

A Dark Side of Gratitude?

Distinguishing between Beneficial Gratitude and its Harmful Impostors for the Positive Clinical Psychology of Gratitude and Well-Being

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Gratitude is not only a virtue but the parent of all others

Cicero

Gratitude is an illness suffered by dogs

Joseph Stalin

Throughout history, the concept of gratitude has been seen as central to the understanding of well-being and the smooth running of society, being a mainstay of philosophical and religious accounts of living (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). However, it was not until research adopted by (although predating) the positive psychology movement was conducted (beginning with McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) that it became a mainstream area of research within personality (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2001) and then clinical psychology (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Research has exploded over the last 15 years, with studies on gratitude being amongst the most quickly accruing within psychology. Our recent review (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010) summarizes this literature, which shows that low gratitude is strongly, uniquely, and possibly causally related to clinical impaired functioning and impaired clinically relevant processes. Our review also outlines the interventions that can be used to increase gratitude in order to improve well-being.

Gratitude has very much been adopted by the positive psychology movement and in many ways is the emblematic poster child (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004). However, particularly from philosophy (Carr, in press), there have been concerns raised about a potential dark side of gratitude. This has not been extensively discussed in the psychological literature, and yet understanding any possible “side effects” of gratitude is particularly important as interventions to promote gratitude move to into clinical practice. The aim of this chapter is to attempt to clarify when and where gratitude is apparently negative, with the aim of building a more

balanced study of gratitude within psychology. Our vision is for a field of gratitude research in which the potential negative side of gratitude is given as much consideration as the positive side. Specifically, we take the view that there are both beneficial and harmful forms of gratitude. Whilst the beneficial form may always be positive for the individual, it is easily confused (by both individuals and scholars) with the maladaptive forms. We call for more research to distinguish the two and caution that any use of gratitude interventions within clinical practice has to take care to promote the beneficial rather than harmful kinds of gratitude. Our aim with this chapter is in keeping with the positive clinical psychology (PCP) (Wood & Tarrrier, 2010; Chapter 1, this volume), which aims to transform the discipline into one where the understanding and fostering the positive is given equal attention as understanding and reducing the negative. We aim to extend this approach to gratitude through clarifying the distinctions between the beneficial form of gratitude and its harmful imposter.

This chapter is aimed to be seminal to the field of gratitude research through beginning a new phase that moves beyond just showing that higher levels of gratitude are generally beneficial toward showing *how*, *when*, and *for whom* gratitude is beneficial. In doing so the area will develop a more balanced view of when trait and state levels of gratitude are and are not helpful to an individual's life, consistent with the general cognitive approach to emotions taken within psychology. This more balanced approach will be much more able to inform clinical practice as to when and how to promote gratitude within a given client. Such developments are also more likely to engage scholars who are skeptical about gratitude and gratitude research through perceiving an over-focus on only beneficial gratitude within the current research. Were it to emerge that most experiences of gratitude were beneficial (apart from specific cases) then the ensuing research literature would be a lot more convincing for the communities, cultures, and research and practitioner groups for whom gratitude does not immediately seem like an important concept, perhaps as the harmful kinds of gratitude more readily come to mind. A more balanced field of gratitude research and practice would be better able to answer the ready challenges that gratitude critics can make about a straw man of gratitude research in which all forms of gratitude are considered to be beneficial. We believe that only through engaging in the search for the "dark side" of gratitude can the field progress toward a full understanding of the concept and its roles in people's lives, be safely used in clinical practice, and be convincing to those who remain skeptical about engaging with gratitude research and practice.

The Beneficial Consequences of Gratitude

The psychological research into gratitude over the last 15 years has overwhelmingly focused on the benefits of higher levels of gratitude (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). People who feel more gratitude in life are more generally appreciative of the positive in the self and world (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008) as well as the future (McCullough et al., 2001). This suggests a possible key role for gratitude in determining mental health, given Beck et al.'s (1979) model of depression as involving a "negative triad" comprising negative views about the self, world, and future. Gratitude may form a "positive triad" comprising positive views about the self, world, and (due to its shared variance with optimism) (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009) future. In keeping with this book, we see gratitude and optimism as forming the "missing half" of Beck's triad, rather than as some separate entity; if mental health is seen as arising in part from a three continua (negative to positive views about the world, negative to positive views about the self, and negative to positive views about the future) then it would seem that gratitude is intimately linked to this process. The empirical evidence showing strong relationships between gratitude and mental health is consistent with this view (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

There are four factors that suggest that higher levels of gratitude may be clinically important in addition to the strong cross-sectional relationships between gratitude and well-being. First, higher levels of gratitude protect from stress and depression over time (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008; Lambert, Fincham, & Stillman, 2012). This suggests a possible role of gratitude in the resilience to clinical levels of symptomatology during life transitions, and the findings further suggest that the role of gratitude in well-being may be causal.

