Gratitude's place in second wave positive psychology

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Positive psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning that aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to flourish (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It was the counter-movement against mainstream psychology that emphasized the shortcomings of individuals for years. Positive psychology turned to the potentials of individuals, not targeting at curing mental health problems. The main focus of positive psychology is on psychological concepts that make life worth living (Boniwell, 2008).

Second wave positive psychology (PP 2.0) evolved out of positive psychology due to the realization that solely focusing on the positive side of human nature did not do justice to the many facets of living a good and fulfilling life. To understand the complexity of the ups and downs of living, it is necessary to study the dynamic nature between the positives and the negatives. The main purpose of PP 2.0 is to bring out the best in individuals, not only in good times, but especially in times of adversity and suffering, considering both the bright side and dark side of human nature (Wong, 2011b). To establish a theoretical framework to support scientific research on PP 2.0, four pillars are thought to be vital for PP 2.0: virtue, meaning in life, resilience, and well-being (Wong, 2011a, 2015). These pillars have shown consistent scientific associations with good mental well-being and human thriving in elaborate research done by positive psychologists. The different pillars embody a moral component, acknowledges the centrality of meaning in life, includes the immense capability for resilience of individuals, and their enduring quest for well-being and happiness. These components help us to understand what is essential to make life better for individuals and society, in good and bad times, in the broadest psychological way (Wong, 2011a).

A positive psychology concept that has shown consistent positive effects on mental well-being and that can make a considerable contribution to human flourishing is gratitude. Positive psychology scientists view gratitude as a state and a trait. State gratitude is a complex positive emotion with an affective, a cognitive, and a social component that can emerge in both happy and stressful situations. Trait gratitude is defined as a general tendency to recognize all kinds of benefits in all kinds of situations, to experience sufficiency, and to acknowledge anything in the world, both human and non-human, with grateful emotion and expression of this emotion which promotes personal well-being and the well-being of others (Jans-Beken, 2018).

The aim of this essay is to explore how gratitude relates to the four pillars of PP 2.0 as proposed by Wong (2011a) and determine what place gratitude can have within PP 2.0. Does gratitude relate to all or just some of the pillars? All pillars will be discussed, explaining what the pillar encompasses and how gratitude relates to this pillar. This knowledge can add to the progression of PP 2.0 science, and counseling and clinical practice, helping individuals to thrive in both good and bad times.

Virtue

Virtues are core characteristics of humans that are valued across different cultures with different value orientations because of their moral foundation. They represent what is good and lacking virtues is considered bad (Leong & Wong, 2003). Virtues might be biologically grounded for evolutionary purposes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Specific behaviors and attitudes, that naturally surfaced in individuals, possibly benefited the community because they solved a survival problem at that moment. These individuals became preferred partners and through reproduction the specific behaviors and attitudes were inherited by their offspring. In this way the virtuous individuals survived and formed societies with different cultural virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Gratitude is a highly valued virtue in religion and spiritual thinking, and cultures all over the world because it is thought to be essential for a meaningful life. Gratitude maybe one of the virtues that have evolved because of survival benefits. Darwin (1889), in *The Descent of Man*, already referred to gratitude associated with evolution;

... for we are led by the hope of receiving good in return to perform acts of sympathetic kindness to others [emphasis added]; and sympathy is much strengthened by habit. In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend one another, it will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest, number of offspring (Darwin, 1889, p. 107).

According to this excerpt from Darwin's book, the reciprocal associations between being kind and hoping for good in return has been a flourishing interaction between members of societies that ensured mutual solidarity and meaningful connections.

Darwin's viewpoint corresponds with the broaden-and-build theory by Fredrickson (2004a) which provides an evolutionary framework on positive emotions, such as gratitude. The theory states that the central role of positive emotions in human experience is equally important as negative emotions of which we know that they narrow our attention to facilitate direct action towards a threat that might harm our existence. The broaden-and-build theory assumes that positive emotions tend to broaden our attention to facilitate more diverse thoughts and actions for exploration, relationships, and other life skills that are of indirect relevance for survival. This broadened thought-action repertoire can help to build personal resources that are useful when adversity strikes (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

