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## Appreciating Gratitude: Is Gratitude an Amplifier of Well-Being?

**Abstract:** The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between gratitude and certain components of well-being which are conducive to affirming life. Additionally, we also compared how experiencing joy impacts those components of well-being. A randomly chosen 1/3 of the participants was asked to recall an event from their past when they felt grateful. Another 1/3 was asked to recall an event from their past when they felt joy. The final 1/3 of the participants was the control group. Next, all participants filled in the Satisfaction With Life Scale. Then (taking turns) they completed the Social Ties Scale and the Social Trust Scale. Finally, all participants estimated the amount of beneficiary experiences and gratitude they had received in life. The results of the study indicate that both gratitude and joy enhance happiness, and that gratitude and joy play an important, although different in some respects, role as contributing factors to happiness. The results indicate a positive relationship between the balance in gratitude experiences and the examined aspects of well-being.

**Key words:** gratitude, joy, well-being, social relationships, social trust

### Introduction

It was not until the turn of the 21st century that gratitude became the subject of systematic research. This can be easily explained – before the advent of positive psychology, which explores positive emotions, dispositions and actions as contributing factors to the so-called good life, researchers primarily researched negative emotions and behavioral disorders (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Because positive emotions are almost always related to happiness, researchers who study gratitude also focus on its relation to happiness.

Both correlational and experimental research supports the idea that gratitude enhances well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Nelson, 2009; Watkins, 2004, 2008). Almost all of the studies were conducted in the US and most of them focused on the effects of expressing gratitude on the subjective sense of happiness. American culture is big on expressing positive emotions – it is almost a cultural requirement in the US – but at the same time it objects to the expression of negative emotions. Polish people on the other hand are attributed with a culturally-based tendency to complain about life rather than affirm it (Szymków, Wojciszke & Baryła, 2003).

This could mean that gratitude is not the forte of Poles and thus the importance of this emotion in building happiness may not be as significant as we would expect it to be in light of the above cited studies. This problem was explored in our previous study (Gruszecka, 2011). The primary purpose of the current study was to examine the influence of grateful thinking on well-being.

### What is gratitude?

Gratitude is appreciating both the gift and the gift-giver combined with a need to reciprocate which goes beyond ordinary reciprocity. This means that gratitude is a positive emotion that we feel when another person has intentionally given, or attempted to give, us something of value (Gruszecka, 2003; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Nelson, 2009; Trzebińska, 2008; Tsang, 2007; Weiner, 1985, 2006). Going beyond reciprocity (specific to gratitude) means that this emotion activates not so much an obligation to reciprocate but rather a strong need to do so. Reciprocation in this context is by no means a cynically calculated act, in fact it often exceeds the value of the received goods (i.e. helping when it costs you) and can transfer to other objects not related to the original benefactor

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(Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Gruszecka, 2003; Szcześniak & Nieznańska, 2009).

The object of gratitude is other-directed - to people, as well as to impersonal (nature) or nonhuman sources (e.g., God, fate, animals; Gruszecka, 2003; Trzebińska, 2008; Watkins, 2008). Although gratitude is most often a response to help, this emotion can also be triggered by 'good in and of itself' - other people's concern for us, their goodwill and kindness, their recognition of our achievements; or things like the beauty of nature, the sounds of music (Gruszecka, 2003). The degree of gratitude experienced by the beneficiary is directly related to both the value of the aid provided by the benefactor and the costs incurred by the benefactor in the process of providing the aid - it is greater the greater the cost of the aid is, the more intentional it is and the more it is independent of any obligations the benefactor has towards the beneficiary (Szcześniak, 2008; Tesser, Gatewood & Driver, 1968; Bar-Tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg & Hermon, 1977; Watkins, 2008). These emotions are inhibited when the received or offered aid is interpreted as threatening to the beneficiary's self-esteem, his or her sense of justice in the relationship with the benefactor, or his or her freedom of choice (Gruszecka, 2003; Nadler & Fisher, 1986; Wojciszke, 2011).