Second, higher levels of gratitude predict a wide range of clinically relevant processes, including less impaired sleep (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009), more social support seeking and active coping, combined with less disengagement coping (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007a,b), the greater development of social support (Wood et al., 2008), better quality relationships (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Lambert, Clarke, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010; Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Stanton, 2012), and more generous interpretation of social transactions (through interpreting gifts received as more costly [to their benefactor], valuable [to them], and altruistically intended) (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Impaired sleep, insufficient social support, and impaired relationship dynamics are implicated in a wide variety of variety of psychological and health problems (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and coping determines psychological and behavioral reactions to stress (Lazarus, 1993). If gratitude is affecting these processes, then it may have a downstream consequence on mental health conditions.

Third, the relationship between gratitude and well-being seems to be unique, existing above the 30 facets of the NEO PI-R operationalization of the full breadth and depth of personality traits within the Five Factor model (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008, 2009). This is important as, whilst many traits within personality psychology predict well-being, there is a lot of conceptual and empirical overlap between the different traits, and newly conceptualized traits are often later shown to relate only to well-being due to their shared variance with other, already known predictors. Gratitude shows an exceptional degree of incremental validity in predicting well-being above the traits most studied in psychology.

Fourth, simple exercises have been developed to increase levels of gratitude (see Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Shin and Lyubomirsky, Chapter 23, this volume), the most common of which is to simply write three things for which one is grateful at night before bed (Emmons & McCullough, 2002). In the first randomized controlled trials to compare this technique to one commonly used in clinical therapy (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010a,b), “counting blessings” was found to be as effective as automatic thought monitoring and challenging in decreasing worry (in a population largely clinically high on anxiety) and improving body image (in a population largely clinically low on this appraisal). A notable feature of these studies was the use of an unguided self-help internet intervention; anyone could access and do these exercises. Such online interventions have the benefit of reaching greater numbers of people than conventional therapies, although they are hampered by very high drop-out rates, and those who do drop out cannot benefit fully from the intervention. Notably, the gratitude intervention had lower levels of drop-out whilst still (in intention to treat analysis) being as efficacious on the presenting problem. This would suggest that clinicians may sometimes wish to use these techniques preferentially as part of a therapy package for certain clients, such as those particularly at risk of disengaging from therapy.

Anecdotally, some participants reported that they initially did not think they could do the exercise at all, as they saw nothing in the world for which to be grateful. However, as the day passed they noticed things (specifically so that the observation could be recorded in the diary) that otherwise they would not have noticed. Seen in such a way, the intervention is not simply a five-minute daily exercise, but rather a continual attempt to reappraise events more accurately throughout the day by noticing the positive in addition to the negative. If this was an important factor then it would suggest that participant engagement is critical to success. Lack of engagement

may explain why many studies into this technique show differences between the gratitude condition and a negative induction “hassles conditions” (to be interpreted as the hassles decreasing well-being, not a benefit of the gratitude condition), but not between the gratitude condition and a neutral control condition (see Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, for a general critique of control groups in gratitude research). Many of the null results seem to arise from samples who might be less enthusiastic about participating (e.g., undergraduates participating as a course requirement). Notably, some of the strongest supporting results for gratitude interventions emerge from our two studies (where participants volunteered for an experimental treatment for worry or body image, respectively): Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson (2005), who studied participants who had self-selected for a positive psychology intervention; and Study 3 of McCullough et al. (2002), which found significant results versus neutral controls in participants with rheumatoid arthritis (Study 3), but not undergraduate samples (Studies 1 and 2; although arguably the controls were more active than neutral). There is also a second intervention involving writing letters to people to whom one is grateful and have not properly thanked. Ongoing research is examining the relative efficacy of these two interventional types (see Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Shin and Lyubomirsky, Chapter 23, this volume).

A third more experimental interventional technique has been developed for children (Froh et al., in press) which involves teaching them (in an age appropriate manner) to accurately read the appraisals of a gift-giving situation in order to feel appropriate levels of gratitude. Specifically, following the social cognitive model of Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph (2008), children were taught (in an age-appropriate manner) to more accurately identify the help they received from others in terms of how costly it was to provide (to their benefactor), how valuable it is to them, and how altruistically intended was benefactor’s help (the appraisals which in the social cognitive model cause transactional gratitude). The early evidence reported showed indication that the intervention was effective in improving both the children’s self- and teacher-rated well-being, as well as motivating behavioral tendencies to express gratitude in different settings. Theoretically, this approach could be extended to adults. Part of the novelty in this approach is that its focus is specifically on *accurately* interpreting the situation. This approach may be more likely in certain client groups to promote beneficial gratitude rather than the harmful kinds discussed below; the focus is very specifically on the accurate reading of the situation rather than generally increasing gratitude without specific guidance as to how to ensure this is a good reflection of reality.

