

UNDERSTANDING GRATITUDE: STARTING FROM ITS CONCEPTUALISATIONS

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Abstract

The study of gratitude has been started since decades ago. This single word “gratitude” has been defined in many different ways. Apparently, this is rather confusing for new researchers to understand gratitude from diverse perspectives. Therefore, this paper aims to simplify the conceptualisations and measurements of gratitude. Originally, the conceptualisation of gratitude is based on the perception that gratefulness can be triggered from a positive gain that is due to the good deed of another person. Nonetheless, other researchers conceptualised gratitude as an affective trait, attitude, moral affect, emotion, mood, and life orientation. The present paper has included extensive discussion of different conceptualisation. The similarity and differences of those conceptualisations were also reviewed. In conclusion, this paper could serve as a guideline for researchers who are interested in the study of gratitude, and serve as a reference for novice who are just getting started to explore in the field of gratitude research.

Keywords: *Positive psychology, grateful, defining gratitude, introduction to gratitude, concepts of gratitude*

INTRODUCTION

The study of gratitude has been started since decades ago. The word “gratitude” has been defined in variety of different ways. Indeed, this is rather confusing for new researchers to understand gratitude from diverse perspectives. Therefore, this paper aims to discuss and simplify the conceptualisations of gratitude. By doing so, the new researchers could look at the similarities and differences of gratitude’s conceptualisations and make correct decision to apply the conceptualisation that closely related to the objective of their study.

Original conceptualisation of gratitude

According to Pruyser (1976), the word “gratitude” is derived from the root word of Latin, *gratia*. The words that derived from the Latin *gratia* (e.g., gratitude, gratefulness, grace, and graciousness) carrying the meaning of gifts, kind-heartedness, generousness, the loveliness of giving and getting something, or “reap without sowing” (Pruyser, 1976). Originally, the conceptualisation of gratitude is based on the view that gratefulness can be triggered from getting

a personal benefit (which is not necessarily deserved) due to the kindness of others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). The personal benefit can be material (e.g., financial aid) or nonmaterial (e.g., emotional support, Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Looking from the definition of the original conceptualisation, the objects of gratitude appear to be restricted to human only. The latter studies eventually broadening the view and proved that objects of gratefulness not only can be human, it can also be non-human sources (e.g., God, animal, and cosmos), or impersonal (i.e., nature, Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Peterson and Seligman (2004) hold the similar views with Froh and colleagues (2008) and conceptualised gratitude as individuals' sense of gratefulness when they are obtaining a gift, either it is in the form of tangible aid from others, or an enjoyable and peaceful moment that aroused by the beautiful environment surrounding them. Nevertheless, many researchers or psychologist conceptualised gratitude in variety of different and appealing ways. For example, they conceptualised gratitude as an affective trait, attitude, moral affect, emotion, mood, and life orientation.

OTHER CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF GRATITUDE

Affective Trait

Some researchers conceptualised gratitude as an affective trait (e.g., Chan, 2013; Chen, Chen, & Tsai, 2012; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Affective trait means the likelihood of individuals to experience a particular emotion (Watkins et al., 2003). Hence, the affective trait of gratitude could be the predisposition to experience gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003), or some other call it as grateful disposition (McCullough et al., 2002). Gratitude disposition has been defined as one's general tendency to acknowledge and express thankful emotion to others for own positive gain or experiences (McCullough et al., 2002). Besides, people with high grateful disposition or traits are more likely to experience gratitude in their daily interaction (Chen et al., 2012). In sum, individuals with high grateful disposition are having the higher tendency and likelihood to experience gratefulness and express gratitude to others for their contribution (Chan, 2013).

According to McCullough and colleagues (2002), there are four facets of grateful disposition; namely, intensity, frequency, span, and density. First, the individuals who are higher in grateful disposition are expected to feel grateful more intensely (*intensity*). Furthermore, their gratitude could be easily triggered even by trivial matters and they would report feeling grateful frequently (*frequency*). In addition, the individuals who are higher in grateful disposition are expected to feel grateful to many life events (*span*). For instance, they would gratitude for their accomplishment, families, stability in their job, life condition, and many more. Last, the dispositionally grateful individuals would thankful to more of persons or objects for one positive event in their life (*density*). For example, they are gratitude to God, families, friends, course mates, and educators for getting a distinct award in university.

Furthermore, Watkins and colleagues (2003) also conceptualised gratitude as an affective trait. According to their research, there are three characteristics of individuals with high gratefulness. First, they will be having *sense of abundance*. In other words, they focus on what they are having and not likely to feel deprived. Second, grateful individuals are more likely to *appreciate the simple pleasure* that readily exists in their life, like enjoying beautiful sceneries. Third, grateful individuals would *appreciate contribution of others to their well-being*. Other than that, they also score higher in the internal locus of control than their less grateful counterparts. This suggested that they believe they are the one who taking control for own successfulness. In other words, other than appreciate others' contribution, grateful individuals also take appropriate acknowledgment to own effort in their achievement (Watkins et al., 2003).

