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Gratitude contemplation as a method to improve human well-being and physical functioning: theoretical review of existing research

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Abstract

Research in positive psychology aims to find and develop diverse ways to improve human well-being and the psychophysical functioning (Fredrickson, 2008; Seligman, 2002; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). As an example, the studies regard such concepts as positive emotions, character strengths or meaning in life. One of the most frequently studied constructs is also gratitude, that is regarded as the appreciation of all what is meaningful, as well as valuable, to oneself (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Also, the social aspect of being grateful, and the effects of gratitude on one's health and physical functioning, are frequently emphasized (McCullough, Kimeldorf & Cohen, 2008; Fox, Kaplan, Damasio and Damasio 2015; Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008). Among great amount of work about general gratitude already, there is still little research about gratitude contemplation, one of the exercises that enable a person experiencing gratitude in form of meditation. In this article, first I explain the meaning of the gratitude construct and its impact on peoples psychophysical state in general. Then, I analyze one of the newest gratitude activity, that is gratitude contemplation, its definition, the way of use and the results of recent empirical studies worldwide. Finally, I critically discuss the findings and conclude with future steps for further research on gratitude contemplation. I believe that the results and analysis presented in the article create a base for further research in the area of positive psychology.

Key words: gratitude, contemplation, meditation, positive psychology, well-being

Introduction: What is gratitude and how it influences human functioning

Gratitude, from medieval Latin *gratitudo* or from Latin *gradus* means ‘pleasing, thankful’ (Oxford Dictionary). Researchers define it diverse, as an emotion, an attitude, as well as a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or also as a coping response (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). As follow, gratitude is perceived as a complex construct and it refers to both positive and negative areas of human being, so it can be perceived in both positive and negative way. For example, it has various synonyms such as acknowledgment, appreciativeness, and grace but also, it can mean a sense of obligation and indebtedness (Thesaurus). Gratitude became a point of interest basically from the beginning of Positive Psychology, that is when Peterson and Seligman (2004) counted it as one of 24 Character Strengths and Virtues classification, an alternative to pathological one, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, APA, 2013). Nowadays, the concept of gratitude became a popular and frequently examined topic of study in the area of positive psychology (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Kaczmarek, 2014).

What distinguishes gratitude from other positive emotions such as happiness or hope is a social aspect (McCullough, Kimeldorf & Cohen, 2008). Fox, Kaplan, Damasio, and Damasio (2015) regard gratitude as a social emotion that shows someone’s appreciation for the things the other people have done for him/her. Algoe et al. (2008) add, that gratitude plays a crucial role in regulating the beginning and maintenance of social relationships. From the perspective of positive psychology, gratitude is described for example by Barbara Fredrickson (2001). Regarding *the broaden-and-build theory*, gratitude, next to other positive emotions, enables change of not only individuals but also of organizations and communities. The author explains that grateful people are more likely to behave in a prosocial way, for both their benefactors and third-party beneficiaries. She describes felt gratitude as a „creative force“, that initiates behaviors that surpass the experience of the giver of gratitude (Fredrickson, 2001). What is more, gratitude strengthens interpersonal relations, among acquaintances and family, as well as among the other people, connected to the person in work or public life (Szczęśniak, 2007). According to the object of gratitude, it can be directed to an other-person, also to nonhuman or impersonal origin (Steindl-Rast, 2004).

When it comes to influencing on human functioning, gratitude, perceived as „willingness to thank somebody and appreciation of life“, is frequently defined as one of the crucial factors to improve human well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). It is also said that it helps people to manage difficult and stressful situations in daily life (Fredrickson, 2001). Gratitude also supports building a high-quality relationship between a grateful person and the receiver of

gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008). Evidence seems to suggest that gratitude improves physical and psychological health. For example, Emmons (2013), one of the most fruitful popularizers of gratitude concept, confirmed in multiple examinations that gratitude training increases the level of happiness, as well as reduces the level of depression and has positive physical benefits such as strengthens immune systems and lowering blood pressure. Gratitude also increases self-esteem (Chen, 2014) and also mental strength, as well as it improves sleep quality. It enhances empathy as well as reduces aggression (Ziegler, 2012) what has a positive influence on social relationships. A grateful person is more likely to behave prosocially.