The evolutionary value of the virtue gratitude is considered to be foremost the fostering of relationships that can function as valuable personal resources when hard times

strike (Fredrickson, 2004b). The broadening effects of gratitude include the encouragement of prosocial behavior toward and beyond benefactors, and creativity to express gratitude such as conveying love and appreciation. Gratitude improves the quality of reciprocity beyond simple ‘tit-for-tat’ interactions (Fredrickson, 2004a). These thought-action tendencies promote our personal well-being and that of others and supports forming enduring relationships and friendships through reciprocal responsiveness (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). The broadening effects of gratitude, thus, are thought to contribute to the development of valuable resources on the personal, social, and societal level (Fredrickson, 2004b), ultimately strengthening human resilience and sustaining mental well-being (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

However, when gratitude as a positive affect arises in social interaction, other proximal negative affects also arise such as indebtedness and guilt (Layous et al., 2017). Indebtedness and guilt are also related to social interaction and are, like gratitude, so-called social emotions. Indebtedness is the feeling that one is obliged to repay someone for something. When this emotion gets the upper hand, feeling grateful can be inhibited, although indebtedness also has a positive connotation as gratitude does (Solom, Watkins, McCurrach, & Scheibe, 2017). Guilt is a negative emotion as it arises because of feelings of failure, such as failing to say, do or give something to a benefactor. Although a negative emotion, it also supports the emotional bonding between individuals (Layous et al., 2017). In sum, the virtue gratitude is thought to function as an evolutionary core characteristic associated with social interaction by eliciting positive affect such as state gratitude and negative affect such as indebtedness and guilt to help build enduring relationships, necessary for immediate or future survival.

Meaning in life

Meaning in life, according to Frankl (1985), is the way to erase an existential vacuum. Individuals focus on the world around them and the individuals therein. By giving to others,

and serving a higher cause, individuals transcend themselves which is the essence of human existence (Frankl, 1985). Van Praag (2013) states that meaning is about the individual and being satisfied with the self and their life, about their environment and the others therein, and society as a whole. Meaning-making requires a certain amount of altruism, compassion and generosity (Van Praag, 2013). Wong (1989) defines meaning as “an individually constructed cognitive system, that is grounded in values and is capable of endowing life with personal significance and satisfaction” (Wong, 1989, p. 517).

When someone experiences meaning in life, it can support them when joyful or stressful life events occur. It can assist in coping with changes, overcoming fear or determining and achieving life goals. Besides these practical functionalities, meaning in life also has a philosophical or spiritual nature. It aids to understand ambivalence and dilemmas in life. Meaning in life provides the individual with a view on the larger whole, whether someone is religious or not. In what way meaning in life can contribute to life depends on the philosophical or spiritual view on life (Wong, 2012).

Meaning in life and gratitude both contribute to the feeling of belonging to the bigger picture (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Gratitude encompasses a continuum related to the nature of the benefit. At one end, there is state gratitude that arises due to a peak experience of a profound feeling of a connection with God, with the cosmos or with nature. This experience is called transpersonal gratitude as it is an experience beyond oneself (Steindl-Rast, 2004). At the other end of the gratitude continuum there is state gratitude felt after receiving a gift from another individual, so called interpersonal gratitude. The intrinsic value of interpersonal interaction is also important in being part of a larger whole (Wong, 2015). Gratitude can play a substantial role in meaningful relationships as reciprocity towards benefactors and upstream reciprocity towards others (Nowak & Roch, 2007) foster existing relationships and supports

forming new ones (Algoe, 2012). These interpersonal interactions and transpersonal experiences can both add to the feeling of being part of a larger whole.

Although interpersonal and transpersonal gratitude seem to add to the experience of meaning in life, research reporting about the association between gratitude and meaning in life is scant. Research that exists, shows positive associations with gratitude and meaning in life as a mediator for well-being and psychopathology (Datu & Mateo, 2015; Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2012; Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, & Riskind, 2013). Meaning in life and gratitude can both be related to joyful and stressful situations and their association might therefor be important to unravel in future research in light of PP 2.0.