Attitude

Watkins, Grimm, and Kolts (2004) supported Watkins and colleagues' (2003) categorization of the three characteristics of grateful disposition. However, they viewed gratitude as an attitude. They defined gratitude as the attitude of appreciating life and able to acknowledge the significance to express the appreciation. Moreover, their study found that individuals with high grateful disposition tend to have positive memory bias. For instance, grateful individuals not only tend to recall more positive events when they are instructed to do so, they are also tend to recall more positive events even when they are instructed to recall negative events. In sum, Watkins and colleagues (2004) concluded that individuals with high grateful disposition having the capability to recall more positive events than negative events. Their finding also showed that the grateful individuals' memories giving more positive emotional impact on them as compared to the memories of their less grateful counterparts.

Moral Affect

McCullough and colleagues (2001) reviewed variety of theories that could use to discuss and conceptualise gratitude, then incorporated those theories and refer gratitude as a moral affect. They stated that gratitude is a reaction to moral behaviours, and also a stimulator for moral behaviours. In other words, gratitude is resulting from a moral behaviour of others to us, and is an encouragement for moral behaviours in future.

Specifically, McCullough et al. (2001) theorised that gratitude has three specific moral functions, which are moral barometer, moral motive, and moral reinforcer. First, *moral barometer* means gratitude is an emotional reaction to someone's good deeds to us. McCullough and colleagues hypothesised that individuals are most likely to feel grateful when (a) the obtained benefit is valuable; (b) the benefactor pay high effort or cost in helping them; (c) the benefactor intentionally (rather than unintentionally) pay high effort and cost in helping them; and (d) the benefactor's help is not an obliged duty of the benefactor. For example, imagine that our car breakdown halfway on the road, a stranger stops and help us to figure out the problem of the car, and finally get it fixed. In this case, gratitude is our emotional reaction to that stranger—who sacrifice his time and energy in helping us.

Second, *moral motive* means gratitude could motivate someone who had been received help from a benefactor to be reciprocally unselfish to the benefactor (or even an unrelated third party) in the future. In addition, they also posited that individuals who grateful for the help of benefactor are more likely to restrain negative acts toward the benefactor. Taking the abovementioned example, we feel grateful for the stranger's help in fixing our car, and our gratefulness could drive us to help the stranger (or oven others) if they need any help in future. This is viewed as individuals' motivation to reciprocate prosocial behaviour to their benefactor.

Third, *moral reinforcer* means gratitude serve as a reinforcer for benefactor to behave prosocially again in future after the beneficiary express gratitude to him or her. The gratitude expression could be a simple "thank you", or recognition and appreciation for the benefactor's aid. Taking the example above, we say thanks to the stranger who helped us when our car breakdown, this could strengthen the tendency of the stranger to help us again in future. The reason is because individuals prefer to be appreciated by social, and this reinforces them to behave prosocially again in future.

Emotion

In fact, the abovementioned conceptualisations of gratitude (i.e., affective trait, attitude, and moral affect) are closely related to emotion. This is because the experiences of gratitude in conceptualisations above were explained as an emotion. However, the abovementioned conceptualisations use the word "emotion" as the way to explain the experiences of gratefulness, but emotion is not the core focus in those conceptualisations. Specifically, the conceptualisations above focus more in the nature of gratitude (e.g., as a disposition— affective trait, or attitude) and function of gratitude (e.g., moral affect); but the present conceptualisation of gratitude is based on state of gratitude (i.e., emotion). In spite of the differences in describing gratitude, the researchers in aforementioned studies appeared to agree that gratitude is an emotional experience.

Particularly, the researchers (e.g., Chan, 2013; Froh et al., 2008; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012) who conceptualised gratitude as an emotion defined that gratitude is an attribution-dependent state that recognising (a) one has gained a benefit; and (b) there is an external sources for this benefit. In a nutshell, gratitude is an emotional state that enabling individuals to acknowledge that they are getting a benefit which is due to some external sources.

In fact, this conceptualisation is having some similarity with external attribution of success. External attribution means attributing positive outcome in own live to other people or sources (Bono, 2013). According to Weiner, Russell, and Lerman (1979), thankfulness and gratitude is related to external attribution. Their study was supported by Zaleski's study in 1988 which found that gratitude is related to external attribution of success. In conclusion, the experience of gratitude emotion will be triggered when individuals believe that there is an external source which contributes to their accomplishment.

