The Theories and Effect of Gratitude: A System Review

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Abstract. Gratitude is an essential element of human cooperation and morality. Massive amounts of research have been conducted over the past several decades, and research that focus on gratitude has arisen in recent years. However, academia lacks integration of research. This review will intergrade the information and research results from different papers to provide a coherent approach and understanding of gratitude. The purpose of this review is to analyze and expound on different theories of gratitude, the factors that influence gratitude, and their impact on people's lives. With the approach of literature reviewing, this paper discusses the origin and definition of morality as the thankful expressions from beneficiaries to benefactors. This paper lists three theories to explain gratitude: morality-as-Cooperation, moral Sentiments, and cognitive emotion theory of gratitude. The level of altruistic intention, specificity of helping behavior, and the level of appreciation of gratitude are the main factors affecting gratitude, which affects people's life satisfaction and happiness.

Keywords: Gratitude, Morality-as-Cooperation, Cognitive Emotion Theory.

1. Introduction

From a social and life perspective, gratitude is valued as essential when dealing with interpersonal relationships. It seems that showing gratitude after receiving help from others shows the politeness of the beneficiary, as well as how morally good they are as a part of society. People often associate a lack of gratitude with rudeness and unreasonable, therefore, reducing the willingness to help others who do not demonstrate gratitude in the future. Children and teenagers are often taught by adults to behave kindly and respectfully by conveying thankfulness every time someone helps them. Thus, in this viewpoint, gratitude has a strong correlation with societal moral values and is one of the direct determinants of whether someone is "good" or "bad". This perspective had been explained in terms of science and psychology already.

On the other hand, the research perspective suggests gratitude is developed as a catalyst for prosocial behaviors and the growth of society. Researchers focus on the origin, definition, traits, factors that influence gratitude, effects/outcomes of gratitude, experiments that justify propositions and assumptions, the relation between gratitude and positive/negative emotions (mental well-being), and how gratitude can be used to solve particular dilemmas or intervene psychotherapeutically, etc. when studying the concept of gratitude. In general, academia is currently working on explaining the existence of gratitude: how it is formed and how it is affecting other areas of psychological activity by providing evidence and examples from all different aspects. The current research status of gratitude among psychological researchers is complete as all of the above aspects were being examined in great detail. However, there is a lack of informational concordance because all of these studies and research papers were spread chaotically over academia and academic webpages. Not a lot of review could be found, which means further researchers will have to devote a lot of their time to read the prior literature inefficiently unless more review articles that collect information and data from a vast amount of sources can be provided to the researchers. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to supply information from multiple aspects in a collected paper while directly pointing out the future implications according to the missing details within this review. Future researchers should advance their productivity in investigating the current research status and progress after accessing this paper. The contents are arranged in the order of gratitude's definition and features, gratitude-related theories, and effects of gratitude. The subsections of definition and features of gratitude; the

subsections under gratitude related model are Morality-as-Cooperation (MAC) model, theory of Moral Sentiments, and Cognitive-emotion theory of gratitude; subsections of effects of gratitude are relation to reciprocal altruism and trust and outcome as happiness.

2. Method

This review article analyses and evaluates the moral feeling of gratitude during cooperation based on the Morality-as-Cooperation (MAC) model developed by Curry et al. in 2018 [1]. Additional studies mentioned in the review are from Google Scholar and Web of Science. Only papers that were published after 1990 are included in this article to ensure the accuracy and effectiveness of reasoning and data. Since the MAC idea originated in 2018, studies published two or more decades ago may not be able to justify and explain the mechanism fully. However, the hypothesis issued prior to 2000 was still included if further research and justification were conducted after 2000 because the examination was still valid and recent. To investigate "gratitude" in depth, this article reviews literature that focuses on the origination and definition of gratitude, the models and theories that explain gratitude, and the effects of gratitude. Consequently, three sections appear in this review in total.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Definition and Features of Gratitude

The feeling of gratitude is defined as a coping response and a moral virtue falling under the "Exchange" category of the seven cooperative foundations [2]. The seven moral values include kinship, mutualism, exchange, hawk, dove, division, and possession. Researchers and scientists have agreed on the definition that conceptualizes gratitude as a virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a personality trait, and a coping response [3]. Since gratitude is emotional feedback for kind acts, such expression reinforces supporters for hospitality and altruism [4]. The presentation of gratitude should be discussed around the three aspects: the benefit, the beneficiary, and the benefactor. The beneficiary usually experiences gratitude in return for the benefit brought by the benefactor [5].

In order to exemplify the feeling of gratitude, specific detectable features of gratitude (e.g., an emotion, an attitude, a personality trait) are being examined in an experiment conducted by Fehr and Russell [6].

