

Gratitude the parent
of all virtues



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Everyone indeed has experienced receiving gifts, favors or benefits. How does it feel? Certainly, the common emotion that one feels is the feeling of being thankful or grateful. But on the other hand, one might also feel indebted. Thus, through this study, a deeper understanding will be grasp to understand every part of the emotion gratitude: what is gratitude, how is gratitude experienced, the difference between gratitude and indebtedness, its impact to the people and limitations. Gratitude is one common emotion to aid (Gallup, 1998). According to Emmons & Crumpler, (2000) it is an emotion evident in all cultures and is a virtue encouraged by all of the major religions of the world. The importance of gratitude has been taught by several world religions (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). But it has been largely neglected in the field of psychological science until the 21st century despite the fact that it is believed by many thinkers in various disciplines from Western social theorists Seneca and Cicero to Adam Smith and David Hume, to modern social scientists Robert Frank and Robert Trivers, that this emotion is essential for building and preserving social relationships (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006 & McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008) and has been marked " not only the best, but the parent of all other virtues" (Cicero, 1851 p. 139).

Gratitude in theological aspect is defined as the affirmation of a bond between giver and receiver, which is central to the human divine relationship (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). This means that when one experience gratitude, it signifies that a relationship exists between the benefactor and the receiver. In New Webster Dictionary (2002), it is defined as a feeling of appreciation for a kindness or favor received. Psychologists on the other hand typically define gratitude as a positive emotion (Tsang, 2006). Being a

positive emotion means that it encourages people to engage in cognitive and behavioral activities that will build resources that will become useful during threatening, and challenging situations (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). It has also been acknowledged as a moderately pleasant emotion (Mayer et al., 1991) but it is different from plain happiness since gratitude generally goes with the perception that one has benefited from another person's generosity. Although it is generally accepted that expressing gratitude brings great happiness (Gallup, 1998). Experiencing Gratitude Gratitude as described by Emmons and Crumpler (2000) is " an emotional response to a gift" (p. 56), adding that it is an interpersonal emotion that is felt not toward oneself but toward other people. But gratitude does not solely occur after a gift is given, as various researches have shown, the benefactor, the recipient and the gifts affect such experience. In Heider's theory of gratitude, it states that the beneficiary would encounter less gratitude in situations where the benefactor would obliged the beneficiary to be grateful, because the beneficiary prefers to infer their gratitude to be self-motivated, rather than controlled by external sources (Watkins et al., 2006). Hence, if a return favor is expected, a feeling of gratefulness declines. Individuals also experience gratitude when they see a benefit was caused by the efforts of others (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979; Zaleski, 1988), and also when they are able to recognize appropriately the effort of others as the cause of another person's gratitude (Weiner et al., 1979). On the other hand, providing intentionally valued benefits, as perceived by the recipients, create greater feelings of gratitude (Tsang, 2007). Similar to it, Emmons and McCullough, (2003) stressed on the personal benefit received by the individual that was not deserved or earned, but because of the good intentions of another.

These benefits whether intentionally provided, costly to the benefactor, and or valuable to the recipient helped increase the amount of gratitude one may experience (Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968). Benefits that are seen to be costly to the benefactor bring forth a larger sense of gratefulness, as long as the benefactor does not have a need for personal benefit on the first place (Okamoto & Robinson, 1997). Likewise, people are also seen to expect feeling more grateful to friends, associates or acquaintances, and strangers who benefit them than to genetic relatives (e. g. siblings & parents) who provided the same benefit (Bar-Tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg, & Hermon, 1977).

