

TOWARDS POSITIVE ORGANIZATION. THE EVOLUTION OF GRATITUDE

Jan RYBAK^{1*}, Agata WOLANIN²

¹Rzeszów University of Technology, Faculty of Management, Department of Quantitative Methods;
j.rybak@prz.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-6664-519X

²Rzeszów University of Technology, Faculty of Management, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences;
a.wolanin@prz.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-7679-9232

* Correspondence author

Purpose: Establishing the way the life history (LH) strategies and gratitude are related to each other.

Design/methodology/approach: Life History Theory provides an evolutionary framework for understanding specific developmental paths of species and individuals. There are certain trade-offs during a lifespan of an individual, they must face (for instance, somatic or reproductive effort, quality or quantity of offspring, mating or parenting). Depending on the choices a person makes, they exhibit a slow or a fast life history (LH) strategy. A latent variable underlying a set of solutions (strategy) is called K-Factor and is used to measure individual differences with regard to the pace of one's LH. People with a slow LH exhibit greater prosociality, tend to form long-term sexual relationships and their sexual maturation is slowed down. On the other hand, gratitude facilitates prosociality and altruism, builds social resources and acts as a moral barometer. In recent years we observe an increasing attention to the issue of gratitude both in academic publications and popular press in various fields including economics, management and organizational sciences. All these disciplines draw from relatively new and contemporarily flourishing field of psychology – positive psychology.

We deployed the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) for the measurement of gratitude and the Mini-K Short Form for the measurement of LH strategies. 197 students took part in the study (138 females, 59 males).

Findings: A positive correlation between slow LH strategy and gratitude was found in women.

Originality/value: Investigations on the relationship between gratitude and LH strategies show a fragment of the landscape of human personality. Slow LH people seem to be more grateful and thus display more prosocial traits while restraining selfishness which can lead to achieving the delayed social benefits. On the other hand, low-K individuals in organizational context have smaller willingness/ability to reciprocate to their benefactors and to build social bonds. Such individuals presenting exploitative interpersonal style should be detected at the beginning of a selection process by HR specialists.

Keywords: life history theory, life history strategies, gratitude, positive psychology, positive psychology interventions in organizations.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the issue of gratitude has become more and more popular among researchers representing various disciplines. Many definitions and concepts of gratitude have been developed (cf. Wolanin, 2019). It is also studied in relation to various phenomena, such as well-being (e.g. Wood et al., 2010; cf. Wolanin, 2020), health (e.g. Wood et al., 2009), or personality traits (e.g. Fagley, 2012). Despite this, there are still many questions concerning this human trait. These questions also concern the biological basis of gratitude. In order to answer them, it seems necessary to refer to the evolutionary perspective. Evolutionary approach suggests that gratitude is a basis for reciprocal altruism (the simple sequence of exchanges of costly benefits between nonrelatives) and, perhaps, upstream reciprocity (those helped by somebody will help a third party - another unspecified player). This might be the way gratitude played a unique role in human social evolution (McCullough et al., 2008).

1.1. Gratitude

In psychology, gratitude is most often comprehended as an emotion or personality trait. Gratitude understood as an emotion is an intense and relatively short-term psychophysiological reaction to receiving a favor or being gifted (McCullough et al., 2004). Gratitude understood as a trait, also known as dispositional gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002), is a generalized tendency to respond with the emotion of gratitude to other people's contribution to one's own positive experiences and results.

Gratitude is of great importance for interpersonal relationships, collaboration, pro-social behavior, empathy, and altruism (e.g., Tsang, 2006). Gratitude is considered to be a moral barometer that indicates that someone has acted in the way that increases well-being of another person. Gratitude is also a moral motive that prompts the recipient of the favor to behave prosocially. In addition, gratitude has the function of moral reinforcement, as expressing gratitude prompts the benefactor to further prosocial activities (McCullough et al., 2001). A higher level of gratitude also reduces aggression (DeWall et al., 2012). In the relationship between gratitude and aggression, empathy plays the role of a mediating variable. Gratitude goes hand in hand with a higher level of empathy which explains the lower level of aggression.