Researchers claim that relationship between gratitude and happiness is complex and while psychologists focus mainly on benefits of the concept, there is also philosophical literature where is emphasized that from ethical point of view in some situations gratitude may be not appropriate way to behave (Wood, Emmons, Algoe, Froh, Lambert & Watkins, 2016). For example, experiencing gratitude may be comingled with conflicted emotions, when somebody feels benefits and harms at the same time (Nussbaum, 2001). William McDougall (1929) believed, that gratitude awe, admiration but also envy, jealousy, and embarrassment, so a person must feel inferior towards the giver. It shows a crucial feature of gratitude concept, mainly that even if usually gratitude is desirable it also contains some characteristics that might lead somebody to experience it ambivalent. Researchers claim that it is important to distinguish gratitude from indebtedness (Steindl-Rast, 2004). *The broaden-and-built theory* claims that only grateful thinking leads to creative and broad thoughts how to repay the gift. In contrast, indebtedness causes only narrow thinking of what to do to pay back to the benefactor. What is more when talking about the complexity of the construct, in one study, the negative effect of gratitude, decreasing of well-being was founded (Sin, Della Porta, & Lyubomirsky, 2011) in contrast to the general pattern in the literature.

The main aim of this article is to describe a specific gratitude intervention – gratitude meditation - and to analyze its influence on people functioning, especially on well-being and the physiological state. The questions I would like to answer are: How is defined gratitude meditation? What is the theoretical background and what is the research about the construct exists already in positive psychology area? Also, what are the next points to discover?

The recent study: Gratitude contemplation

Gratitude contemplation, next to practicing kindness or writing a gratitude letter is one of the simple positive activities. Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) claim that such intentional actions significantly influence one's happiness level. Regarding the studies, the effect of a positive

activity on well-being is moderated by person-activity fit, features of persons (e.g., their motivation and effort), and features of positive activities (e.g., their dosage and variety). Some simple gratitude exercises were already developed to increase the level of gratitude (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), however, there exists still little research about gratitude contemplation.

Research on meditation in general started in the 1970s and has since rapidly evolved (Murphy, Donovan & Taylor, 1997; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). The examination usually emphasized symptom reduction and alleviation and little attention was paid to development, growth, and cultivation of positive psychological features and experience (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). One of the main goals of meditation is to uncover what is positive and to catalyze the internal potential for healing and development, what was largely ignored so far (Shapiro & Walsh, 1984; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Researchers broadly examine several gratitude activities such as gratitude journal, counting blessings and gratitude visit so far (Seligman, Rashin & Peterson, 2006). In this article I focus on one of the newest and still developing method, that is gratitude contemplation as a small number of researchers and theorists have explored and continue to explore the positive effects of meditation. The positive exercise is Buddhist-derived and is also known as gratitude reflection or gratitude meditation (Chan, 2010; O'Leary & Dockray, 2015). The method is currently being examined, focusing on a specific positive quality of human being: gratitude.

Researchers talk about a couple of different meditation techniques that evolve gratitude. One of them is Naikan Meditation, that was described by a Japanese psychotherapist, Yoshimoto Naikan and was derived from Jodo-shin sect of Buddhism (Reynolds, 1983). It is based upon the philosophy that a human being is fundamentally favored with the unmeasured benevolence of others. The therapy brings a patient into a state of deep self-awareness and self-reflection thanks to the general meditation techniques such as focusing on breath and is based on 3 questions: *What have I received from _____ ? What have I given to _____? What troubles and difficulties have I caused _____ ?* (Kwiatek, 2012). It begins at 5:30 in the morning and finishes at 9:00 in the evening, for seven days. The patient sits in a narrow space to eliminate distractors and to facilitate self-reflection. The instruction of Naikan meditation is as followed: *1. Recollect and examine your memories of the care and the benevolence that you have received from a particular person during a particular time in your life.* (Beginning frequently with the examination of relationship to mother, the personal experience and reflect relationships with other family members and people from the past till the present) *2. Recollect and examine your memories of what have you returned to that person.* *3. Recollect and examine*

the troubles and worries you have given that person. The counselor examines the patient briefly (about 5 minutes) every 90 minutes. The examination should be conducted in a moralistic manner, focusing the patient on own experience (Murase, 1986). One of the main outcomes of the intervention is an improvement in personal relationships and increase or appearance of the feeling of gratitude for others, and also achieving confidence. The Naikan therapy seems very complex and demanding, anyway, it was already successfully used while working with patients with disorders such as anorexia nervosa, alcoholism, neuroses and personality disorders, as well as in work with resocialization of criminals, consultancy service, at school and in business (Kwiatek, 2012).

