from 25% to 55% and from 32% to 66%”. Though this research has proved useful it does have its limitations, like many other studies it doesn't consider the undesirable side of gratitude. Studies could include the investigation of the burden receiving thanks could hold, by making the helper feel pressured to assist even further than what is expected.

Due to the results from this experiment and more (Yost-Dubrow and Dunham 2018) we can assume gratitude does have the capacity to induce prosocial behaviour. This factor could be beneficial for society as well as the individual. From further research into prosocial behaviour and the direct correlation it has with well-being and happiness (Aknin, Broesch, Hamlin, and Van de Vondervoort, 2015) it is not implausible to accept gratitude leads to psychological welfare.

In 2015 a study completed by Oarga, Stavrova, and Fetchenhauer, hypothesised that “ The stronger the individual's belief in reciprocity, the lower the positive association between helping behavior and subjective well-being”. Using data from 23 countries they put this theory to a test. Their results suggested participants who help others were expected to have more life satisfaction than those who were less helpful. Another interesting <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-gratitude-in-our-life/>

discovery uncovered by this experiment is that participants who provided help to others without expecting anything in return also reported being more satisfied with their life than those who expected gifts of kindness to be reciprocated. Life satisfaction and psychological benefits will often come in conjunction with one another therefore this study is important to take into consideration when reviewing the overall effects of gratitude. An obvious weakness within this study is the method used to collect data, using a self-report is risky due to the high chances of social desirability especially in the countries where generosity is a social norm.

In conclusion, by examining the research stated in the above text it is a reasonable statement that gratitude almost certainly has a positive effect on psychological health. Biopsychology as a subject is very rooted in the nature side of psychology, thus is prone to only arguing one side of the nature-nurture debate. This is a concern when deliberating the research investigating biological effects of gratitude, however if social psychology is also considered it may give a balanced argument as society is embedded in the belief the way we are nurtured causes our behaviour. As we can see, both topics are at opposite ends of the psychology spectrum.

Most research conducted by bio-psychologists is lab based, due to this many of the studies lack in ecological validity, although social psychology is more likely to have high levels of ecological validity many of the research can't control for extraneous variables thus causing low validity in other areas.

Biopsychology and social psychology aren't the only areas to be considered when exploring this matter. Other areas to be taken into account include,

developmental psychology, individual differences, and cognitive psychology. Not including these in a final conclusion would be reductive and reduce overall validity.

Gratitude can have both negative and positive effects, despite research predominately focusing on potential positives it would make sense to investigate the burden receiving gratitude can have (Stomski, Morrison, Sealey, Skeffington, and O'Brien, 2018). It has been previously discussed showing appreciation may make the helper feel pressured to assist further.

Therefore, despite the relentless research into the psychological benefits of gratitude through biopsychology and social psychology, the subject is far too broad to reach a definitive conclusion without studying all psychological perspectives.