Gratitude interventions seem to work for some people some of the time. However, much more research is needed, and some of the enthusiasm seen within positive psychology communities to focus on the immediate implementation of these interventions in a wide variety of settings may be premature. Indeed, in one study (Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011) a gratitude intervention was found to decrease well-being, contrary to the general pattern in the literature. Important questions for future research (see also Watkins, 2013) are:

- 1 How do gratitude interventions work, what are the active mechanisms?
- 2 For whom do they work (do individual characteristics interact with whether the person is allocated to the gratitude or control group to determine outcome)?
- 3 What is the participant experience and what exactly do participants actually do?
- 4 For which groups of people (e.g., those with extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation to do gratitude exercises) do gratitude interventions work better or worse?
- 5 What is the optimum delivery of the intervention, for example: (a) how often should the exercise be performed (dose responsiveness)?; (b) how many things for which they are grateful should people list?; (c) what is the optimum length of the intervention?; (d) should people be guided to think of different categories of things for which to be grateful, such as people, life in general, etc. (see Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008, for a list of the domains of gratitude)?

- 6 Do apparent null results emerge because of ceiling effects due to both the gratitude and control group being high in gratitude well-being prior to the intervention?
- 7 When and for whom might gratitude interventions be harmful?

Answers to these questions would likely explain some of the null results alluded to above (and discussed in Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010); it may be that there are distinct “boundary conditions” or moderators that explain when and for whom gratitude interventions are helpful. Some emerging work is beginning to answer these questions, such as through showing that baseline levels of positive affect may moderate the effectiveness of the intervention (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009), and that people falling prey to “gratitude fatigue,” with the usefulness of the intervention being dose responsive (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008); see also the work out of Sonja Lyubomirsky’s laboratory and her chapter (Chapter 23) in this volume.

Gratitude interventions are quick and simple to deliver, apparently have client acceptability (as seen in the drop-out rates in Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland 2010a,b), and seem to work well for some people. These factors make gratitude interventions attractive to clinicians and can be a simple way of making existing therapeutic intervention more consistent with PCP through the inclusion of an additional gratitude task at low cost. However, as noted by Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010), and considering the challenges discussed throughout this chapter, this should be considered an “off-label” use of an intervention based on individual clinical judgment and with informed consent, as the evidence base is not yet sufficient to definitively recommend the technique under standard clinical guidelines for the amount of evidence needed for this purpose. We encourage the development of that evidence base. However, for the research questions we highlight to be answered, there needs to be a greater engagement in the question of whether there is a negative side to gratitude, and much greater awareness – and research into – related issues, resulting in movement from the occasional framing of all forms of gratitude as positive for everyone all of the time, toward a more balanced PCP view that recognizes that different forms of gratitude can be beneficial or harmful depending on the person and the situation that they are in.

Toward a Balanced View of Gratitude: Philosophical Considerations

As noted by Held (Chapter 3, this volume), it is complex to talk about the “positive” or “negative” characteristics, as these words have various meanings and it is often the case that different people are using the terms to connote different meanings. Positive and negative may refer to: (1) the valance of the emotional experience, (2) the general impact of something, or (3) the specific role of the experience for a given individual in a given context (whether it is beneficial to them or harmful). For example, anger may be negative in the sense of emotional valance, but positive in a given situation if it helps an individual behave more appropriately (as, e.g., in righting a genuine wrong). Such variable usage may be leading to unnecessary disagreements between scholars who are simply unaware that they are using the words “positive” and “negative” to mean different things. To clarify: it is to the third meaning of positive and negative that we mean to speak of in this chapter. In an attempt to avoid confusion, we refer to this “positive” and “negative” as beneficial and harmful, respectively. We are aware that these words may themselves be confusing but they are perhaps closest to our intended meaning. Clinical psychologists may talk about “adaptive” and “maladaptive” with the same meaning, although we prefer to avoid these terms to prevent confusion with evolutionary adaptation.

The question of what is beneficial or harmful for an individual may be seen from a prescriptive perspective (e.g., what is almost universally considered beneficial both within and across cultures), or an idiosyncratic perspective (e.g., what is positive for the life of the individual on their own terms). A useful starting point for considering when gratitude is beneficial or harmful

is to consider the question: “is gratitude a virtue?” The word “virtue” is much used within positive psychology to refer to gratitude, although the meaning of this is not normally spelled out. A comprehensive view of virtue was provided by Aristotle (1999). In the Aristotelean view, virtue is the situationally appropriate use of several characteristics, when such appropriate use is near universally considered to be amongst the most excellent expressions of humanity (a generally prescriptive account of virtue). However, thoughts and behaviors associated with the use of potentially socially excellent characteristics are seen as existing on a continuum from high to low, with both the extreme high and low levels ends seen as equally nonvirtuous (lit. “vicious,” the expression of vice). The socially excellent characteristic exists only at the “golden mean,” where its use is situationally appropriate and displayed to the right degree. For example, modesty is the situationally appropriate occurrence of thoughts and behaviors that can range from self-effacement to arrogance. Behaviors at either side of this golden mean “sweet point” are harmful to the person or others, and only behaviors that occur at the situationally appropriate mid-point are considered beneficial. Modesty, as the situationally appropriate expression of behaviors that lie on a continuum from low (self-effacement) to high (arrogance), is by definition always beneficial. Behaviors, thoughts, and feelings on the self-effacement to arrogance continuum may however be harmful in that they are situationally inappropriate; in such cases they are not the virtue of modesty, which exists only at the appropriate point, but rather behaviors (such as self-effacement) that are incorrectly labeled as such.