Another type of Meditation focused on Gratitude is Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM, Fredrickson, 2001). LKM includes the praxis of mindfulness, what is marked by frequent scholars and practitioners from traditions such as Theravadin, Japanese, and Chinese Zen (e.g., Sanharakshita, 2004; Suzuki, 2011). The time required for this method is 15 minutes per day. First, a person is asked to take the comfortable body position and relaxed, follow the instruction. Second, there is a part is called „receiving loving-kindness“, when the person focuses on someone who loves and cherishes her/him very much. The task here is to imagine that the important people in person’s life send him/her wishes of happiness, well-being, and health. Next part is called „Sending loving-kindness to loved ones“ and here, the person sends love and kindness back to the closest ones, repeating following phrases: *„May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain. May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain. May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain.* Another part is „Sending loving-kindness to neutral people“. The person imagines someone he/she doesn’t know well and toward whom he’she has no particular feelings and repeats in mind following sentences: *Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness. Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness. Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness.* The last part is about sending wishes of happiness, well-being, and health to all living beings. The person repeats in mind sentences: *Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health. Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health. Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health.*“ At the end, the person takes two deep breath and release, focuses on feelings and the state of mind after meditation and when he/she is ready, opens the eyes. Fredrickson emphasizes that LKM is an example of an activity that bases on imagining an object of attention and then, it requires a mindful awareness of it. Important is, that exercise should be a mindful investigation of what is happening when a person generates loving-kindness. Only mechanical repetition of images

or sentence is not enough. It is believed that thanks to the process a person gains insight of the emotions and understands own relation to them (Fredrickson, 2001).

The third kind of meditation is grateful contemplation. It seems to be the simplest activity according to the complexity of the task, as a person is asked to contemplate “the things for which he/she is grateful for” either once a week or three times a week. The individuals keep the records of their positive and negative affect, coping behaviors, health behaviors, physical symptoms, and overall life appraisals. Examples of “blessings” listed by participants in studies conducted by Emmons and McCullough (2003) were for example “a healthy body“, “my mom,” and “AOL instant messenger.”

Results of empirical studies

The research about gratitude contemplation is still a new direction in psychology. However, some studies have been done already and its number is still growing (Fredrickson et al., 2008). For example, Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin (2011) proved that gratitude contemeplation increases our self-esteem. They examined that people after a four-week gratitude contemplation programme have reported increased life satisfaction and self-esteem in comparison to control group participants. The researchers explain that gratitude helps people to feel better about the circumstances, what leads to feeling better about ownself (Rash et al., 2011).

Gratitude contemplation is also used to help people with such disorders as anorexia, alcoholism, neurosis or personality disorders (Kwiatek, 2012). Evidence seems to suggest that conducting daily Naikan therapy is a successful method for maintaining the psychological and psychosomatic state following the intensive Naikan therapy (Sengoku, Murata, Kawahara, Imamura & Nakagome, 2010). Daily Naikan meditation is perceived as an important factor to prevent the repetition of numerous mental disorders. Anyway, some detailed data still need to be provided.

In other studies, researchers found out that the “Positive- or Sacred-Word focused Meditation” significantly improves personal well-being (Rao & Kemper, 2016). Also, the “Loving-kindness“ causes significant increases in self-compassion, as well as in self-judgment, self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. What is more, increased confidence in providing compassionate care to others was reported in these studies. The research about LKM indicates that this kind of meditation increases positive emotions that were experienced as the results of a meditation activity. Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) found out that gratitude meditation supports personal resources e.g. physical health and social relationships, and consequently, increases life satisfaction. What is interesting, the loving-kindness meditation

research, shows a significant increase in positive emotions by all participants, even those with lower baseline positive emotions. Participants with higher baseline positive emotions increase relatively earlier in positive emotions over the course of the 8-week (Fredrickson et al., 2008). Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre (2002) emphasize that one of the main goals of meditation is finding the positive and expanding the people's internal potential for self-healing and development. It is consistent with the aim of positive psychology: the drive a new perspective in psychology from repairing troubles and bad conditions in humans life to also building the finest elements in life.