Resilience

Resilience is the human capacity to having sufficient personal internal and external resources to cope with whatever life may bring and bounce back afterwards (Vieselmeyer, Holguin, & Mezulis, 2017). This coping relates to confronting, growing and even flourishing of individuals in the face of adversity (Meichenbaum, 2012). Previous research has consistently demonstrated that resilience is associated with preventing or attenuating mental health problems after adversity, and that secure attachment, experiencing positive affect and having a meaningful life purpose are important factors of resilience (Rutten et al., 2013).

Gratitude could be beneficial for all three factors of resilience. Grateful individuals are thought to be more inclined to seek social support (Wood et al., 2010). No research has been conducted looking into the role of gratitude in establishing secure attachment in newly formed relationships. However, drawing from the find-remind-bind theory of Algoe (2012) gratitude can play a vital role in forming and maintaining adult relationships. State gratitude seems to be evolved as a mechanism to fuel upward spirals of reciprocal behavior between individuals in important relationships of our daily lives. Secure and close relationships between

individuals are essential for well-being and resilience (Algoe, 2012). We can assume that being grateful can support the forming of secure attachment in adult relationships.

Gratitude can elicit positive affect, which is an important factor of resilience, in stressful situations. Research has shown that gratitude is associated with increased positive affect (Jans-Beken et al., 2018; Jans-Beken, Lataster, Leontjevas, & Jacobs, 2015) and reduced perceived stress (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012; Killen & Macaskill, 2015; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Also, grateful individuals are thought to appraise situations in more positive ways so that they will experience positive emotions more often (Wood et al., 2010). Several experiments with positive psychology interventions, including gratitude exercises, were able to increase resilience by increasing positive affect (Bird & Pincavage, 2016). By exercising gratitude, positive state gratitude is generated which can buffer against or attenuate negative affect, increasing resilience in the long run (Jans-Beken et al., 2018; Killen & Macaskill, 2015).

Gratitude is positively associated with purpose in life because it motivates individuals (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010) to contribute to life at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal level (Simondon, 1992). At the intraindividual level, being grateful for having the capacity to learn or achieve things can motivate individuals to reach for personal goals. At the interindividual level, gratitude can motivate individuals to pay-back or pay-it-forward to others or to take care of them which can be a purpose of life for some. At the transindividual level, gratitude can inspire individuals to contribute to the greater good such as caring for the environment or serving a God, finding a purpose in life on a transcendent level.

Gratitude seems to be able to positively affect the underlying mechanisms of resilience: secure attachment, positive affect, and purpose in life. The association between gratitude and positive affect has been studied extensively and researches showed this association consistently. Research is scant on gratitude and secure attachment, but related

research helps us to hypothesize about possible associations between gratitude and secure attachment. The association between gratitude and purpose in life is also been shown regularly but explanations about why this is, is missing. Hypothesizing about possible levels and contributions to purpose in life can direct future research on this topic. In the end, cultivating gratitude is thought to enhance levels of resilience (Emmons, 2007).

Well-being

Well-being encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being and is also called flourishing (Keyes, 2002). Emotional well-being, derived from hedonism, involves feelings such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, and interest in life. Psychological well-being, derived from eudaimonism (Ryff, 2014), involves realizing one's own potentials and becoming a better person across the lifespan, and consists of six elements: self-acceptance, positive relations, environmental mastery, personal growth, autonomy, and purpose in life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Social well-being consists of five domains according to Keyes (1998): social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social contribution, social acceptance. Together, emotional, psychological, and social well-being comprise mental well-being of which research shows it is related yet distinct from psychopathology (Keyes, 2005; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

Gratitude is associated with all three factors of well-being. At the emotional well-being level of everyday life, state gratitude is associated reciprocally with momentary positive affect, independent from momentary negative affect (Jans-Beken et al., 2018). On the long run, trait gratitude is able to predict higher levels of positive affect (Jans-Beken et al., 2015) and it is able to maintain a certain level of positive affect while living through severe illness (Otto, Szczeny, Soriano, Laurenceau, & Siegel, 2016). Other emotional psychological concepts are positively affected when experiencing gratitude such as happiness (O'Leary &

Dockray, 2015), subjective well-being (Watkins, Uher, & Pichinevskiy, 2015), and life satisfaction (Khanna & Singh, 2016).

