

Gratitude's place in second wave positive psychology

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Welcome at the paper session of the delegates of the Scholarship of this wonderful conference. Thank you for your interest in the papers and presentations of us early career researchers. My name is Lilian Jans-Beken and I am an assistant professor of lifespan psychology at the Open University of the Netherlands. In this scholarship, I received an honourable mention for my paper Gratitude's place in second wave positive psychology.

Positive psychology is the science and practice of improving well-being and not necessarily the reduction of psychopathology. The past 5 years, as a positive psychologist, I have been studying gratitude and its associations with psychopathology and flourishing. Based on my research, I found that gratitude is not necessarily associated with less psychopathology, but it is with flourishing and subjective well-being. Then recently I heard of second wave positive psychology through the work of dr Wong. In second wave psychology, the focus is on the dialectic interaction between the positive and the negative to bring out the best in humans. For this scholarship, I wanted to theoretically explore if gratitude also has a place in the new paradigm of second wave psychology.

Let's start with explaining what gratitude is according to science. Gratitude is both viewed as a state and a trait. State gratitude is thought to be a complex positive emotion with an affective, a cognitive, and a social component that can emerge in both happy and stressful situations. You can be grateful for a nice present you receive for your birthday, but you can also be grateful for the hero that saved your life. Trait gratitude is defined as a general tendency to recognize 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 purpose of second wave positive psychology is to bring out the best in individuals, not only in good times, but also in times of adversity and suffering, taking into account both the bright side and dark side of human nature (Wong, 2011). For this purpose, four pillars of second wave positive psychology were formulated: virtue, meaning, resilience, and well-being. (Wong, 2011, 2015b). My paper explores how gratitude is associated with these four pillars.

I will start off with the pillar Virtue. Virtues are human core characteristics associated with morality and that are valued across all cultures with different value orientations (Leong & Wong, 2003). It is thought that moral virtues are biologically grounded for evolutionary purposes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Gratitude is a highly valued virtue in religion and spiritual thinking because it is thought to be essential for living a good life. This is in accordance with the broaden-and-build theory of Fredrickson (2004a), that provides an evolutionary framework to explain the function of positive emotions such as gratitude. Positive emotions broaden our attention and ensures that there is interaction with our environment and everything in it. This interaction creates personal resources, such as cognitive, emotional, physical or social skills, that can be helpful in times of setback. This evolutionary theory proposes that feeling gratitude for others in our environment is important for fostering relationships that can function as valuable personal resources when adversity strikes (Fredrickson, 2004b). However, when gratitude as a positive affect arises in social interaction following both positive and negative events, other proximal negative affects also can arise such as indebtedness and guilt (Layous et al., 2017). Gratitude, as a virtue, seems to function as an evolutionary feature by eliciting both positive and negative affect to help build enduring relationships that can help us live a good life.

The next pillar is Meaning. Meaning is an individually constructed cognitive system, that is based on values and it is capable of placing personal significance and satisfaction to one's life (Wong, 1989). Meaning contributes to the feeling of belonging to the bigger picture. The intrinsic value of social interaction is important in being part of a larger whole (Wong, 2015a). Also gratitude is thought to support this belonging to a larger whole, making both meaning and gratitude characteristics of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Gratitude can play a substantial role in meaning as reciprocity towards benefactors and upstream reciprocity towards others (Nowak & Roch, 2007) fosters existing relationships and supports forming new ones (Algoe, 2012). Although meaning and gratitude both seem to be important in transcendence, research reporting about the association between gratitude and meaning is scant. However, research that exists, shows positive associations with gratitude and meaning in life as a mediator for well-being and psychopathology (Jans-Beken, 2018). Meaning and gratitude can both be related to happy and stressful situations and it might therefor be important to unravel their association in light of second wave positive psychology.

The third pillar is Resilience. Resilience is related to having sufficient personal resources to cope with whatever life may bring; to bounce back after hardship. Life for most of us is full of problems, difficult life events and challenges. Resilience is necessary to manage the associated stress and to maintain a sufficient level of well-being. Resilience is important for all individuals but especially for vulnerable populations that are faced with war, low economic situations, or chronic physical diseases (Wong & Wong, 2012). As said before, gratitude can arise in stressful situations and it is able to alleviate perceived stress (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, &

Joseph, 2008). Also, grateful individuals are thought to be more inclined to seek social support, to appraise situations in more positive ways, and are less prone to maladaptive coping strategies (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). These are all characteristics that can help to grow resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), and cultivating gratitude is thought to enhance levels of resilience (Emmons, 2007). These findings suggest that gratitude is an interesting path to enhance resilience to adversity.

The last pillar is Well-being. Well-being encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being and is also called flourishing (Keyes, 2002). Gratitude is associated with all three factors of well-being. At the emotional level of everyday life, state gratitude is associated reciprocally with momentary positive mood, independent from momentary negative mood (Jans-Beken et al., 2018). 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). Outcomes on gratitude and social relationships is quite consistent; gratitude is beneficial in both close relationships (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016), the emergence of new ones (Algoe, 2012), and interaction between strangers (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). At all levels of flourishing, gratitude can play a substantial role in enhancing and maintaining levels of flourishing, as was also demonstrated in my thesis (Jans-Beken, 2018), which is important to bring out the best in individuals and society, in line with the aim of second wave positive psychology.

So, what is the conclusion of this short theoretical exploration? It definitely shows that gratitude has its place within the conceptual framework of second wave positive psychology. Gratitude is considered an evolutionary core characteristic or virtue that has a positive valence and it is also accompanied with negative valenced emotions, being able to balance the multitude of feelings that can arise in social interaction and stressful situations. Also, gratitude is associated with greater resilience when faced with adversity in life, and a wealth of research points to the beneficial effects of gratitude on human well-being. Regarding meaning in life, the how and why of the connection with gratitude is still unclear. Future efforts to unravel the association between gratitude and meaning in life are warranted. Future research into gratitude and the four pillars of second wave positive psychology can establish the effects of gratitude on both the bright side as the dark side of human nature, to bring out the best in individuals and consequently in society based on the paradigm of second wave positive psychology.

Thank you very much for your attention and time listening to my presentation about Gratitude's place in second wave positive psychology.

If you have questions, I will be available the rest of the day or you can contact me through email or Twitter; please take a business card if you want to reach out.

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