Mood

Despite vast number of studies supported that gratitude is an emotion, McCullough, Tsang, and Emmons (2004) asserted that gratitude should be conceptualised as a mood rather than emotion. McCullough and colleagues agreed that “moods are subtle and less accessible to conscious awareness than are emotions” (p.296). This means individuals are more likely to aware of their gratefulness as an emotion rather than mood. However, they argued that long duration of moods could have broader and widespread effects on consciousness. Emotions could not have this effect as it last in a shorter duration.

McCullough and colleagues (2004) believed that mood (which last longer) having the ability to allow the gratitude mood to control one’s information processing, physiological reactivity, and other psychological phenomena over a longer period. In addition, they posited that gratitude mood (but not emotion) caused the social and psychological effects of gratitude. For instance, someone is willing to help his or her friend (i.e., social effect of gratitude), or someone is having a better way to cope with stress (i.e., psychological effect of gratitude). These processes required a longer period to process the information and eventually make these decisions (i.e., to help one’s friend and to cope with stress in better way). Thus, McCullough and colleagues argued that the duration of emotions is too short to involve in these complex processes. In conclusion, they suggested the researchers to understand how gratitude brings effect on one’s social and psychological lives, particularly as a mood.

Life Orientation

Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) reviewed the conceptualisations of gratitude from different perspectives (e.g., emotion and affective trait). They argued that the conceptualisation of gratitude as emotion fails to comprehensively capture many aspects of the life that could be the sources of one’s gratefulness. This is because the conceptualisation (i.e., gratitude as emotion) always directed to thankfulness for the help of others.

Indeed, some respondents from the studies done by Emmons and McCullough (2003) stated no one as the source of gratitude (e.g., “waking up this morning”, p.379), which implied that appreciation to life could trigger one’s gratitude. Besides, Watkins and colleagues (2003) also proved that appreciating simple enjoyment (e.g., enjoying beautiful nature) could make one gratitude. Moreover, the study done by Graham and Barker (1990) implied that appreciation towards own ability somehow could trigger gratitude to some extent. Watkins and colleagues’ (2003) study also support Graham and Barker’s finding by indicated that grateful individuals also appreciate own ability for their achievement.

In addition, the studies by Emmons and McCullough (2003) and Watkins et al. (2003) showed that divine could be a source of gratitude as well. In sum, these studies could be supported by Froh and colleagues (2008) who stated that the sources of gratitude can be human, non-human (e.g., God), or impersonal (e.g., nature). Hence, gratitude is not only can be studied by looking at interpersonal appreciation of others’ help, but it also can be comprehend in wide variety of directions. On the other hand, Wood and colleagues (2010) agreed that gratitude could be

conceptualised as an affective trait (i.e., gratitude disposition). The general definition for affective trait of gratitude is predisposition to experience gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003). Nevertheless, Wood and colleagues defined gratitude in a broader way. They stated that at disposition level, gratitude is an element of life orientation that enabling one to *notice* and *appreciate* the positive aspects in the world.

Therefore, by integrating the definition by Wood et al. (2010) with three characteristics of grateful individuals by Watkins and colleagues (2003) and four facets of grateful disposition by McCullough and colleagues (2002), grateful individuals are more likely to: (a) focus on what they have (i.e., *sense of abundance*); (b) frequently notice positive aspects in their life (i.e., *frequency, notice*); (c) feel intensely grateful for those positive aspects (i.e., *intensity*); (d) grateful for many aspects in their life (i.e., *span*); (e) grateful to wide variety of sources (i.e., *appreciate contribution of others to own well-being, density*); and (f) able to appreciate the positive aspects as well as sources related to those aspects (i.e., *appreciate simple pleasure, appreciate*). In conclusion, the life orientation conceptualisation of gratitude is indeed comprehensive and rather flexible to define gratitude in a concise way.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Gratitude is a broad topic to be discussed and studied. The overview of the conceptualisations in gratitude could only serve as a stepping stone towards the long journey in studying gratitude. Gratitude is indeed a virtue within an individual. Many studies proved that gratitude is related to positive life experiences like optimism (Froh et al., 2009), higher subjective well-being (Watkins et al., 2003), feeling proud, hopeful, inspired, excited (Froh et al., 2009), happy, thankful, and contented (Watkins et al., 2003), experience fewer symptoms of physical illness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2009), spend more time to exercise, sleep more hours every night, and having good quality of sleep (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), as well as motivated to behave prosocially (Froh et al., 2009).

The information in this paper could serve as a guideline for novice researchers to understand more about gratitude. The discussion and summarisation in this paper could give a clearer picture and idea to the new researcher regarding different conceptualisations of gratitude. In conclusion, the researchers are advice to do more review in the conceptualisations of gratitude before deciding which conceptualisation to apply in the study. The conceptualisation applied must be in line with the objective of the study.

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