The Lack of Gratitude’s Practice in a Hyper Individualist, Hyper Consumer, and Hyper Technologized Society

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Abstract

This paper proposes to identify the gratitude practice of a group of 40 master students at Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, young people that have been raised in a society dominated by capitalist values: individualism, consume, competition, efficiency, and financial power. Research objectives have followed to analyse the gratitude level for their lives, to the investigated master students, to identify the important persons from their lives and the changes determined by the exercise of Gratitude Journal. Content analyse of the journals demonstrated the lack of gratitude practice of master students, their focus on negative aspects of their lives, the limited number of persons their feel gratitude for, the negative perception on today society, but also positive changes in their lives as a consequence of the exercise of Gratitude Journal completion (reflections considering their own live, the important persons and the importance of spending time with family, the satisfaction for making charitable activities).

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1. Introduction

In a hyper individualist, hyper consumer, and hyper technologized society, young people and adolescents learn to believe that the individual and the individualism are fundamental reference points for the world, that them represent the reason for decisions and aspirations. Everything is happening around, life models from mass media, their own

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experiences demonstrate to the adolescents and young people that they have to manage their lives alone, to impose (with tenacity, and also aggressiveness) in order to have social success or to use any means to reach their objectives, desires, dreams. Interests about choosing the school, professional and socio-economic route are priorities, in spite of the concern for the human relations quality, for emotions, for admiration and gratitude for the close persons of their lives.

Competition and celebrity culture influence today adolescents and young people to excessively concentrate on success. Many of them make applications for at least two faculties for different reasons: to be the best, to have a certain “image” in the society, to deal with social conveniences, to have a high socio-economic status. The adolescent (and his/her parents) pay attention to the status and prestige of the university, to the qualification that they intend to obtain, to the financial perspective of future job, and less to the educational values (curriculum, competences, values and attitudes).

Unfortunately, today more than ever, the universities are not always proud about the candidates’ basic competences (for the specialization they are opting for), but still we can observe a powerful willing of young generation to get diplomas. After graduation, the option for master degree is almost compulsory. The obsession for universities, classes, profession, as a condition for better financial possibilities, contrasts with the joy for living, for relationships, for giving love, patience, help, and time for the other human beings. As Plevu (2011, p. 8) commented, “we are developed and precarious. It is striking, for example, the disappearance almost complete of some essential issues from the horizon of our interrogation and reflection.” More, “we are contaminated by a career and gain’s wildness that disfigures us. The rhythm of everyday life do not either spare the interior peace” (Plevu, 2011, p. 55). Unfortunately, the reflection of adolescents/young people on own life is replaced by a barbarian emotivism, and an excessive preoccupation for material gains.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, in his work “Rationalization of the education”, Max Weber identified the new orientation of rational education which was focused on developing more the “the specialist” and less the old type, “the cultural man”. Later, in 1972, S. Bowles, in his work “Unequal Education and the Reproduction of the Social Division of Labour”, enunciated the idea that the capitalism have wicked the role of the family and the church and diminished their roles as socialization factors, and causing the growth of geographical mobility of all the segments of a family with consequences on the internal connections of the extended family. The effects of all these social changes could be seen in the personality profile of nowadays young people which, without the emotional support of their families, without the cultural roots offered by traditional family, become easily influenced by the educational contexts offered by the modern educator with great impact: mass media (and the “models” that this institution proposes).

As a paradox, in a society that, theoretically, promotes the respect for the individuality and the necessity to create the contexts for optimal development of every individual), we still recognize the effects of a bureaucratic educational system. As the promoters (see L. Althusser) of the model of the institutional repression consider, the educational system induce the conformism conduits to the people by using mechanisms that limit children’s spontaneity and creativity.

All these aspects worry us, especially when thinking that today adolescents are parts of the tomorrow society, and its quality depends on the values young people internalized and put into practice.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. General aim and objectives of present research

The idea of present research has started from the experiment of doctor Robert Emmons from Davis University, California which has asked the students to complete a Gratitude Journal, for 10 weeks; every week, the students had to write 5 events for which they were grateful. The results have been surprisingly: 25% of students were happier, more faithful in their lives, and even get less ill during the experiment. Then, Robert Emmons repeated the study, but this time, the students have been asked to fill in their Gratitude Journal every day for 2 weeks. In order to evaluate the state of the participants, he has sent questionnaires to students’ friends, which have noticed that the subjects of the experiment have become more involved for helping and morally supporting the others. In fact, Robert Emmons has demonstrated that our genetic structure could be consciously controlled; forcing the students to
focus on positive things from everyday life, he made them to escape from the track of the routine (Bronson & Merryman, 2011, pp. 222-225).

We have taken the idea of *Gratitude Journal* and used it as homework, but our purpose was not to evaluate the psychological state of our students during or to the end of the experiment. Our purpose was a sociological one, that to identify if our subjects use the gratitude practice, considering that they have been raised in a society that have oriented them since childhood to a capitalist values system, which focused on individualism, efficiency and financial power.

