



Gratitude predicts psychological well-being above the Big Five facets

Alex M. Wood^{a,*}, Stephen Joseph^b, John Maltby^c

^aSchool of Psychological Sciences, University of Manchester, 1.18 Coupland Building 1, Room 1, Oxford Road, Manchester, England M13 9PL, United Kingdom

^bSchool of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, England, NG7 2RD, United Kingdom

^cSchool of Psychology, University of Leicester, Leicester, England, LE1 9HN, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study tests whether gratitude predicts psychological well-being above both the domains and facets of the five factor model. Participants ($N = 201$) completed the NEO PI-R measure of the 30 facets of the Big Five, the GQ-6 measure of trait gratitude, and the scales of psychological well-being. Gratitude had small correlations with autonomy ($r = .17$), and medium to large correlations with environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (r s ranged from .28 to .61). After controlling for the 30 facets of the Big Five, gratitude explained a substantial amount of a unique variance in most aspects of psychological well-being ($r_{\text{equivalent}} = .14$ to .25). Gratitude is concluded to be uniquely important to psychological well-being, beyond the effect of the Big Five facets.

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1. Introduction

Throughout history, religious, theological, and philosophical treatise have viewed gratitude as integral to well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Harpman, 2004). The systematic study of individual differences in gratitude has traditionally been neglected in psychology (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), probably due to a more general neglect of research into positive emotions (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006).

Conceptually, gratitude should be expected to be strongly related to well-being. Gratitude represents the quintessential positive personality trait, being an indicator of a worldview orientated towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008). Grateful people feel more frequent and intense grateful affect (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004), have more positive views of their social environments (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008), utilize productive coping strategies (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007a), have more positive traits (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008; Wood, Linley, Maltby,

Baliouis, & Joseph, 2008), better sleep (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, in press), and continually focus on the positive in their environments, with a greater appreciation of their life and their possessions (Wood et al., 2008). Such a life orientation towards the positive can be contrasted with a depressive worldview which typically involves a focus on the negative aspects of the self, world, and future (Beck, 1976). From a slightly different perspective, Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) see gratitude as integral to well-being, as it offers an alternative to the “hedonistic treadmill”, where ever more possessions need to be purchased in order to maintain short term gains in happiness. In contrast, gratitude may help to avoid the hedonistic treadmill by ensuring a daily appreciation of events. This perspective has achieved early support from the studies showing that “counting your blessings” has a causal effect on well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Considerable recent empirical work has focused on showing empirically that gratitude is related to well-being (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; McCullough et al., 2002, 2004, Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Wood et al., 2007a). This research has suggested that gratitude is as strongly correlated with well-being as are other positive traits (Park et al., 2004), and has suggested that this relationship is causal (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). However, with one exception (Kashdan et al., 2006), research has focused on subjective well-being (SWB) and has ignored the potential relationship between gratitude and psychological well-being (PWB).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +447790816407.

E-mail address: alex.wood@manchester.ac.uk (A.M. Wood).

URL: <http://www.psych-sci.manchester.ac.uk/staff/alexwood> (A.M. Wood).

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The distinction between subjective and psychological well-being was first discussed by Aristotle (see Ryan & Deci, 2001). In the Aristotelian view, well-being can be dissociated into *hedonistic* and *eudemonic* components. Hedonistic well-being involves the experience of momentary pleasure, whereas eudemonic well-being involves acting in a way which is constructive, socially beneficial, and leads to personal growth. In more recent conceptions, hedonism is operationalized as SWB, and involves the frequent experience of positive affect, a rare experience of negative affect, and a feeling of satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984). In contrast, PWB is normally operationalized as involving self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). A large number of factor analytic studies have shown that PWB and SWB are correlated but distinct aspects of well-being (e.g., Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, (2002), McGregor & Little (1998), which have different patterns of correlates (Waterman, 1993). Conceptually, SWB measures an emotionally pleasant life, whereas PWB measures a life full of meaning, constructive activity, and growth.

In contrast to the large number of studies into gratitude and SWB, only one previous study has shown that gratitude is related to any aspect of PWB. Kashdan et al. (2006) showed that trait gratitude is related to daily self-regard, rewarding social activity, and the pursuit of intrinsically motivating activity. These relationships were shown to exist after removing the effects of dispositional positive and negative affect, suggesting that gratitude is not simply related to these PWB variables due to affective valiance. We expand on this study by examining whether gratitude is related to the full range of PWB variables, and by testing whether gratitude has a unique relationship with PWB, or whether gratitude is only related to PWB due to the confounding effect of the Big Five personality facets.

