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Gratitude as an Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Strategy

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Abstract

Reviews the book, *The Spectrum of Gratitude Experience* by John Elfers and Patty Hlava (see record 2017-01801-000).

Elfers and Hlava articulate the gratitude experience from a scientific perspective. They present key features of the lived gratitude experience in separate chapters but nicely scaffold their argument. These authors effectively unravel the complexity of this affective experience and explain its utility. The authors weave the role of gratitude in interpersonal relationships throughout the book. Principally, they define gratitude as a positive emotional experience derived from being given a benefit, typically (although not exclusively) in caring relationships. The authors present the evolutionary origin of gratitude, define types of gratitude, and discuss its development in one's identity. Perhaps the most compelling information is on the effects of experiencing gratitude. This book is most relevant for affective scientists. The authors delicately bridge various theories of emotion (e.g., basic, cognitive, action tendencies) to provide a framework for the multifaceted nature of gratitude. You do not need to have a background in psychology to appreciate this book. It would interest anyone who is curious about the human condition. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2017 APA, all rights reserved)

Keywords

gratitude experience; interpersonal relationships; positive emotional experience; evolutionary origin; identity

Article Text

Expressing gratitude has become a commonplace prescription for experiencing greater joy. Indeed, social media sites have a tremendous number of memes regarding gratitude. As I sit to write this review, one site has 8,021,250 specific mentions of gratitude. Examples include “gratitude turns what we have into enough,” “gratitude unlocks the fullness of life,” and “gratitude is the open door to abundance.” In *The Spectrum of Gratitude Experience*, Elfers and Hlava articulate this lay understanding from a scientific perspective. They present key features of the lived gratitude experience in separate chapters but nicely scaffold their argument. These authors effectively unravel the complexity of this affective experience and explain its utility.

As such, this book is most relevant for affective scientists. The authors delicately bridge various theories of emotion (e.g., basic, cognitive, action tendencies) to provide a framework for the multifaceted nature of gratitude. Psychologists interested in this topic who specialize in niche areas may also find some of the chapters beneficial as brief refreshers in topics such as child development, personality, emotion, and trauma. The authors do not attempt to give a crash course in these topics but do succinctly, and in digestible quantities, present core concepts. Yet, you do not need to have a background in psychology to appreciate this book. It would interest anyone who is curious about the human condition.

The authors weave the role of gratitude in interpersonal relationships throughout the book. Principally, they define gratitude as a positive emotional experience derived from being given a benefit, typically (although not exclusively) in caring relationships. The authors present the evolutionary origin of gratitude, define types of gratitude, and discuss its development in one’s identity. Perhaps the most compelling information is on the effects of experiencing gratitude. Gratitude leads to increased positive affect and greater social connection. With that background, it seems reasonable to explore the possibility of gratitude as specific interpersonal emotion regulation strategy.

Emotion regulation research has grown exponentially in recent years. The majority of this work is on intrapersonal or “self” regulation most notably explained by Gross (1998). There is now also a growing body of literature on interpersonal regulation, or the regulation that occurs between individuals. Researchers have started to make this shift based on the recognition that most of our emotion regulation occurs in social contexts.

In the intrapersonal context, researchers have focused on cognitions and behaviors that downregulate or minimize negative affect. Two strategies that have received the bulk of research focus are reappraisal (cognitive) and suppression (behavioral). These, among others, have significant correlations with psychopathology and well-being (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012), particularly as they relate to lowering symptoms of negative affect. While findings in the interpersonal context are still emerging, one notable difference between it and intrapersonal regulation is that interpersonal regulation also aims to upregulate positive emotion (Levenson, Haase, Bloch, Holley, & Seider, 2014). Hence, gratitude as a regulation strategy could serve to increase positive affect not only in the individual but potentially in their partner. For the individual, it can include feelings of joy, love, release, warmth, and thankfulness. The authors even include a nonintuitive example of the way gratitude can be practiced such that it could serve as a regulation strategy. In that example, a person is told by a friend that his or her actions were hurtful. The authors suggest that if the person receives that information as a benefit of honesty and way to be a better friend—in other words show gratitude for the information—then the friendship can be enhanced. Undoubtedly, the friend will also experience more positive affect as opposed to resentment being expressed instead. Unfortunately, the authors did not explore in detail the experience of being the recipient of gratitude. However, they provide some evidence to support the idea that once gratitude is expressed, the relationship is strengthened, presumably because there is a shared positive affective experience.

Perhaps of even greater interest is the idea that gratitude reduces the boundaries between self and other. In the context of regulating a partner, the ability to remove psychological distance and foster a broader empathetic space would seem to create the ideal environment for effective interpersonal regulation. Indeed, they report that gratitude is a social glue binding mind, heart, and body. Thus, the future of gratitude research should include its use as an interpersonal regulation strategy.

On completing this review, there are an additional 79 mentions of gratitude on the social media site. Those posting on social media could look to Elfers and Hlava's recommendations on ways to increase the experience and exercise of gratitude. Indeed, it appears that the practice of increasing gratitude is here to stay.

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