Gratitude versus Indebtness In the beginning of this review, it is stated that obtaining benefits does not always result to gratefulness. Sometimes individuals react negatively, for instance compelled to repay. In the earlier writings of Greenberg, he treated gratitude and indebtedness as synonymous (Greenberg, 1980). As such, people often use interchangeably the phrases “ I’m grateful to you” (gratitude-related) and “ I owe you one” (obligation-related). However, these two constructs are different and have distinct psychological effects (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Greenberg (1980) defined indebtedness as “ a state of obligation to repay another” and is an emotional state of “ arousal and discomfort” (p. 4). A study of Watkins, Sheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts (2006) discovered that when benefactors assist them with an obvious expectation of a return favor, individuals felt indebted and obligated, but not grateful. This implies that the greater the recipient’s gratitude for a benefit, the greater it is for the individual to aid, praise, and be near to their benefactor. On the contrary, the greater the recipient’s indebtedness, the greater it will generate distress and desire to shun away

from the benefactor, thus, an important distinction between the two is that indebtedness is an emotion of exchange, whereas gratitude is not (Watkins et al., 2006). Furthermore, indebtedness is accompanied by negative emotions, whereas gratitude is a positively valenced emotion (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; Mayer et al., 1991). This is supported by another research study of Watkins et al., (2006) where participants were asked how they would respond to the favors received after reading a scenario on gratitude. They found out that gratitude was strongly associated with gladness while indebtedness was significantly correlated with guilt. Another, indebtedness has been found to be coupled with self-reported avoidance motivations, where gratitude is associated with prosocial motivations (Gray et al., 2001). This premise will be further elaborated under the impact of gratitude to the people. Also, from Fredrickson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions to gratitude, gratitude should have broad and creative thought or action tendencies similar to positive emotions, whereas indebtedness should be associated with a more narrowed mentality of reciprocity (Fredrickson, 2004), a moral code stating that "(1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them" (Gouldner, 1960, p. 171). Taken together, it confirms that gratitude and indebtedness are truly two different concepts.

Impact of Gratitude Being able to distinguish the difference between gratitude and indebtedness, it is good to consider the importance of gratitude to human beings. How it can affect the lives and behaviors of the individuals, both the receiver and the addressee. In field experiments, it revealed that expressions of gratitude can reinforce kidney donation (Bernstein & Simmons, 1974), and volunteering behavior toward people with HIV/AIDS (Bennett, Ross, & Sunderland, 1996). By these findings,

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it indicates that gratitude can create, nurture, and sustain positive social relationships. In another experimental work, Watkins, Grimm, & Kolts (2004) conducted a memory recall of grateful persons, and found out that gratitude was positively correlated with a positive autobiographical memory bias. Specifically, grateful individuals tend to recall more positive memories when told to do so and moreover, tend to have more positive memories come to mind even when they are attempting to remember negative events. In addition, Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that first, individuals who were tasked to remember the things they were grateful for, provide a wide variety of emotional benefits such as contentment in life and optimism. Second, these recollections of events assist one in coping with stressful events. By these findings, the tendency to recall positive happenings would likely enhance one's judgment of their satisfaction with life (Schwartz & Clore, 1983; Strack, Shwartz, & Gschneidinger, 1985), and promote subjective well-being (Watkins, in press). This is also supported by a three experimental, longitudinal studies that showed that when participants are manipulated into focusing on the good side of their lives for how many weeks, there are considerable improvements on happiness, depression, and even physical health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Hence, the emotion gratitude improves the current psychological as well as the physical well-being of an individual. As a whole, these studies showed proof to the notion that gratitude helps one to reframe negative emotional memories by decreasing one's aversive impact on them (Watkins, Grimm, & Kolts, 2004). Aside from the findings that gratitude enables one to remember positive events in one's life and enhances the individual's psychological and physical

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condition, it as well facilitates the person's coping strategies. Wood, Joseph, and Linley (2007) made a study on whether gratitude was linked with distinct coping styles. They discovered that grateful people were more likely to search for emotional and instrumental social support as their means of coping. In addition, grateful people generally used more positive coping strategies that are largely characterized by approaching the problems rather than avoiding them such as self-blame, denial, and substance abuse. For these results, generally gratitude is related to positive coping strategies involving facing the problems instead of withdrawal tendencies.

