

Part of the **College of Science & Engineering**Maths CS Psych ► Psychology ► PosPsy11-12 ► Wikis ► Wiki ► **4. Gratitude**[Update this Wiki](#)Groups Wiki for 8) Only remarketing
??:

Other Wikis:

Search Wiki: [View](#) [Edit](#) [Links](#) [History](#)[Reload this page](#)

4. Gratitude

Re-marketing of Traditional Topics?

[:Gratitude:](#)

[Introduction](#)

‘As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them. ‘

- John F. Kennedy

Gratitude is defined as a state of thankfulness and appreciation, with an inclination to return kindness. Certainly this is not a new concept and is not exclusive to positive psychology. Gratitude has existed in the form of thanksgiving and worship in world religions for centuries and even the first exploration, of the concept of gratitude, was done by a Roman philosopher. However, the development of Positive Psychology has seen gratitude be empirically tested with subjective well-being and individual differences.

[Traditional Topics](#)

Religion

McCullough et al. (2001) believe gratitude to have three morally relevant functions of a moral barometer, a moral motivator and a moral reinforcer. These moral functions are clearly seen in the basic idea of such world religions as Judaism and Christianity. The individual sees God as the benevolent provider and sustainer of life and therefore, feelings of gratitude induce a motivation to obey his commandments. God will confer further prosperity and rewards to those who express gratitude through prayer, sacrifice and ritual which functions as the reinforcer. Gratitude is a core focus, of teaching, throughout religious scripture. For example, Psalm 118:24 reads:



The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice and be glad.

Gratitude is also a central component of religious practice through worship, usually hymns, and prayer, where the individual praises God for his or her blessings. **Rosmarin et al. (2010)** investigated the relationship of active religious practice, of Christianity and Judaism, with anxiety and depression, and found that gratitude and spirituality acted as a protective factor against these negative emotions.

Original Scientific Exploration

The first exploration of gratitude was by Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher. He believed that one of the principle great vices of human



nature was ingratitude and therefore, sought to address the complexity that underlines the problem of gratitude. His ideas addressed the intentions of both giver and receiver of benefits, egalitarianism and debts of gratitude. However, Seneca did not provide a systematic analysis and his arguments are addressed in a haphazard and incomplete manner. Despite this, the analysis of gratitude progressed very little, from these first writings, until Adam Smith.

In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith recognised the importance of human virtues and passions and therefore, attempted to address the mechanism that gave rise to feelings of gratitude. Although Smith emphasised the role of self-interest over benevolence, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1766), he also argues that, for society to flourish, a certain moral capital is necessary. He saw gratitude as one of the major components in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and sought to provide an explanation of moral judgement in the world. Smith's analysis provides a secular account of gratitude, free from the religious and hierarchal assumptions of medieval thought, and concludes that gratitude is a human phenomenon which binds people together within society.

Positive Psychology

Empirical Research

Although it is evident that gratitude has been a topic of interest prior to the introduction of Positive Psychology, it is only recently gratitude has been tested empirically.

Well-being

The benefits of feeling and expressing gratitude have gradually become a more widely researched area (**Sheldon et al., 2011**). Considering the



events in your life, for which you should feel grateful, appears to act as a coping mechanism for stress. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, gratitude appeared as the number one factor relating to resilience and coping (**Fredrickson et al., 2003**). Gratitude has also been shown to reduce upward social comparisons because of its incompatibility with resentment and envy. Instead, the individual will appreciate the positive qualities in others and feel happy over their good fortune (Smith et al., 1776). Gratitude is also incompatible with materialism as each represents opposing motivational goals (**Sheldon et al., 2011**). Materialism can lead to life dissatisfaction (**Richins & Dawson, 1992**) and

unhappiness (**Kasser & Kanner, 2004**), among other things, whereas grateful people are less likely to define personal success in terms of materialistic goals.

Emmons & McCullough (2003) examined the effects of gratitude on psychological and physical well-being. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions of either hassles, gratitude listing or either neutral life events or social comparison. In the first study, participants kept weekly records of their moods, coping behaviours, health behaviours, physical symptoms and overall life appraisals. Participants in the second study kept the same record but did so daily. In the third study, participants suffered from a neuromuscular disease and were randomly assigned to either a gratitude condition or a control condition. Most of the outcome measures showed that the gratitude groups exhibited heightened well-being, as compared to controls, and a large effect was found on the positive affect of gratitude.

Individual Differences



One of the recent areas of research into gratitude has focused around individual differences in its expression. Gratitude can be seen as an important personality trait, primarily because it appears to have one of the strongest links with mental health than any other personality variable. A study by **Park et al. (2004)** discovered that 18.5% of individual differences in a person's happiness could be predicted by the amount of gratitude they felt.

Wood et al. (2008) tested whether gratitude could explain variance between individual satisfaction with life (SWL), after controlling for the domains and facets of the Big Five. Participants (n=389) completed the GQ6 measure of gratitude, the NEO-PI-R measure of the Big Five and the SWL scale. At the facet level, gratitude correlated with each of the Big Five domains, but the strongest relationship was seen with well-being and social functioning.

[With regard to 'gratitude', is Positive Psychology just a restructuring of a traditional topic?](#)

World religions have existed for centuries and have emphasised gratitude as

a central component of worship and prayer and the first exploration of gratitude was done by Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher. Seneca's analysis of gratitude was hardly developed further until Adam Smith, in the mid-eighteenth century, who investigated the underlying mechanisms of expressing gratitude. However, despite it being clear that gratitude has been a traditional topic of study, Positive Psychologists have formed empirical investigations which have resulted in evidence for the effects of gratitude on subjective well-being.

[Key Papers](#)

There is a book available in our university library called **Psychology of Gratitude by Emmons & McCollough (2004)**. It gives an excellent insight into the traditional topics surrounding the basis of Positive Psychology research.

With regard to the empirical studies within Positive Psychology, I recommend reading **Emmons & McCollough (2003)** to see the effect of gratitude on well-being. Individual differences have been found in the way people express gratitude and therefore, for this topic, I recommend you read **Wood et al. (2004)**.

[To Head to Another Topic...](#)

1. Signature Strengths

[Click link above for debate on Signature Strengths](#)

2. Mindfulness

[Click link above for debate on Mindfulness](#)

3. Learned Optimism

[Click link above for debate on Learned Optimism](#)

4. Gratitude

[Click link above for debate on Gratitude](#)

5. Wiki

[Click link above to head back to the title page and our general conclusions](#)

[References](#)

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Referring links:

1. Signature Strengths 2. Mindfulness 3. Learned Optimism 4. Gratitude Wiki



Jump to...



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