Through applying this framework to gratitude,¹ the use of the word “gratitude” becomes complex, and it is likely that advocates and critics of gratitude research are using the term in somewhat different ways. In the virtues usage, gratitude can only be beneficial by definition, as it is a state comprising thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are being situationally appropriately displayed in a way that is considered socially excellent. With the same usage one can refer to trait levels of gratitude (“grateful people”) based on the frequency and intensity with which they experience state gratitude in this manner. However, a given state of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that an individual or others may label (in a nonvirtue ethics usage) as gratitude may be situationally inappropriate and be harmful (“negative”), both in terms of what would be considered socially excellent, and in terms of the impact on the individual’s life. Thus, inappropriately thanking an abuser would not be considered gratitude, in the virtues usage of the term, as the behavior is excessive for the situation. Thus, in a virtues usage, it would be a near truism to say that gratitude is always beneficial, as the word would refer exclusively to the situationally appropriate display of state gratitude, not its lack or excess.

The practical importance of this discussion is in interpreting the recommendations of gratitude researchers in the consulting room. Gratitude research can often be misunderstood if the author is using the word gratitude to refer to (virtuous) situationally appropriate displays, in which case it is entirely logical to say that we should always promote gratitude, whereas such claims would be nonsense if they were interpreted to mean that people should display an excess of gratitude. Appreciation of this point will also allow the development of a more advanced field of gratitude research and practice, where the focus becomes explicitly on when the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors associated with gratitude are appropriate, and thus meet the definition of “virtuous” gratitude, to which many authors have been implicitly but not explicitly referring.

In a related vein, Peterson and Seligman (2004), from a broadly virtue ethic position, refer to the golden mean as “gratitude,” too low levels as entitlement, its absence is rudeness or forgetfulness, and its excess as ingratiation. Similarly, Shelton (2010) presents a taxonomy of seven types of quasi-gratitude (when qualities of goodness are negligible or absent) and three types of what he terms harmful gratitude (when gratitude is corrupted by behavior intended to hurt). The seven forms of quasi-gratitude are shallow gratitude, reluctant gratitude, self-serving gratitude, defensive gratitude, mixed gratitude, misperceived gratitude, and misplaced gratitude. The three types of harmful gratitude are more pathological: hurtful gratitude, deviant gratitude, and malignant gratitude.

From a virtue ethics position, none of Shelton's (2010) "false" gratitudes would be termed gratitude as, although they may share similar behaviors (e.g., expressing thanks), appraisals, and experienced emotion, each represent deviations from what would be considered culturally excellent situationally appropriate displays of these behavior, appraisals, and emotions. All would also be considered harmful, at least in the sense that they are not optimum reactions to the situation. To the extent that a person is characterized by these inappropriate forms of gratitude, they and others may describe themselves as high on trait gratitude, but from a virtues perspective they would be incorrect, based on mislabeling of the states that they are commonly experiencing. The field of gratitude research must engage more consciously in making these distinctions through more careful language usage, in order to avoid confusion and spend more time researching the specific situations under which these different forms of "gratitude" occur. We refer here to "beneficial" gratitude in the sense of an Aristotelean virtue, and "harmful" to refer to all other cases.

It seems that the word gratitude is being used in different ways by different scholars, leading to much disagreement and confusion. This may be due to a nonshared use of language rather than disagreement about the core concept. The subtlety in the types of gratitude should be critically important to clinical psychologists seeking to improve mental health through gratitude interventions, as their focus should be on promoting appropriate gratitude rather than its maladaptive or quasi forms.

This subtlety between beneficial and harmful gratitude may also not be being picked up by most psychological research into gratitude, which often relies on participant's understanding of the word gratitude. Even if they do understand it to refer exclusively to beneficial gratitude, as much of the research is based on self-report it will rely on participant's ability to correctly label what they are experiencing as beneficial rather than as harmful gratitude (for issues with the self-report of gratitude, see Davidson and Wood, in press). Similarly, some of the null results of gratitude interventions may result from a minority of participants misinterpreting the exercise and it promoting harmful forms of gratitude in them. We take the view that gratitude is by definition always positive, if in the virtues usage, but that similar experiences can easily masquerade as gratitude, and that this is both causing confusion in scholarly discussions as to whether gratitude is always positive and causing confusion for some individuals in their attempts to build gratitude into their own lives. It will be the job of the clinical psychologist to help the individual develop beneficial gratitude rather than the harmful forms, through appreciating these subtleties, whether through specific gratitude exercises or other aspects of the therapeutic encounter. On the academic side, there needs to be a new phase of gratitude research that separates out the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of beneficial verses harmful gratitude, as well as how these types of gratitude differentially interact with situations and are differentially fostered by variants of gratitude interventions.