94 undergraduate students aged from 18 to 30, with an average age of 21, participated in this experiment. Participants were instructed to brainstorm as many relevant attributes of gratitude as they could by imagining they were explaining the term "gratitude" to someone who had never experienced gratitude. The experiment conductor also told participants that those attributes could either be positive or negative in order to eliminate potential biases.

As a result, the features of appreciation, thankful, satisfaction, happy feeling, and loving were voted as the top five traits of gratitude. The five aspects (virtue, attitude, emotion, personality traits, and coping response proposed by Emmons et al. [5]) of gratitude were all supported by the result. For example, the central feature of "compassion" refers to emotion and "hugging" relates to a coping response. Thus, the assertion of the definition is proven to be accurate.

3.2 Gratitude related model/theory

3.2.1 Morality-as-Cooperation model

Morality-as-Cooperation model was first established by professor Oliver Scott Curry in 2016. He indicated that on a biological and revolutionary aspect, the term "Morality" is defined as cooperation that emerged during the evolution of genes and species to bring greater benefits and more resources to groups compared to what individuals could earn [1]. The formation of more multicell organisms, chromosomes, and cells evidences such a cooperative strategy's effectiveness, enabling life to thrive through natural selection [7]. As more molecules start to replicate themselves, life begins. The

principle of cooperation affected not only the development of genes and cells but also the behaviors of animals and species. For instance, humans have lived in social groups for more than 50 million years, including 2 million years of intense collaboration [8].

From a modern point of view, these biological and cultural backgrounds encourage cooperative, social, and altruistic behaviors to pursue the best possible outcome. Therefore, human morality is together shaped by human instincts and laws [9]. In addition to the general definition of morality, MAC model was specified into seven categories-Kinship, mutualism, exchange, hawk, dove, division, and possession.

In this case, gratitude is a sub-value under the "exchange" category, also known as "reciprocity". The exchange was defined as the returning favor procedure of cooperation [1] to benefit both sides mutually. Species have the opportunity to abuse trust from other cooperative members by receiving the goods but never returning any help, which would break the reciprocity habit and eventually form a non-cooperation system [10]. On the other hand, those who decided to cooperate would feel grateful after each round of exchange and trade. The subcomponents of reciprocity are patience, trust, guilt, apology, forgiveness, as well as gratitude.

3.2.2 Theory of Moral Sentiments

In the psychology paper, the theory of Moral Sentiments was presented by Adam Smith in 1790 and was edited by future scholars in 1976. Under the influence of Christianity, Smith believed human sentiments were the factors that drive individuals to conduct moral judgments they we deemed to be correct. According to his understanding, gratitude is one of the main reasons for being kind to a benefactor [11]. Gratitude encourages the recipient to acknowledge the gift from the benefactor and thus find ways to establish two-way cooperation and reinforce the reciprocity obligation for both sides.

Adam Smith also posited three psychological rules that were crucial to the development of gratitude. Firstly, recipients were more likely to express gratitude when they sensed the altruistic intention of benefactors. In other words, beneficiaries would be less able to communicate thankfulness if the benefactor was just helping them incidentally. Secondly, the more successful the supporter helped when dealing with a specific problem, the more grateful the beneficiary would convey. Thirdly, recipients would experience gratitude truthfully if the benefactors were able to understand and relate to their gratitude. Additionally, it was concluded that gratitude could occur across different species after meeting these three fundamental laws, such as when pets were providing companionship to their masters [11].

3.2.3 Cognitive-Emotion Theory of Gratitude

Cognitive-emotion psychological theory was developed during the second half of 20th century. Psychologists such as Adam Smith, Heider, Weiner Ortony, Clore, and Collins took lead in the investigations. Heider hypothesised that the level of gratitude from beneficiaries would decrease if the benefactors pressured them to convey thankfulness and appreciation because gratitude was regarded as an internal mindset rather than something that could be influenced by external forces, such as obligations and rules, by the cognitive-emotion theorists [12].

In extension of the basic definition, Weiner classified general emotions into two main types: outcome-dependent feelings and attribution-dependent feelings [13]. Outcome-dependent emotion was affected by the final outcome of events: people feel sorrow and frustrated when facing negative outcome, people feel delightful when experiencing positive consequences. To the contrary, attribution-dependent emotions result from the reason and process of a particular consequence instead of the direct final outcome. Scientists classified gratitude as an attribution-dependent emotion since individuals are attributing their final situation to the efforts or behaviors of others [14].