Research results (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Gruszecka, 2003, 2008; McCullough, Tsang & Emmons, 2004; Trzebińska, 2008) allow us to describe gratitude as a constellation of positive emotions experienced by the beneficiary which signify his or her appreciation of a gift (e.g. joy, happiness, contentment, hope and relief), as well as his or her appreciation of the benefactor (e.g. admiration, respect, trust) and the kindness they have shown him or her (e.g. love, liking, care, the need to give the shirt off one's back). However, sometimes gratitude is also accompanied by negative emotions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Gruszecka, 2003, 2008; McDougal, 2005; Trzebińska, 2008; Weiner, 2008). For the sake of keeping this paper reasonably short I do not dwell on this aspect of gratitude and hold that what is constant in every instance of gratitude is the fact that it is primarily a positive emotion both in content and strength.

From antiquity to the present day, gratitude has held a special place in the catalog of human emotions and virtues. For example. Cicero claimed that gratitude "is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." (*Pro Planci*), Smith (1790/1976) argued that "the sentiment which most immediately and directly prompts us to reward, is gratitude" (p. 68). Simmel (1950) contended that gratitude is "the moral memory of mankind" (p. 45). Today psychologists categorize gratitude as the "head" of one of two evolutionarily significant families of complex emotions (Oatley, Jenkins, 1996), compromised also of empathy, compassion and pity. What links all of these emotions is the fact that they promote behaviors that enhance the well-being of others and are the cornerstones of friendship and cooperation. McCullough and colleagues (2001) have argued convincingly that gratitude may be seen as a "moral barometer", a "moral motivator" and a "moral reinforcer".

### What is well-being?

In everyday language, happiness means different things to different people in different cultures and within those cultures (Czapiński, 2004; Boski, 2009). There is also a lack of agreement among researchers concerning the theoretical concept of the phenomenon of happiness, its form (subtypes) or appropriate terminology. In psychology the term 'happiness' is commonly used but so are a number of other related terms such as: 'well-being', 'subjective well-being', 'psychological well-being', 'emotional well-being', 'quality of life', 'and 'life-satisfaction' among others (Boski, 2009; Czapiński, 2004; Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, Conway, 2009; Tousaint, Friedman, 2009; Trzebińska, 2008). These terms overlap to some degree but are not synonymous - they do not carry the same meaning in particular concepts and are not used consistently. In this paper we use the word happiness interchangeably with the terms 'happiness' 'well-being and life satisfaction' and 'quality of life', and the terms 'subjective well-being' and 'psychological well-being' in the meaning attributed to them in the two theories described below. These theories are representative of the traditional hedonistic philosophy of happiness and the eudemonistic tradition - the former assumes that the balance between pleasure and pain in our life is a good measure of good in our life whereas the latter believes that it is rather the attainment of goals consistent with our values and motives that serves as a good measure of good in our life.

The most popular theory of hedonistic happiness was proposed by Ed Diener (1984; Diener, Lukas & Oishi, 2002). The author defines happiness (mental well-being) using the term '*subjective well-being*' (SWB) and emphasizes that this term refers to people's evaluation of their own lives and things which are important to them. Diener, defined happiness simply as 'the degree to which we like our lives' (Diener, Lukas & Oishi, 2002, p. 63). The author assumes that happiness is comprised of the following sub-components - satisfaction with one's life, a positive appraisal of the most important spheres of one's life and of course frequently experiencing positive emotions and rarely experiencing negative emotions. In his later work Diener (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008) introduced two other constructs related to happiness and satisfaction with life. The first one is 'psychological wealth', defined as experiencing well-being and a high quality of life, a sense that our life is wonderful - it allows us to fully commit to and engage in it, have a sense of purpose in life and brings us satisfaction and joy. This term encompasses the following elements: satisfaction with life and a sense of happiness, spirituality and sense of purpose in life, positive attitudes and emotions, high quality social ties, an interesting job and other forms of vocational activity, values and life goals, and last but not least, mental and physical health and material resources to support oneself. The second term is 'mental flourishing' which encompasses the following components: subjective evaluations of one's life, good social relationships, self-respect, a feeling of competence and an engaging job, spirituality, as well as meaningful life goals and sense of purpose in life.

A concept of well-being which is representative of eudemonia is one by Carol Ryff (1989, Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2006) who assumes that happiness, which she refers to as ‘*psychological well-being*’ (PWB), encompasses six dimensions: autonomy, the ability to manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values, personal growth and development, quality ties to others, self-acceptance and pursuit of meaningful goals. Ryff and coworkers (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002) established that subjective well-being and mental well-being are constructs which are related yet separate – they have separate socio-demographic and personality correlates. However, this is not the place to further elaborate on the differences between these terms.