1.2. Life History Theory

As presented by M. del Giudice et al. (2015), the basic concept that underlies the life history theory is the concept of "energy". Individuals acquire energy through hunting, foraging or cultivating (in modern times also through professional work). The energy budget is limited and there are many competing needs. Selection favours individuals that allocate energy in the way that results in the greatest inclusive fitness. The author describes three trade-offs an organism must face: current vs. future reproduction, quality vs. quantity of offspring and mating vs.

parenting. The first trade-off describes a situation where an organism can either engage in reproduction or focus on themselves, prolonging their life through growth, repairing somatic tissues or allocating energy to immune function – hoping for reproduction opportunities later in their life-span. The second trade-off (quality vs. quantity of offspring) exists because the parents have limited parenting resources. If there are more children, parental investment (care, resources etc.) per offspring drops, lowering their individual quality. Individual quality is defined by body size, health, education or status which is largely an effect of parental investment. The third trade-off is mating vs. parenting. Both mating (finding and attracting potential mates, competing with rivals and securing copulation) and parental investment are costly in terms of energy expenditure, and compete for individual's energy budget (Gadgil, Bossert, 1970; del Giudice et al., 2015; Łukasik, 2021).

1.3. Life History Strategies

Particular organisms, as well as entire species, solve trade-offs in energy allocation in various ways (Roff, 2002). They make different choices in the field of maturation, growth, fertility, parenting, and lifespan. Specific solutions form clusters of traits – the strategies. Species (and individuals) that follow fast strategy (r), mature, mate and reproduce earlier; they also produce more offspring. Species (and individuals) that follow slow strategy (K) mature, mate and reproduce later; they also produce fewer offspring. Examples of the fast LH strategy species are fish or frogs; examples of the slow LH strategy species are elephants or humans (Tifferet, 2019). However, as indicated above, the differences in LH strategies refer not only to entire species, but also to individuals within one species. As far as humans are concerned, the intense mating effort reflects the fast LH strategy. Whereas, intense somatic effort and parenting effort represent the slow strategy. In other words, the slow strategy is associated with a tendency to form long-term romantic relationships, retarded maturation, ability to delay gratification, less anti-social behaviour and interpersonal aggression, and fewer attitudes like distrustfulness and being suspicious. Whereas people that exhibit the fast LH strategy tend to form short-term romantic relationships and feature accelerated sexual maturation, pragmatic orientation (“here and now”), weaker control of aggression, external locus of control and proneness to engage in risky actions (Figueredo et al., 2006). The fast LH people also score higher on dark triad traits (Łukasik et al., 2019).

The formation of the specific LH strategy is mostly heritable (Figueredo, 2004), but environmental factors are also of significance. For instance, Pisula et al. (2008) found that the individuals who were brought up with more financial and emotional support, including physical touch from their parents and grandparents, form slower LH strategy.

It is assumed that a latent variable underlying a cluster of LH indicators exists. This hypothetical construct is called K-Factor and is used to measure individual differences with regard to LH strategies in humans (Tifferet, 2019). The most popular scale used for the measurement of K-Factor is the Arizona Life History Battery (ALHB) (Figueredo, 2007).

It is a battery of 199 cognitive and behavioural indicators of life history strategy, grouped into seven categories: 1) Insight, Planning and Control (Example: “I can head off a bad situation before it happens”), 2) Mother/Father Relationship Quality (“How much did they understand your problems and worries”), 3) Family Social Contact and Support (“During the last twelve months, about how many times have you seen them?”), 4) Friends Social Contact and Support (“During the last month, about how many times have they helped you get worries off your mind”), 5) Experience in close relationships (“I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down”), 6) General Altruism (“I have important skills I can pass along to others”), and 7) Religiosity (“I’m a very religious person”).

In order to reduce research participants burden researchers more often administer the Mini-K Short Form (Figueredo, 2006). Each of the seven ALHB scales is represented by two to three Mini-K items (Tifferet, 2019). However, the drawback of deploying this shortened version is its relatively low reliability (Cronbach’s alpha of original English version $\approx .70$).