The findings advocate that LKM correlates with a decrease in negative affect and an increase in positive affect. Also, primary intervention studies support an application of these strategies in clinical populations. Evidence seems to suggest that combining gratitude meditation with empirically supported cure, like cognitive behavioral therapy, can be applied in diverse psychological areas that engage interpersonal processes, such as social anxiety and marital conflict, anger (Hofmann, Grossman & Hinton, 2012). LKM aims to flourish unconditional kindness to every human being. Hutcherson, Seppala, and Gross (2008) claim that even a short, 7-minute exercise in LKM causes small or moderately strong improvements in positive feelings towards unknown people and own self. Similar evidence, a period in another study with nonclinical populations shows Fredrickson et al. (2008), where the training consisted of six 60-minute weekly sessions. Even if the LKM exercise took only 15–20 minutes itself, the effects of the treatment were also modest. According to clinical studies, the LKM treatment contained 8 weekly 1-hour parts to decrease chronic low back pain (Carson et al., 2005), and 12 1-hour weekly parts for treating patients with paranoid symptoms in schizophrenia (Mayhew & Gilbert, 2008).

Discussion and summary

Although the number of research on gratitude is growing fast for the last 15 years (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2001; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), gratitude meditation is still a new concept in positive psychology. Anyway, the results of recent studies bring „a green light“ for further exploration. Gratitude meditation seems to have a positive influence on peoples' psychological functioning, even when the time of training was rather short (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Pro gratitude mediatation are the results of recent studies that say that gratitude meditation has the positive influence on dealing with difficult situations and the stress connected to that

(McCullough & Emmons, 2003), personal development (Hofmann et al., 2012) and psychophysiological functioning (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

What could be a danger of practicing gratitude meditation is a fact that in some cases gratitude contemplation might cause conflicted emotions, for example, gratitude and indebtedness when a person feels benefits and harms at the same time (Nussbaum, 2001). It is said that Naika therapy is ineffective while working with patients with psychosis, however, it is possible to work with depressive patients. The reason is that the emotions experienced during Naikan therapy are different than the ones felt by patients with depression (Murase, 1986).

There are several future steps to take in research on gratitude contemplation. First, it seems beneficial to examine different age groups. Bono and Froh (2009) claim that gratitude might be more beneficial to the youth than just temporary happiness. The reason is that thanks to evolving in youth a desire for “upstream generativity”, the experience of gratitude can motivate to give back to their peers, communities, and the world. There is already some research about gratitude and the social assimilation, or motivation to use own strengths to support others and feel connected to others, and gratitude contemplation could be the next step. Another aspect of research on gratitude contemplation is to measure its influence interculturally. There is some research that says that collectivist cultures gratitude activity might have different effects than in individualistic cultures (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Conclusions

Meditation is defined as a mind-body technique, in general. This category includes interventions that employ a variety of techniques designed to facilitate the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms.“ (Goyal, Singh & Sibinga, 2014). The “family” of techniques traditionally has been divided into concentrative meditation and mindfulness meditation (Goleman, 1972). The mantra-based techniques there is a try to hinder awareness by focusing attention on a single object. The practitioner attempts to focus complete attention on the object of meditation, ignoring the other stimuli around. It could be the breath, a mantra, a single word (e.g., “one”; see Benson & Proctor, 1984), or specific sounds (see Carrington, 1998). In mindfulness meditation, an attempt is made to attend nonjudgmentally to all stimuli in the internal and external world, but not to ruminate on any particular stimulus. What is more, some meditation techniques involve integrated elements of both concentrative and opening types. For example, a person may focus on breathing (Zen and vipassana meditation) or a mantra (e.g., TM), but be willing to allow attention to focus on other stimuli if they become predominant and then return to the breathing (or mantra). Gratitude meditation

seems to be an example of concentrative meditation, where a person focuses on the feeling of gratitude. Anyway, it is said, that meditation techniques are dynamic and most descriptions of meditation do not account for the dynamic nature of meditation (Goyal et al., 2014).

The results of gratitude activities suggest that short-term increases in happiness are possible and, furthermore, that optimal timing is important. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade (2005) founded that students who regularly expressed gratitude showed increases in wellbeing over the course of the study relative to controls, but these increases were observed only among students who performed the activity just once a week. It shows that also the aspect of frequency of the gratitude exercise is still to explore. Concluding, much more research in the area of gratitude contemplation is needed whilst exploring its influence on human functioning. The main aim of that seems to give the exercise evidence-based instructions so that more people could benefit from it in their private and work life. I hope that the analysis presented in the article will be a base to further exploration of positive psychology research, especially about gratitude contemplation.

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