Due to the length requirements of this paper I shall also omit the description of a theoretical model which combines both these philosophies of happiness and will just say that both these concepts create a complex image of human happiness, in which satisfaction and positive emotions are completed by meaningful goals and pursuits (Krok, 2011, 2012; Peterson, Ruch, Park & Seligman, 2007; Skarżyńska, 2004; Trzebińska, 2008). However, we must add that what is seen as the cause of happiness in the hedonistic approach, is perceived as a vital component of happiness in the eudemonistic approach. This discrepancy is visible, for example, in the way these concepts approach quality and kindness of social ties – in the SWB model they are seen as the cause of happiness, whereas in both the PWB model and the concept of flourishing and mental wealth, they are seen as a component of happiness.

My research on the link between gratitude and happiness goes beyond the obvious connection between gratitude and life satisfaction or the positive balance of good-bad experiences and also involves gratitude as an integral contributor to a sense of happiness understood eudemonistically. This rationale is theoretically supported by many philosophical and religious takes on gratitude which suggest a link between the emotion of gratitude and a sense of purpose in life or quality social ties – the latter in turn are inextricably linked not just to hedonistically understood happiness but also to a sense of well-being. This rationale is further supported by research results which suggest that gratitude leads to happiness not only through the experience of positive emotions but also through a marked improvement of social ties – which are the result of gratitude or are strengthened by it – and through an enhancement of trust in others – of which it is a testament. Thus, I assume that gratitude can enhance both subjective well-being and psychological well-being – in the understanding of these terms which is described above – I justify this later in the text.

### Gratitude and well-being

Philosophers, moralists and writers have praised gratitude as a contributing factor to happiness since time immemorial. It is they who raised gratitude to the level of a virtue, which is not only a feeling of joy, of being deeply moved but also a form of love towards the benefactor and

a means of bonding in personal relationships. Practicing gratitude, they emphasize, is conducive to our own well-being and benefits others in our life as well. It is for these reasons that Gadacz (2003) lists gratitude as one of the most important life skills in today’s world. Psychology shares the above convictions and continues to provide more and more empirical evidence for their veracity.

What about gratitude makes it so conducive to happiness? We can list at least a few paths by means of which gratitude enhances happiness. One of these paths leads through intensively experiencing positive emotions, and focusing on them. Experiencing gratitude is pleasant and induces many positive emotions, and experiencing positive affect literally boosts our well-being and overall health (Cohn et al., 2009; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Nelson, 2009). Chesterton contended that “gratitude produced...the most purely joyful moments that have been known to man” (see. Emmons & McCullough, 2003, p. 378). Joy was shown to be the dominant emotion in descriptions of gratitude in all of our research studies conducted in accordance with various paradigms and among divergent age groups (Gruszecka, 2003, 2008, in press). Watkins (2004) showed that intentionally focusing on experiencing gratitude (i.e. by listing all the things we are grateful for or writing a letter of gratitude) results in an increase in positive emotions. Moreover, the author showed that a personal disposition towards experiencing gratitude positively correlates with remembering positive rather than negative events from one’s past.

A significant boost in happiness, as measured by means of many different scales, was noted in many studies in which participants were asked to count their past blessings, focus on the things they were grateful for or express their gratitude. Participants of one such study (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), which was conducted over the course of ten weeks, were divided into three groups. Participants from all three groups were instructed to note down events that had affected them emotionally during each week. However, participants in the first group were asked to note down only those events which they considered to be important, participants in the second group were to write down only those events which were unpleasant whereas participants in the third group were to write down only those events which made them feel grateful. Additionally, at the end of each week, all the participants had to rate their level of subjective well-being during the past week and also make predictions about their well-being in the upcoming week. It turned out that those participants who were asked to focus on their gratitude, rated their current mood as more positive, reported fewer somatic complaints (e.g. headaches), displayed more pro-health behaviors and had a more optimistic vision of the week ahead of them than participants from the other two groups.

Participants in a similar study (Lyubomirsky, 2008), which took place over the course of six weeks, were given gratitude notebooks and were asked to note down five things they were grateful for and owed to somebody or someone. In a random fashion, half of the participants were instructed to make such gratitude lists once a week, whereas

the other half was to do so three times a week. A significant boost in happiness was only noted in those participants who focused on gratitude once a week. According to the authors of the study, paying thanks for our blessings in a repetitive, boring manner can destroy the positive effects of gratitude that are conducive to boosting happiness.