1.4. Gratitude in organization

One of the most influential contemporary management thinkers, Tom Peters – famous for his classic “In search of excellence” published in 1982, and nowadays called “Red Bull of management thinking”, devotes astonishing attention in his recent work (Peters, 2021; but also see Peters, 2010) to the issue of gratitude – noticing and appreciating people’s effort, frequent thanking to co-workers, sending them “thank you notes” etc. The author also underscores a direct link between gratitude, human-being centred approach and leadership. The radical title of Peter’s latest book speaks for itself - “Excellence Now: Extreme Humanism”, showing an essence of this “people-first manifesto”. Not only Peters focuses on the issue of gratitude in his printed works but also, almost on a daily basis, shares his on-the-ground observations and reminds his followers on Twitter (175 k. followers, including a number of CEOs of large companies) about the need for expressing gratitude.

Peters is not alone. In recent years we observe an increasing attention to the issue of gratitude both in academic publications and popular press in various fields including economics, management and organizational sciences. All these disciplines draw from relatively new and contemporarily flourishing field of psychology - positive psychology. Positive psychology is the study of positive emotions, positive character traits and positive, enabling institutions. Positive psychology focuses on virtues and character strengths. It advances the science of mental health and well-being (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Gratitude in positive psychology is one of five “transcendence strengths”, along with appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope, humour and religiousness (Seligman et al., 2005). In organizational behaviour theory two fields emerged – positive organizational behaviour (POB) and positive organizational scholarship (POS). Both build on positive psychology (Donaldson, Ko, 2010). Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably (but see Müceldili et al., 2015), however – among other things - they differ in the level of analysis (POB – individuals, POS – larger

structures, organizations). Fehr et al. (2017) proposed a multilevel model of gratitude in organizations. The authors distinguish three types of gratitude: episodic (at the event level), persistent (at the individual level) and collective (at the organizational level).

We couldn't agree more with Fehr et al. (2017), who call gratitude "a valuable emotion with an array of functional outcomes". In other words, there is a link between the tendency to experience gratitude by the individuals within the organization and tangible effects of such a propensity. For instance, contemporary employee is more mobile and less dependent than ever (e.g. Mawdsley et al., 2016). To counteract this phenomenon building collective gratitude may be a key factor to secure employee's loyalty (Mücelandili et al., 2015). Promoting gratitude in a workplace can also have many other beneficial organizational outcomes:

- Gratitude can help uprooting the toxic emotions and attitudes in a workplace, such as unhealthy competition or greed, replacing them with strength and harmony through building bonds between people,
- Collective gratitude promotes helping and compassionate behaviour (by emphasizing reciprocity),
- Collective gratitude facilitates team communication, sharing knowledge and team learning - also through the mechanism of social bond (Mücelandili et al., 2015).

The role and the significance of gratitude in developing human potential in organization substantiates further research on this phenomenon. We believe that including evolutionary perspective into research agenda can bring significant contribution to better understanding of this perplex phenomenon.

1.5. Research question

The research question for this study was: What is the relationship between LH strategies and gratitude?

2. Methodology

2.1. Measures

Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6)

The GQ-6 by McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002) measures dispositional gratitude, i.e. the tendency to experience gratitude. The tool was used in the Polish adaptation of Kossakowska and Kwiatek (2014). The scale contains 6 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The psychometric properties of the Polish adaptation are satisfactory. Confirmatory analysis performed on 511 subjects confirms the relative goodness of fit to the original one-factor

structure of the questionnaire, and the reliability coefficient is equal to .72. In our study we received Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$.

The Mini-K Short Form

The scale is used for the measurement of the K-Factor – a latent variable indicating individual differences in LH strategies. The scale comprises 20 items. It can be used together with ALHB as its eighth subscale or separately. The items are rated on a scale between -3 (disagree strongly) to +3 (agree strongly). The items are scored directionally to indicate a slow LH strategy – the higher the score of the scale the slower LH strategy (Figueredo et al., 2006). The Polish-language versions of the tool had the following reliability: $\alpha = .73$ (Marzec, Łukasik, 2017), $\alpha = .76$ (Czarna et al., 2016), $\alpha = .83$ (Kwiek, 2020). In our study we received Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$.

2.2. Participants

197 students, including 138 women and 59 men, participated in the study. The mean age of the respondents was 21.50 with a standard deviation of 3.78.

The vast majority of our study sample were the students at the faculty of management – the rest were attending social sciences/humanities studies. Perhaps this specific sample adds some value to the data we have gathered in the managerial and organisational research context. This is because our subjects are future managers, HR specialists or social workers. It is beneficial in the field organizational behaviour and management to gain some additional knowledge on how this peculiar group functions and perceives social reality.