3.3 Effects of Gratitude

3.3.1 Relation to reciprocal altruism and trust

The assertion that gratitude originated to facilitate reciprocal altruism was first proposed by Trivers [15]. He explained that the emotion of gratitude had been chosen to modulate human responses to

altruistic behavior as an emotion that is sensitive. This viewpoint was proven in a large amount of future research.

As gratitude is a reinforcer of prosocial behavior, it promotes altruism by showing thankfulness to the benefactor to recognize and praise their cooperative efforts. This emotion from the beneficiary encourages the benefactor to behave prosaically again in the future. Dunn and Schweitzer discovered that participants who expressed their gratefulness at least one time per day (creating grateful emotion in the present) reported higher levels of trust toward a third party than participants who were asked to describe a time when they felt angry, guilty, or proud [16]. Thankfulness leads to crediting others for their achievements. Since trust and a willingness to give others credit for their achievements are crucial in forming a healthy social interaction, the psychological consequences of gratitude are vital. As the trust increase between strangers, apathy for helping others converts into reciprocal altruism [4].

3.3.2 Happiness as a outcome

A strong association is found between gratitude and well-being as gratitude has a positive emotional impact on both the beneficiaries and benefactors [17, 18]. Gratitude is linked to happiness, pride, hope, contentment, optimism, and vitality [19]. In an empirical study of emotion taxonomy, gratitude was categorized into a group that was deemed as the activation of positive and interpersonal feelings that are based on respect and trust. On the contrary, gratitude, and contempt, hate, jealousy were judged to be the opposite in the following study [20]. The analyst Gallup performed a survey in 1998 that justified the above explanation by conveying that 90% of the respondents described their feeling as “somewhat happy” or “extremely happy” after expressing gratitude [21].

From a real-life perspective, scientists discovered that there is a proportional correlation between the capability of appreciation and awareness of one’s fortune and the level of satisfaction one is experiencing.

4. Implications

Four avenues for future research seem especially promising. First, referring to the experiment by Fehr and Russell on gratitude features, the 52 features justify the accuracy of Emmon’s gratitude definition. However, some of the listed features are blurry and hard to define. For instance, Further studies and researchers could work on conceptualizing gratitude scientifically and directly instead of explaining the term using other subjective terms. Professional researchers can also examine the change of brain waves and observe which part of the brain is reacting when people are expressing gratitude to seek the reason for the existence of gratitude by observing its inside features.

Second, Trivers’ model proposed that trust between strangers within a community is enhanced when gratitude is expressed. What if someone expresses gratitude to their kin, who has established a strong sense of trust with him/her already? What would be the reason for gratitude in this scenario? Further studies should focus on examining the correlation between kinship and gratitude to understand if gratitude is only a tool for strangers or everyone regardless of closeness.

Third, the 3.2. 1 MAC model presented the subcomponents of reciprocity as patience, trust, guilt, apology, forgiveness, as well as gratitude. Since only the subelement of gratitude has been reviewed and investigated in this paper, future studies can choose to review the other five components, as listed above, alongside. That will lead scholars to a more comprehensive overview of reciprocity as a cooperative option and a moral virtue.

Fourth, the 3.2.1 MAC model section mentioned that the subcomponents of reciprocity are patience, trust, guilt, apology, forgiveness, as well as gratitude. This review paper only analyzed the subcomponent of gratitude; therefore, this paper suggests future reviewers focus on the other five elements, as listed above, to integrate information to a better extent.

Fifth, in the 3.2.2 Theory of Moral Sentiments section, three rules that explained the variation of levels of gratitude were introduced. Although the first rule stated that recipients were more likely to express gratitude when they sensed the altruistic intention of benefactors, it was just a pure

assumption with no experimental and data proof. The element was also described in an abstract way. To improve the validity of this claim, future studies should examine "to what extent does having a clear intention leads to a higher level of gratitude than incidental cooperation brings" by performing experiments that will test how the level of thankfulness of participants vary based on the benefactor's different intention.

5. Conclusion

This review had focused primarily on the gratitude's definition and features, gratitude-related theories, and effects of gratitude. In the first section, gratitude was defined as a emotional response for kind acts where beneficiaries express their appreciation and thankfulness to the benefactors. The definition and origin of gratitude was proven by a prototype analysis. In the second section, three theories of gratitude: MAC, Theory of Modern Sentiments, and Cognitive-Emotion Theory of Gratitude, are being introduced. MAC discussed how the emotion of gratitude drives the cooperation between/across species; Theory of Modern Sentiments proposed three rules that determine the development of gratitude-the altruistic intention, the level of success of helping behavior, and the ability for benefactors to discover and understand the gratitude expressed by beneficiaries. In the last section, the idea that gratitude acts as a modulator for altruistic behaviors was being indicated while the proportional relationship between gratitude and positive emotions was being proposed.

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