Despite the above considerations it should be emphasized that the empirical research (see Wood, Froh, and Geraghty, 2010) overwhelmingly shows that trait gratitude measures are strongly, uniquely, and causally relate to well-being, and there is good evidence that gratitude interventions in general increase well-being. However, as with all such psychological work, this is a pattern based on statistics, forming a generality about the particular populations from which the sample was drawn. Even within these samples the variance in people's responses will incorporate some people who have higher gratitude and lower well-being (in trait research) or who get worse in an intervention. Whether this is random error or a systematic difference that could be picked up with moderation analysis remains to be seen. Also, as gratitude research and practice increasingly moves into clinical domains, the statistically rarer cases may be seen more frequently. It is important to understand when and for whom research is accidentally picking up harmful gratitude and this is an important avenue for future research. What we are arguing for is the "emotionally intelligent" use of gratitude, and research and practice to become more subtle in picking this up. However, given the strong links shown in the empirical work between gratitude and well-being it seems that in general gratitude research is managing to pick up

beneficial rather than harmful gratitude, and it is important to not be overcritical here, but rather to aim for ever increasing refinement as befits a growing field of research.

The distinction between beneficial and harmful gratitude also avoids a potential problem for gratitude research where gratitude is seen to be good all the time. Proponents of such views seem to be arguing that gratitude is the elixir for all that ails us. Then, they move to redefining gratitude: all that is good becomes gratitude. This is dangerous, because when we do this, gratitude paradoxically loses its power. Gratitude is an important trait to the good life because it is something meaningful and specific, and when we make it into everything good, we lose a clear conception of gratitude, and then gratitude pretty much becomes anything, or nothing. A clearer distinction between beneficial and harmful gratitude helps avoid this trap.

Harmful Gratitude

The proceeding discussion highlights examples of where harmful gratitude may occur, including in settings that clinical psychologists are particularly likely to encounter when they are aiming to increase gratitude with certain clients. Some of these examples are based on contributions to Carr (in press), and arise more from the philosophical than psychological literature. As such, they as yet lack an empirical basis, and must not overshadow the empirical findings that generally gratitude has been shown to be beneficial, at least with the outcomes and samples studied. However, much more research is needed into these areas whilst distinguishing between beneficial and harmful types of gratitude.

Gratitude Within Abusive Relationships

A harmful gratitude may occur within a context of an objectively abusive relationship, with the victim feeling what they experience as gratitude to the abuser (cf., Card, in press). In this case such feelings are extremely negative, not least as it will motivate the person to remain in the relationship and continue to tolerate the abuser. Indeed, this ingratiation may partially explain why people remain in clearly abusive relationships when those around them (including in extreme cases, the police and social services) say that they should leave. Consistent with the opening quote from Stalin, the abuser may also foster ingratiation in their victim in several ways with this express intent. For example, the abuser may encourage a false dependence from your victim (e.g., “you’re nothing without me”, “you could not survive without me”, “no one else would put up with you, and then where would you be?”). Further, an abuser may normally provide such a low level of provision than any act (unworthy of gratitude and still unreasonable) would attract substantial gratitude as it would be *relatively* higher than what is normally given. This would be consistent with research by Wood, Brown, & Maltby (2011) that shows what determines transactional gratitude is not the act itself, but rather how that act ranks amongst what the person is used to receiving and how it falls on the overall range of the least to most help that they normally receive (see also Algoe et al., 2008).

In the virtues model, such feelings toward an abuser would not be seen as gratitude as the response is far beyond the virtuous, situationally appropriate mid-point (which here would be at the extreme poll of ungrateful behavior, at least toward the specific act of the abuser). There would certainly not be a widely held view in most modern societies that a wife feeling gratitude toward her husband who is severely beating regularly (and even feeling gratitude *for* the beatings) is having a virtuous reaction, the most excellent expression of her humanity. (Although, of course, there would hopefully not be judgment either, rather an appreciation that this may be what she needs to do to survive.) The example here is deliberately extreme, although this process likely occurs very regularly for many people at a less extreme level. Although most people in

most societies are not in extremely abusive relationships, many (if not most) people have some unhealthy relationships in their personal or occupational lives, and everyone will routinely encounter others acting inappropriately toward them and with ill-intent if only on a very superficial level (e.g., the person cutting in line, the snappy person in the shop, etc.). To the extent that people are feeling harmful gratitude toward these people they will likely behave nonoptimally. Harmful gratitude, in these types of situations, can also prevent individuals from giving those misbehaving the feedback they need to appropriately alter their behavior. Thus, gratitude can be damaging not only to individuals who bear the brunt of misbehavior, but also to those who sorely need corrective feedback with regard to their damaging behavior. To the extent that people commonly feel such inappropriate emotions toward others with whom they regularly interact, then they will likely create relationship problems, if only through a lack of healthy boundaries.