3. Results

In the measurement of gratitude on the GQ-6 scale, a higher score means a higher level of gratitude. On the Mini-K life strategies scale, a higher score means slower LH strategies (higher K-factor).

The intensity of gratitude (Tab. 1) turned out to be significantly higher in women ($M = 32.69$) than in men ($M = 30.73$, $t(195) = 2.02$, $p = .04$). Also in terms of LH strategies, gender differences were revealed ($t(195) = 2.86$, $p = .01$) - women had significantly slower strategies ($M = 20.47$) compared to men ($M = 14.31$).

Dispositional gratitude positively correlated at a low level with LH strategies, i.e. a higher level of gratitude coexisted with slower LH strategies. The above result was revealed in the entire group of respondents ($r = .35$, $p < .05$). However, after dividing the sample by gender, it turned out that the above relationship was significant only in the female group ($r = .41$, $p < .05$).

Table 1.*Gratitude and K-Factor: descriptive statistics and Pearson's r correlations*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Pearson's <i>r</i>
Total				
Gratitude	197	32.10	6.28	.35*
K-Factor	197	18.62	14.10	
Females				
Gratitude	138	32.69	6.02	.41*
K-Factor	138	20.47	12.66	
Males				
Gratitude	59	30.73	6.71	.20
K-Factor	59	14.31	16.32	

* $p < .05$.

4. Discussion

Gratitude positively correlates with slower LH strategy. This result is statistically significant in the whole sample, however after calculating data separately for men and women, this is significant only in women. Fast LH strategy is associated with „here and now” orientation, favours short-term social exchange and correlates with anti-social behaviours (Figueredo et al., 2006). Whereas, gratitude is associated with long-term cooperation (one may be grateful for a received favour for many years and reciprocate after a long time), favours altruism, empathy and prosociality, also in terms of passing along good to third parties (McCullough et al., 2001). It also favours building social bonds and networks (Fredrickson, 2001). Our results correspond with the findings of Gladden and Cleator (2018) who showed that the slow LH strategy is positively associated with moral foundations (universal psychological systems on which cultures construct diverse moralities). Similarly, in our study a positive correlation between gratitude (a moral trait) and the slow LH strategy was found. Slow LH people flourish under stable and friendly ecological conditions, where displaying moral traits while restraining selfishness, leads to achieving the delayed social benefits.

The means in gratitude are higher in women than in men, which is a typical result for this scale (e.g. Kossakowska, Kwiatek, 2014; Wolanin, Rybak, 2021). The means in K-factor are also higher in women than in men. The reason for this seems to be the fact that the participants of our study were students. As far as female students are concerned, they have slower LH strategies by definition. In male students this might not be the case. What do we mean exactly? According to the cultural script a male is supposed to be “productive” and generate financial income. Education is, of course, a mean to achieve this goal. Therefore a male prolongs his education no matter what his K-factor level is. Whereas, our female participants pursue their degree out of their slow LH strategy, compared to their peers who directed their

energetic effort towards reproduction. This unfortunately shows the limitation of our study in the form of its limited generalizability.

The role of gratitude in the "rudimentary", evolutionary layer of human nature is ambiguous and multidimensional. On the one hand, a characteristic of a person, which is their tendency to react with the emotion of gratitude, seems to be crucial in the context of group behaviour, relating to the issues of altruism and group cohesion and durability. On the other hand, gratitude does not seem to correspond to the basic mechanisms of survival. In order to survive, the individual should rather see in the environment things that are potentially threatening, things that require correction, so that they could adequately cope with them – by fighting or flighting. To establish the place of gratitude in the context of other modules of mind postulated by evolutionary psychologists (Buss, 2016), further research is needed.

The follow-up studies should rely on a larger and more balanced, preferably non-students subjects sample, because – looking at the data – it seems that a larger sample would show significant correlation between LS and gratitude also in the male group. This correlation however would probably still be weaker than in women (again, prediction based on our data analysis).