2.2. Participants and research methods

In order to accomplish our objectives, we have involved 40 master students form Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti (with different specializations), enrolled in the psycho-pedagogic module, second level (this module allow them to become teachers in secondary education). For two months, during the university year 2014-2015, our subjects have filled in, as homework, their Gratitude Journals.

The content analysis of every journal completed by the students has focused the following units:

- The gratitude level the adolescents/ young people have for their life and for what they are;
- What are the persons that they consider important for what they became and for which they feel gratitude;
- Changes determined by the reflection induced when filling in the Gratitude Journal.

3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

3.1. The level of young people’s consciousness about their lack of gratitude practice

An important result of our study was that our master students have realised that they are focusing more on the negative than on the positive aspects of their lives, forgetting to be grateful for what they have and what they are in the present:

“We are used to see only the empty side of the glass, to complain for what is missing from our lives and to ignore what we already have. We are not capable to fully live our lives, to enjoy and keep our health. We have chaotic life style and we are not having control on our lives.”

“We are all the time unsatisfied for our life and for our living conditions, for what we are and for what we do. It seems that everything is going wrong. We practically are blocked on negative events, forgetting to be grateful to the dear persons from our lives. We are waiting for a change…”

“I think that I have brought so many things that are not necessarily. The money that I have spent, I could have done to someone that really needed them, but I haven’t done that.”

“Often we are complaining that we have no money to buy clothes or jewelries, while other people have no money to buy food to survive.”

“Unfortunately, we are too occupied to buy things, and we are neglecting the important things of our lives, the essence of life which consists in spiritual acquisitions through good behaviour and appreciation for the important people from our lives.”

We could notice in their self-description negative traits specific to our society: selfish, pragmatism, possession need, irrational wasting, “Xerox behaviour” (Paraschivescu, 2013). These results are in concordance with the one mentioned by doctor Jeffrey Froh, Psychology Professor to the Hofstra University, Long Island, which have been shocked by the excessive materialism and exaggerated sense of possession of young people (Bronson & Merryman, 2011, p. 225).

Also frequently in our students’ journals are appreciations considering generous and altruist people that are offering money to the poor ones, master students do not express their intention to change themselves, to give, to put in practice their thoughts:

“We are often impressed by the people that offer money to the poor ones. I wonder if I’ll be able to give a thing that I like for charity. I don’t’ know yet, I have to think about that”.
What is also remarkable in our students' answers is that they are frequently using personal pronoun “we” instead of “I”, who could be interpreted as lack of maturity, of self-opinion / self-convictions, well defined references and values on our investigated young people.

3.2. The presence of a small number of important persons that they are grateful for (and teachers are excluded)

About the important persons from their lives that master students are grateful to, we have to notice that their number is small, and, surprisingly for us, teachers are not mentioned as important persons. Only one student from our sample expressed her gratitude to her English teacher:

“When my English teacher gave me a small mark, this motivated me to be more determined to be better, to learn in order to pass the exam for the faculty, specialization Philology (Romanian – English) and I am grateful for that”.

It seems that the teachers do not succeed to influence students. On the one hand, mass media systematically denigrated the image and the status of today teacher; on the other hand, more teachers are already demotivated.

“Many teachers are motivated only by the security feeling that they have a job (that helps them to survive) and / or a certain feeling of power. For the most precarious and also the most evident understanding, to be a teacher means to meet the pupils, everyday confrontation with them, to teach (what the curricula impose), to examine, and to evaluate pupils’ performances” (Albu, p. 255).

We are glad to notice that on the first place in the hierarchy of important persons are parents, but, unfortunately, grandparents or other members of extended family are rarely mentioned:

“Family is the most important for me, and the moments spent with my parents couldn’t be compared with nothing else. I am grateful to God that we have a decent life and we are a peaceful family,”

“I am grateful to God for the family He gave me. We are not perfect, but we love and support each other.”

“I am grateful to my family which represents an engine of energy and human warm for me. I have been for weekend to the countryside, to my grandparents and I have felt a great joy. These family reunions make me feel myself and help me identifying with my family.”

Adolescents’ connections with extended family are fragile, although wanted, and are generating a lot of joy and contribute to building self-identity. Once again we noticed the consequences, the influences of individualist society which destroys family and society links.

The second place in the hierarchy of important persons is occupied by high school or faculty’s colleagues or Facebook friends:

“I am grateful for the sincerely admiration and respect that Lucia shows me, a friend that I met on Facebook.”

“I am grateful for the messages full of affection and sincerity that I get from Francesca, a good friend that I met on Facebook and which lives in Germany.”

It seems that the online relationship / communication is appreciated by adolescents and young people because it offers them things they need on their age: new friendships, the possibility to express unlimited, getting over timidity, development and recognition for their own personality.

3.3. Description of a dark image of Romanian society

From the content analysis of the students’ Gratitude Journals, we noticed that the society is illustrated by master students in dark terms:

“In nowadays society, the accent is almost always on getting a high social status, even if that asks for a sacrifice of family life. Sad truth is that today people are focus on career in spite of family.”

“Generally, I am disappointed about our society, about the lack of people education, about their lack of good behaviour. Every day I get sad to see so many poor people and baggers on the streets. Then I am terrified about the number of unemployed persons. What revolts me is the thought that politicians and business men live in their own world, a beautiful one, a luxury one and do not help the poor people.”