Extending the sociocognitive model of gratitude (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008), the beneficial gratitude in this situation is that which is based on appraisals of cost, benefit, and altruism that are *accurate* readings of the situation. Based on the relative model of gratitude (Wood, Brown, & Maltby, 2011), in order to make accurate judgments people would also have to have an accurate idea of the distribution of amounts of help that people normally get. This offers a framework with which to begin analyzing individual cases of when transactional gratitude is beneficial or harmful. The interventional approach of Froh et al. (2014) may offer a way toward promoting this healthy transactional gratitude.

The assumption that accurate readings of the situation are the most beneficial is in line with Aristotelean perspectives and clinical perspectives such as Beck et al. (1979). Part of the motivation for this assumption is that people can make more rational decisions about their life if they can more accurately read the objective situation. However, others (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988) have suggested that a slightly rosy view of the world may be positively related to well-being, which here would be a slightly generous interpretation of help received. The implications of this for the promotion of gratitude is discussed by Watkins (2013, Watkins, in press). However, the general literature on positive illusions is controversial (e.g., Joiner, Kistner, Stellrecht, & Merrill, 2006) and the pervasiveness of the illusions has been challenged (Harris & Haun, 2011). Nevertheless, it is a complex individual and clinical decision if and when to challenge moderately rosy views of the world if they are maintaining well-being perhaps whilst an individual is challenging their appraisals in another domain.

It is also a separate question as to whether beneficial gratitude could still be experienced in even in abusive situations. For example, keeping in mind things for which it is appropriate to be grateful (e.g., outside the abusive relationship) may be important to the individual's recovery. It is possible that such gratitude, quite distinct from the form described above, may be adaptive for the individual. Making these kinds of distinction is a wide open and much needed area for future research. In discussions of gratitude in abusive relationships there needs to be a much clearer distinction between the form of "gratitude" being referred to; talking about the harmful gratitude in this context to critique the beneficial or virtuous form of gratitude may lead to misleading conclusions.

The Systems Justification Problem

Eibach, Wilmut, and Libby (2015) discuss a potential maladaptive form of gratitude that is fostered by social systems to avoid people challenging the system itself. They discuss extensive, although indirect, evidence that this may be occurring (e.g., parents higher on social systems justification of valuing "good manners" in children more). They discuss, for example, that cultural outpourings of gratitude during times of war may increase support for the military actions. This is probably closest to the opening quote from Stalin. It is a version of what Nobel

Prize winner Amartya Sen described as “the happy peasant problem.” Here he was referring to the general problem of using subjective measures of states and quality of life (specifically life satisfaction) to assess the person’s objective quality of life or the situation in which they are living. In the first author’s experience, some of the most apparently grateful people are living in countries in which people are the least free (as judged by corruption and low political and human rights, including the systematic subjugation of women). Further, it is possible that some people in some of these states may be grateful *to* the state *for* the treatment (a group version of the abusive relationship problem). Indeed, it was the first author’s perception in one such state that, when talking to the locals about the aggressive behavior of the border guards in the airport (who were shouting at people to get in line), the locals cheerfully, unanimously, and apparently sincerely said they were grateful *to* the guards *for* this behavior, which they said had been explained to them on many occasions as necessary to keep them safe and free. He saw the scene as somewhat reminiscent of Huxley’s (1931) fictional *Brave New World*, in which a despotic state without the population’s best interests at heart focused on increasing positive moods as a way to keep the people in line.

Indeed, given the ubiquity with which organized religion has promoted feeling gratitude as a moral obligation (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), and as organized religion has at least partially operated in league with unhealthy states as an agent of social control, then it seems likely that the promotion of gratitude for the purposes of state subjugation has been widespread throughout history. There is, however, no direct research on this, and much is needed that interacts subjective gratitude with objective living conditions at the individual and group (national) level. The prediction would be that people feeling more harmful gratitude toward those in control and also those that are less free would be more likely to put up with their lot and be less likely to take appropriate action to assert their human rights. Such phenomena, of course, may also manifest in all countries in the form of a contentment that leads to a lack of striving for change. But it should again be noted that these are examples of harmful not beneficial gratitude, which would not meet the definition of gratitude in a virtues framework. It may very well be that even in such states there may be situationally appropriate experiences of beneficial gratitude, for example, to the state for genuinely beneficial provisions, and if not toward the state, then toward sources not connected to the state (e.g., family members). Even were there increased gratitude in such states, it would be important to separate out whether this is beneficial or harmful gratitude as well as its source; whether it is harmful gratitude toward the state or beneficial gratitude emerging out of other positive aspects of the culture (such as stronger communities). There also needs to be consideration of whether any evidence for the “happy peasant” problem is due uniquely to harmful gratitude or the shared variance between gratitude and life satisfaction (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008), given that the latter is normally what is considered in this context. Nevertheless, this does highlight concern about how gratitude interventions could potentially be misused in some settings by those in control, as well as the care with which large-scale interventions have to be delivered in order to promote beneficial rather than harmful gratitude.