4.1. Organizational implications

The positive psychology movement have prompted new applications far beyond the field of traditional psychology, aimed at making substantial improvement in the quality of working life (Donaldson et al., 2010). There are various gratitude-focused HR practices targeted at enhancing employees gratitude – they are termed “gratitude initiatives”. Fehr et al. (2017) identify three initiatives facilitating gratitude in a workplace: appreciation programs, contact with beneficiaries and developmental feedback. Appreciation programs are “institutionalized opportunities to endow individuals with expressions of positive affirmation” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 718, as cited in Fehr et al., 2017). The authors give the example from a consulting firm where managers email descriptions of employees’ strengths to the company’s head. Later these emails are made public for the organization community. The second gratitude initiative, contact with beneficiaries, assumes that there are jobs that involve frequent and meaningful contact with beneficiaries. For instance, a fire fighter or a physician has a sense of saving/changing people’s lives on a daily basis, which gives them the sense of meaning and motivates them for further efforts. But there is a wide range of professions where people, doing hard work, do not have such an experience. These are “invisible” employees no one can see but everyone benefits from their job (e.g. medical laboratory workers, engineer maintaining sophisticated medical equipment etc.). The contact programs are for groups of this sort. One of the programs described by the cited authors was contacting employees at a donations call center with those who finally received scholarships from those donations. It has been proved that such interventions result in bolstering employees’ sense of social worth, prosocial motivation and persistence. The third gratitude initiative, developmental feedback, relies on the assumption that the employees

experience gratitude for the possibility of personal growth. Nonetheless, in many institutions the manager provide insufficient developmental feedback, leaving the employees unaware of the progress they are making. Developmental feedback, unlike routine performance evaluations, is conceptualized by the authors as high-quality mentoring relationship based on mutual trust and respect (Fehr et al., 2017).

The scope of positive organizational intervention that create an enabling institution goes beyond gratitude-centered interventions. Positive psychology interventions aim at cultivating positive subjective experiences, constructing positive individual traits and building positive institutions (Meyers et al., 2012). The aforementioned authors (Meyers et al., 2012) in their review of research conclude that organizational positive psychology interventions are a “promising tool” for bolstering employees’ well-being and performance. Moreover, these interventions reduce stress and burn-out and – to a lesser degree – anxiety and depression.

Finally, let’s look closer how our own findings translate into practical organizational context. We were able to establish that fast low-K people (at least women) have a lesser propensity to experience gratitude. From other research we also know that individuals exhibiting fast LH strategy (low K) have more Dark Triad traits (psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism). To be precise fast LH strategy is associated with antisociality facet of psychopathy and the entitlement/exploitativeness facet of narcissism (McDonald et al., 2012). In organizational context this means that people presenting exploitative interpersonal style have smaller ability or/and willingness: reciprocate to their benefactors, build social bonds, work as a part of a network, conform to the norms in a workplace etc. Thus they lack very basic skills/predispositions to be a contributor to building nourishing, friendly and enabling work environment. That is why we believe that this is crucial for HR departments to identify such problematic individuals at a very beginning of a selection process. What to do once a low-K individual (or a cluster B person) is detected in a selection process? The answer to this question goes beyond the framework of this article, but we know – and this is uplifting – that at least gratitude might be a subject of training (Seligman et al., 2005).

4.2. Conclusions

Investigations on the relationship between gratitude and LH strategies show a fragment of the landscape of human personality. These two traits, being a subject of variability, contribute to individual differences between people. In spite of the fact that one (LH strategy) is rather a product of genes and to a lesser extent of environmental pressure (Figueredo et al., 2004; Mendle et al., 2009; see also: Łukasik, 2021) and another (gratitude) comes rather from upbringing and might be a subject of training and formation (Rash et al., 2011; Mercon-Vargaset et al., 2018), they are related to each other. However the nature of this relationship (causation, latent factor underlying both?) is still an open question.

As to the organizational aspect of the subject, we would like to underscore that managers should understand the relationship between collective gratitude and positive organizational outcomes. Organizations should invest in human resource initiatives to enhance the gratitude of employees. Moreover HRM specialists should make an effort to identify individuals presenting exploitative interpersonal style (the Dark Triad traits, low K-factor) at the very beginning of a selection process, because employees with these characteristics have difficulties with experiencing gratitude and, generally, have difficulties to fit in organizational citizenship behaviour. All this, of course, requires an appropriate, research-based university education for economics/management/psychology students, fully informed by new findings from the field of positive organizational psychology.

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