In the recent years, there has been a consensus that the Big Five traits of extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness represent most of personality at the highest level of abstraction (Goldberg, 1993; John & Srivastava, 1999). These variables cover the breadth of personality, including such variables as pro-sociality (under agreeableness); positive emotions, social-outgoingness, and energy (under extraversion); and negative emotions, depression, and anxiety (under neuroticism) (Costa & McCrae, 1995). As may be expected from a well-being variable, gratitude is positively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness, and negatively correlated with neuroticism (e.g., McCullough et al., 2004, Wood, Joseph, et al., 2008; Wood, Maltby, Gillett et al., 2008; Wood, Maltby, Stewart et al., 2008); together the Big Five variables explain between 21% and 28% of the variance in gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002). The Big Five variables are correlated with PWB (Schmutte & Ryff, 1997), raising the possibility that gratitude is only linked to PWB because of the third variable effects of the Big Five. The Big Five traits represent some of the most studied variables over the last 50 years (Goldberg, 1993; John & Srivastava, 1999). McCullough et al. (2002) argued that for gratitude research to have an impact on personality psychology it is necessary to show that the variable has incremental validity above the effects of the Big Five personality traits.

This paper reports on a test of whether gratitude is linked to PWB after removing the effects of the facets of the Big Five. Several previous studies have shown that gratitude is related to social and well-being variables after controlling for the domains of the Big Five (e.g., McCullough et al., 2002, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Gillett et al., 2008; Wood, Maltby, Stewart et al., 2008). However, in the five factor model personality is assumed to be hierarchically organized, with other personality traits existing underneath each of the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1999). In the NEO PI-R operationalization

(Costa & McCrae, 1992), six personality facets are measured for each of the five domains, with a total of 30 personality measures assessing the facet level of personality. For example, the domain “agreeableness” has the six facets of trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness. As gratitude is expected to be at the facet not the domain level of personality, a stronger test of the incremental validity of gratitude would control for the 30 NEO PI-R facets, rather than just the five domains. A large literature is developing which shows that a variety of outcomes can be better predicted by measuring each of the 30 facets rather than just using global measures of the Big Five domains (e.g., Ekehammar and Akrami (2007), Paunonen, Haddock, Forsterling, and Keinonen (2003), Reynolds and Clark, 2001). Showing that gratitude is related to well-being above the effects of the domains may simply be a result of including a facet level variable in the regression equation.

In the only previous study to show that gratitude is related to any variable above the effects of the Big Five facets, Wood et al. (2008) showed that gratitude has a unique relationship with satisfaction with life. To show an incremental validity above the effects of the Big Five facets, it is necessary to select outcome variables which are not confounded with the facets (for example depression would not be an appropriate outcome variable as it is one of the facets of neuroticism). Satisfaction with life is one such variable (Schimmack, Oishi, Furr, & Funder, 2004), and Wood et al. (2008) identified PWB as a similarly appropriate variable for future research. Thus, in addition to testing whether gratitude is uniquely related to PWB, the current paper provides one of the first tests of whether gratitude can predict any outcome above the effects of the facets of the Big Five. If gratitude was only linked to outcome variables because of shared variance with the Big Five facets, then the study of gratitude may still be valuable in understanding how people with particular Big Five facet configurations view the world (cf., McCullough et al., 2002). However, for gratitude to have a unique impact on personality psychology, it is necessary to show that gratitude can explain variance in outcome variables above the Big Five facets.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 201 undergraduate students (128 female and 73 male). Ages ranged from 18 to 26 and ethnicity was predominantly white (75%) or Indian (13%). After agreeing to complete the study, participants were directed to a secure university website where all measures were completed in a single sitting.

2.2. Measures

Gratitude was assessed with the gratitude questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002). Six items assess the frequency and intensity of gratitude, as well as the range of events which cause the emotion. Items are rated on a 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) scale. The GQ-6 has a unifactorial structure (shown through three confirmatory factor analyses), non-significant correlations with social desirability, good convergent validity with well-being and peer-ratings, and high test-retest reliability (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, and Joseph, 2008).

PWB was measured with the 18-item scales of psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Items assess self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy. Items are rated on a 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) scale. These scales have been used extensively in the previous research, which has

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