“It’s hard to see every day on buses that everyone is grey, sad, worried, with empty look. I prefer the colourful and joyful world of my pupils in the classroom. How is possible to be two worlds so different? The exterior one is grey, the interior one is colourful. I want to focus everyone attention. Is it possible that nobody see that?”
“I take the bus and see how pupils and young people are staying on the sits, and old people are standing up. We are proud that we live in a democratic country, but good sense does not exist anymore.”

We have noticed adolescent/young people’s tendency to show an unsatisfactory state, disappointment, even disillusion. They “wake up” in the capitalist era where social abnormality has taken place of traditional normality, in which it seems that everything is allowed (not to offer a sit to an old man in the bus, to give up on your job and become unemployed, to be envious about the luxury life of others etc.).

“Some people become obsessed about their own Ego: they are hallucinated about themselves, about their little (and big) ambitions, about their image” (Pleșu, 2011, p. 197), and forget to help the one in need, forget to be empathic, to be polite.

Only few sentences of the students in our sample have demonstrated their gratitude toward the country:

“I was watching TV and I have seen that in other countries the life of other people is really hard, and then I have realised how grateful I should be that in my country is peace”.

“After the TV show Discover Romania, I realised that we should be grateful for the wonderers of our country, a real show of image, and colour”.

3.4. Effects of reflection practice – revelations and changes during the exercise of the Gratitude Journal

Many studies indicated that grateful people are healthier, happier, and more optimistic than unsatisfied people. The more the people manifest gratitude to the people or things of their lives, the more they have a better physical and mental state. Although we didn’t want to evaluate in our research the psychic estate of our students, during the completion of the Gratitude Journal we have noticed a series of revelations and positive changes of them (in their mental, behavioural and attitudinal sphere). These have been also confirmed by some opinions:

“It was first time when I have completed such a journal and I am grateful for that. I never have had this kind of homework. I have never reflected on my life and I haven’t thought about the people that influenced me positively.”

“I have learned to appreciate more my family members and to spend more time with them. I was a perfectionist, but now I’m more flexible, sociable, and available.”

“I have started to notice more the things, the people around me and to think more to their needs and wishes.”

“I have started to do good things and I have realised that I like helping the others. The help that I gave them make me feel good, gave me satisfaction and happiness.”

Consequently, some of the positive changes that seemed to appear during the completion of the Gratitude Journal are: analysing their own lives, appreciating the family members, spending time with them, satisfaction due to generous behaviours.

4. Conclusions

The present research had started from the aim to identify the gratitude practice of master students that grow up in a hyper-individualist, hyper-consumer and hyper-technologised society.

An important finding of our study was that all master students have realised that they do not manifest the virtue/value of “gratitude”, but they are aware of the necessity of learning and applying it. Moreover, they recognized that they focus more on negative aspects of their lives and less on the positive ones. Still, completing the Gratitude Journal, the students of our sample have described a series of positive changes in their life: empathy, reflection on their own life, appreciation of family members, spending time with them, satisfaction due to generous behaviours.

Another finding is that master students are using in their personal description the plural “we” instead of “I” which could indicate more assumption of others’ opinions, reference points, and values and less their well-defined values and opinions. “Most do not manifest introspective valences and psychological openness for interpreting interpersonal relations. Many students do not know what they want for their own lives, what they want from themselves. They do not know how to act and interact with others; many do not trust (still) themselves or others” (Albu, 2009, p. 232).

Unfortunately, the number of persons that master students mentioned as deserving their admiration and gratitude is a small one and, surprisingly for us, teachers are usually not included in this category. It is true that lately, we
could see that teacher – student relationship is eroded concerning respect, stability, consistency, expectancy, durability and empathy. The teacher has no echo in pupils’ conduit and conscience; he/she has no more the power to influence (mentally, attitudinally, and behaviourally) the pupils’ generation, as he/she used to do in the past. It seems that teachers are demotivated and pupils have become immune to the educative influence. We believe that it is necessarily to deepen this theme because teachers have to find new elements, more attractive and practical in order to get back the prestige of the teaching profession. In a future research we also intend to investigate if the students which intend to become teachers (and this is their only option in concordance with their specialization) value more their former teachers as important persons from their lives.

Therefore, if we think to the school, socio-economic and cultural context in which these young people have been raised, we could find reasons to partially understand their lack of gratitude exercise. The New Romania, The Romania after 1989, as Radu Paraschivescu considers, has a lot of bugs, bad habits, defects (neurosis, bewilderment, confusion, suspicion, envy, slander, corruption, disillusionment, and aggressiveness). “Everyone is moving surrounded by rumours, allusions, gossips, insinuations, and accusations. Everyone could say anything anytime anyhow anywhere about anyone” (Paraschivescu, 2013, p. 247).

Many negative comments for Romanian appears also in the journals of the master students, which indicate the need for a society reform side by side with an individual reform concerning the process of re-learning some values / virtues that seems that have been lost (respect, sociability, generosity, dignity, politeness, empathy, altruism and gratitude).

References