The Nonidentity Problem

From a pure philosophical viewpoint, and for one specific type of gratitude, Smilansky (in press) describes the “nonidentity” problem, how gratitude for being alive necessitates gratitude for the whole chain of events that lead to one’s existence. For example, in many Western societies the Second World War caused such great loss of life and population movement that people with families traced to this period would almost certainly not have been born had the Second World War not occurred. How, then, Smilansky asks, can one feel gratitude for one’s existence without also being grateful that the war (and antecedent atrocities) occurred? There are perhaps answers,

such as from a Stoic (Epictetus, 2008) or Buddhist (Sangharakshita, 1990) viewpoint that one should simply accept the universe as a vast causal entity and be glad that all transpires as it does because this is how it is meant to be, as well as the only way that it could ever have turned out (in secular terms, following the Big Bang, everything may have been predetermined through the interaction of atoms set in chain by that event). This is also likely the view of many of the major religious thinkers, although here there is a danger that this is motivated by the systems justification noted above. It is also a rather radical solution and not one that has been explicitly adopted by the psychological research into gratitude. Smilansky's criticisms are very early and much more philosophical work is needed to consider his challenge in more depth including its tenability. The scientific method of psychology is unlikely to add much to these ethical considerations of whether a person should feel grateful, although could do much to establish a moral understanding of whether people generally believe that they should feel grateful in these situations. Survey data would be useful here, as well as experiments in which the saliency of this problem is manipulated to see whether gratitude differs when people are more aware of nonidentity problem barrier to gratitude. However, such work would more likely develop a much needed better understanding of types of harmful gratitude rather than show that beneficial gratitude cannot exist. The direct relevance of the nonidentity problem to the practicing positive clinical psychologist is perhaps less than some of the other considerations in this chapter, and the relevance is perhaps more towards those interested in the philosophy and ethics underpinning clinical practice.

The Slave–Foreman Problem

As discussed in Carr (in press) there are ethical problems with feeling gratitude toward people who are themselves giving aid that is costly, valuable, and altruistic, but who are cogs within an oppressive regime. For example, is it appropriate for a slave to feel gratitude toward a foreman who treats him or her kindly, with good intent, and going beyond what is expected of their position? (Critically, in this example it is beyond the authority of the foreman to release the slave, although one assumes within their physical capability, if even at the cost of their own life.) It is an ethically difficult question as to whether the slave should feel gratitude to this captor (many would say not, although based on the social-cognitive model the person would be expected to do so). Despite the foreman acting in a way that is costly, valuable, and altruistic, the system could not exist without foremen, and, as such, they are as much of the problem as the (pitifully inadequate) solution. Again, an extreme example is presented, partially due to a philosophical epistemology in which a theory is expected to hold at the extremes, and should be tested with thought experiments at these extremes (where it is perhaps most saliently not going to hold). However, everyday examples of this will regularly occur; for example, should one feel grateful in the situation where, when faced with mistreatment by an organization (e.g., cold-calling or provision of substandard products by unethical companies), an employee of that organization goes beyond what is expected of their role to lessen the harm in a way that is costly, valuable, and altruistic? In many ways, this is a version of the systems justification problem, but differs in moral complexity as here it is not those that are in charge of the system (e.g., the slave owner) that are the focus of the thought experiment, but rather those who in a sense victim themselves to it whilst simultaneously allowing it to continue to exist. A concern would be that gratitude expressed to these people would make them less likely to stop supporting the system, which if done in sufficient numbers, would cause system change. More philosophical work is needed into these issues, as well as experimental work to see how people do behave in these situations and survey data to quantify people's moral understanding of how people should react in these situations. Practicing clinical psychologists need to be aware of these ethical complexities when promoting gratitude in specific cases.