Furthermore, recent research has shown that individuals who habitually experience gratitude engage more frequently in prosocial behavior than do individuals who experience gratitude less often (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). According to McCullough et al, (2001) gratitude possesses three psychological features that are significant in processing and responding to prosocial behavior. First, gratitude as a benefit detector. It alerts or signals that one has benefited from another's benevolent actions. Tsang (2006a) discovered that participants felt more grateful toward benefactors who lend them a hand out of kindness rather than self-serving motives. Second, gratitude acts as a motivator of prosocial behavior. It motivates an individual to behave in a benevolent and prosocial way after receiving benefits. Modern research has confirmed this from Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) when they found that grateful participants tend to exert more effort in helping their benefactor on an unrelated task (e. g. answering a cognitively & boring survey) compared to the nongrateful participants. Furthermore, a study done by Tsang (2006b) compared the likelihood of gratefulness to benefits given intentionally and by chance alone. It was

found that not only people felt more grateful when they received the benefits that were intentionally given by their partner, but were also more likely to act openhandedly for their partner in response, than those people who received the benefits by chance. Gratitude may motivate prosocial behavior by influencing the psychological states that support generosity and cooperation. In simpler terms, gratitude leads an individual to give other people a credit for their accomplishments (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Third, gratitude plays the role of a moral reinforcer. Expressing gratitude to a benefactor such as saying "thanks" functions as a social reward (Polak, Michael, & McCullough, 2006) and therefore increase the probability that benefactors will act prosocially once more in the future (McCullough et al., 2001), just as showing ingratitude can instill anger and resentment in benefactors and inhibit future acts of kindness (Buno & McCullough, 2006). McCullough and colleagues (2001) concluded that benefactors who were given appreciation or being thanked were willing to perform more and work harder than were the benefactors who were not thanked, when future opportunities take place. In other words, expressing gratitude acknowledges the benefactor's benevolent act and thus, may encourage the benefactor to do similar deed when future events come.

Limitations Research on gratitude has been recently growing (Emmons, 2004). Many of these studies make use of recall methodology or self-report measures, and gratitude scenarios. Utilizing such methods has some drawbacks. Taking first into account the recall methodology, there is a likelihood that participants would possibly have altered or reconstructed their memories and thus, elicit either a genuine or fake gratitude. Other

limitation also is that of a positive memory bias. Asking participants to recollect both positive and negative events in their life does not necessarily show that the participants would exhibit a similar bias if not asked to do so (Watkins, Grimm, & Kolts, 2004). In other words, do grateful people more likely to count their blessings even if not told to do so? And does the experience of gratitude plays a role in remembering positive happenings or does recalling of positive happenings elicit gratefulness? Further limitation also is utilizing gratitude scenarios. Gratitude scenarios do not essentially stimulate grateful emotions. Moreover, participants may respond basing on their personal theories in gratitude (Weinar et al., 1979) than stating their authentic grateful emotions. In simpler terms, scenario method addresses on the cognition of the individuals rather than on the affective state. Overall, these methods have potentially low psychological realism and tend to elicit low cost responses (Hegtvedt, 1990).

Additionally, the genders of the participants have an effect on the studies too. In a study of Kashdan et al, (2009) on gender differences in gratitude, they assessed whether men comprehend and respond to gratitude differently than women. They found out that men view gratitude as more challenging, anxiety provoking, and burdensome; and women possess greater willingness to openly express emotions and view this as an effective regulatory act. Therefore, as much as possible future research on gratitude must have an equal number of male and female respondents. Finally, most experiments' population is culturally limited. The results obtained on gratitude may perhaps not extend to the people from different cultures.

Conclusion

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As noted by Seligman (1998)“ Sadly, while plumbing the depths of what is worst in life, psychology has lost its connection to the positive side of life- the knowledge about what makes human life most worth living, most fulfilling, most enjoyable, and most productive” (p. 4). Therefore, positive emotional states deserve attention because positive states are perceived as essential for a fulfilled life. Thus, psychological research on gratitude has evoked that gratitude holds one of the main correlations with well-being, of almost any personality characteristic (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Moreover, research exploring on the ‘ parent of all virtues’ has progressively revealed the power of gratitude in drawing out positive results to individuals and benefactors. Finally, taking the words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1967):

” In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich”. Hence, gratitude is indisputably the parent of all virtues.