Regarding psychological well-being, gratitude shows to be positively associated with self-esteem (Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2015) and basic psychological needs (Lee, Tong, & Sim, 2015). Unfortunately, results on gratitude and factors of psychological well-being such as meaning in life and life purpose are currently scant, fragmented, and inconclusive (Jans-Beken, 2018). There is some evidence suggesting that gratitude may contribute to psychological well-being as we saw earlier. Further examination of the benefit of state and trait gratitude as a predictor for psychological well-being to attain a clearer view on the association of gratitude and concepts of psychological well-being is needed.

Outcomes on gratitude and social relationships is very consistent; gratitude is beneficial in both close relationships (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012), entering new relationships (Algoe, 2012), and interaction between strangers (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). This was already mentioned under the headings about virtue, meaning in life, and resilience, making the social component of state and trait gratitude definitely central in mental well-being of human beings; gratitude can play a crucial role in enhancing and maintaining levels of flourishing (Jans-Beken, 2018), important in bringing out the best in individuals and society.

Discussion

The aim of this essay was to explore how gratitude relates to the four pillars of PP 2.0 as proposed by Wong (2011a) and to determine what place gratitude can have within PP 2.0. This essay shows that gratitude has a prominent place within the theoretical basis of PP 2.0 because state and trait gratitude can be positively associated with all four pillars of PP 2.0 and their underlying mechanisms.

Gratitude is considered a virtue; an evolutionary core characteristic that has a positive valence which is accompanied with negative valenced emotions, and gratitude is able to balance the multitude of feelings (Jans-Beken et al., 2018; Jans-Beken, Lataster, Peels, Lechner, & Jacob, 2017) that can arise in social interaction and stressful situations. Also, gratitude is associated with greater resilience when faced with adversity in life. With respect to the underlying mechanisms of resilience, further research is warranted. Especially secure attachment and life purpose are understudied topics in gratitude research. Regarding meaning in life, the how and why of the connection with gratitude is still unclear. Based on related research, it is possible to hypothesize about possible beneficial effects. Gratitude and mental well-being is studied quite often and most of the associations are positive (Jans-Beken, 2018). Only about psychological well-being, comprising meaning in life and life purpose, there is little evidence in the scientific literature. Future efforts to unravel the association between gratitude and meaning in life or life purpose is needed to strengthen the scientific knowledge about the importance of gratitude for creating or attaining a meaning in life.

In the meantime, counseling and clinical practice could deploy gratitude interventions to cultivate or enhance trait gratitude. This can be done from a bottom-up model of change (Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards, & Hill, 2014) presuming that a trait is a higher order function that is regulated by several lower order trait processes. Intervening in these trait processes, the unconscious character of a trait can be cultivated. Ways to do so are by imprinting new processes on the social, cognitive, and affective level until these new processes become automatic and sustainable (Magidson, Roberts, Collado-Rodriguez, & Lejuez, 2014). Through repeated practice of new behaviors, thoughts, and affect the aim is for these new processes to become implicit and ultimately to manifest themselves in trait-level changes (Chapman, Hampson, & Clarkin, 2014; Jans-Beken, 2018).

Worrisome is that developing trait gratitude to reach a certain goal such as enhanced mental well-being, as an extrinsic or instrumental incentive, can be ineffective and even hurtful (Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011). Trait gratitude should be perceived as an intrinsic and moral virtue on its own and it should be sincerely felt to provide benefits for mental well-being and thriving (Kristjánsson, 2013). If one does not acknowledge the received benefit, just saying thanks will not result in similar feelings as when gratitude is sincerely felt. By looking at gratitude in an instrumental way, it turns attention away from its moral and intrinsic value. Gratitude interventions should therefore target the different facets of trait gratitude: cognition, recognition, expression, and empathy. These multi-faceted interventions are more likely to be able to achieve an attitude of gratitude compared to interventions that solely elicit state gratitude as a positive emotion and may be important for both experimental studies in scientific research as programs in counseling or clinical practice to cultivate trait gratitude.

Conclusion

With what is known now about gratitude and the four pillars of PP 2.0, it is possible to conclude that gratitude can establish beneficial effects on the psychological concepts within virtue, meaning in life, resilience, and well-being. Gratitude that arises in joyful or stressful situations, seems to be able to support individuals to thrive in life.

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