The Other Personality Characteristics Problem

So far the examples have considered the situations in which gratitude is likely to be problematic. Increasingly, the social sciences are focusing on how individual personality characteristics interact with the objective environment to determine the person's reaction (e.g., Boyce, Wood & Brown, 2010; Boyce & Wood, 2011a,b). Applying this approach to gratitude suggests that there may be some people for whom the situations highlighted above may be particularly problematic. The personality theory underlying Schema Therapy (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003; van Vreeswijk, Broersen, & Nadort, 2015; see Taylor and Arntz, Chapter 30, this volume) is especially helpful in this regard. Eighteen ways of viewing the world (each ranging from maladaptive to adaptive) (Lockwood & Perris, 2015) are identified, which in turn arise from particular parenting conditions (themselves ranging from maladaptive to adaptive). Several are particularly relevant: (1) people with maladaptive self-sacrifice schemas believe that they have to put others needs before their own or they will suffer terrible consequences; (2) those with subjugation schemas believe that it is unsafe to have even expressed their preferences and needs in the first place; and (3) people with dependency schemas believe that they cannot function autonomously in the world without deferring to more powerful others. Each of these (all on continua, continuous with adaptive counterparts) are pervasive, long-term ways of viewing the world, involving selective attention toward confirmatory information, selective ease of encoding for confirmatory information, and greater ease of recall of confirmatory information (with the opposite processes for disconfirming information). They have emerged from chronic negative environments or acute negative events (normally the former, and normally involving the primary care givers during childhood). Particular configurations of the eighteen schemas (and whether people are acting in line with them, trying to avoid the triggering situation, or overcompensating by trying to do the opposite) provide the underlying psychological process of what manifests externally as a categorical personality disorder. It is possible (and a testable hypothesis) that maladaptive gratitude may be particularly seen in these individuals, who may mislabel it as beneficial gratitude. This would be consistent with Watkins et al.'s (2006) findings that grateful emotion is associated with yielding to others. In therapy, clinicians may consider carefully questioning what clients are labeling gratitude and helping them to explore whether it is beneficial gratitude or a harmful form. It may be that the gratitude that such individuals feel is well placed, not linked to subjugation, but rather the genuinely costly, valuable, and altruistic things that, for example, the partner provides, or it may be misplaced and related to self-sacrifice, subjugation, and dependency schemas. Given the majority of clients in clinical therapy have some maladaptive functioning on the eighteen schemas, this underscores the importance in clinical practice of distinguishing between beneficial and harmful gratitude, as well as the care with which any gratitude intervention is presented to such clients to ensure that it is beneficial gratitude that is being fostered rather than a deepening of their schemas.

Bringing Together the Positive and Negative Sides of Gratitude

Whereas the psychological literature (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010) has focused almost exclusively on the benefits of gratitude, the philosophical literature (Carr, in press) has focused more on ethical issues and special cases where gratitude may not be appropriate, tending if anything toward focusing on when it is problematic. Partially this is due to psychology focusing on the impact of gratitude in general in people's lives, rather than situation-specific effects, and through focusing on looking at the impact of gratitude in general irrespective of the other traits of the individual. The philosophical literature has generally focused on ethics, when *should* an individual feel gratitude, whereas the psychological literature has focused more on what happens *when* an individual feels gratitude. A lack of integration between these literatures is harming research

efforts, with some of the philosophical literature speculating on falsifiable statements of fact on which there are already answers provided by psychology, and psychology not sufficiently reflecting on underlying conceptual and philosophical challenges to gratitude that would lead to testable predictions about when the concept is beneficial and when it is harmful. Moving the study of gratitude forward will require: (a) a better integration between the philosophical and psychological literatures, and (b) movement away from looking at the general (“on average”) impact of gratitude on well-being irrespective of other personality characteristics or the specific situations in which a person is living. It will also involve movement toward testing whether the impact of gratitude is beneficial or harmful depending on dynamic interactions between gratitude, other personality traits, and the objective environment. Within clinical therapy, it is important that: (a) gratitude is considered, given its strong, unique, and possibly causal impact on well-being; but that (b) in case conceptualization, the role of gratitude in people’s lives and in specific relationships is considered in light of other characteristics of the individual and the exact situations which a person is facing; and (c) that any attempt to increase gratitude therapeutically is done carefully based on clinician judgment in collaboration with the client. This, until more research is conducted, is the best way to ensure that beneficial rather than harmful gratitude is being promoted, and that it will have a positive rather than negative impact on a person’s life.

Note

- 1 Aristotle did not specifically consider gratitude in *Nicomachean Ethics*. From his other work it seems that he considered gratitude to not be a characteristic for which the situationally appropriate usage would be socially considered an excellent expression of humanity (failing his test for inclusion). He saw gratitude as generally aversive as it reflected an imbalance in what one is giving and receiving. This is perhaps closer to indebtedness, which has since been shown by research to be a separate emotion caused by different appraisals and leading to different thought action tendencies (Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006). Difficulty of translation from classical sources (including different concepts of emotions) can make it unclear whether the same topic is being discussed in ancient and contemporary work. Aristotle seems focused on transactional gratitude (or perhaps indebtedness), whereas (at least in later Stoic accounts) the wide sense of gratitude representing a general sense of appreciation for what one has was revered. In this chapter we aim to use Aristotle’s wider conceptualization of virtue and apply it to contemporary conceptions of gratitude, rather than present the Aristotelean view of the emotion (which is discussed extensively in Carr, in press). Given that he explicitly chose to apply his framework to characteristics *within his own time and culture* that were considered excellent, we consider it legitimate to apply a virtues ethics framework analysis to characteristics valued in our time and place. We stress, however, that we are applying a loosely Aristotelean framework rather than representing Aristotle’s views.

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