Gratitude undeniably “is the wind beneath our wings”, it broadens our attention scope, opens us up to the world, and brings us closer to others. It should therefore be conducive to positive thoughts about others, creativity in thoughts and actions, empathy and pro-social behaviors, bonding with others and maintaining existing relationships, and should thereby help us build solid personal resources and enhances happiness (Fredrickson, 2004).

Gratitude is also the act of cultivating positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors and such actions are effective means of overcoming depression and boosting happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Gratitude also improves well-being via other paths – it can be a very effective defense mechanism against stress, it can help us deal with a change brought on by a personal trauma and has been found to be a very effective tool in the prevention and treatment of depressive episodes (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Watkins, 2004; Watkins et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2010).

Focusing on gratitude can even ease the pain caused by physical ailments and enhance our well-being this way. It was shown for example that cardiological patients who blame others for their illness (to a great degree) are at a greater risk of another cardiac arrest, whereas this risk is much lower in cardiological patients who, faced with their illness, had reevaluated their lives and as a result were able “to see the bright side” and appreciate their blessings. What is more, patients who deal with their illness by expressing gratitude for what they already have and take advantage of the support offered by loved ones, find it easier to bear hospital stays and the accompanying strict diet and medication routine (Emmons, 2007; Wood et al., 2010). Medical data point to the fact that focusing on gratitude, love, compassion and care, harmonizes heart rhythm and improves heart-mind communication. This is visible in the cardiograms of cardiological patients.

Maybe the most important route via which gratitude boosts well-being is through interpersonal relationships. People who experience gratitude not only focus on positive aspects of their lives but also on the help they have received. In turn, this makes them want to bond with the benefactor whom, as a result of the help they have received from him or her, they now trust more and care for more. Last but not least, people who feel grateful for the help they have received feel motivated to pay it forward and help others (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Gruszecka, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001; Szcześniak & Nieznańska, 2009; Trzebińska, 2008; Tsang, 2006, 2007). Lending a helping hand and showing kindness towards other people are undeniably factors that boost happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Wojciszke, 2011; Haidt, 2007). Prosocial behaviors that stem from gratitude tend to spiral into a mode of mutual help between the beneficiary and the original benefactor

and also between him or her and complete strangers all of which is conducive to establishing new social relationships (Algoe, Haidt & Gable 2008) and strengthening existing ones (Lambert, Fincham, 2011). It has long been known that the number and quality of our social relationships is the most reliable correlate of happiness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wojciszke, 2011). According to data obtained from Social Diagnosis (Czapiński & Panek, 2011) the number of friends one has is invariably (and has been for many years) one of the strongest indicators of happiness and satisfaction with life for Poles. Satisfying personal relationships not only make people happy but happen to be indispensable to happiness so much so that no other contributing factor to happiness has as strong an influence on our level of happiness as this one (Czapiński, 2004; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Haidt, 2007; Wojciszke, 2011).

Thus, gratitude multiplies positive emotions, helps build on personal resources, inhibits anger, makes it easier for people to deal with stress, encourages prosocial behaviors, brings people together, helps people lean on others for support and makes them more likely to reach out a helping hand to others in need. Finally it helps form new social bonds and strengthens those that already exist. And of course, each of these positive outcomes is in itself conducive to happiness (Cohn et al., 2009; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Grzelak, 2005; Haidt, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Trzebińska, 2008; Watkins, 2004; Wojciszke, 2011).

### **Gratitude intensity in Poland and its relationship with well-being**

As it was said before, almost all of the studies on gratitude and its relation to well-being which were cited above were conducted in the US and most of them focused on the effects of expressing gratitude on one’s subjective sense of happiness. American culture is big on expressing positive emotions – it is almost a cultural requirement in the US – but objects to the expression of negative emotions. Polish people on the other hand are attributed with a culturally-based tendency to complain rather than to affirm life (Szymków et al., 2003). This could mean that gratitude is not the forte of Poles and thus the importance of this emotion in building happiness may not be as significant as we would expect it to be in light of the above cited studies. We explored this issue in our previous study (Gruszecka, 2011; Gruszecka & Trzebiński, 2006).

Participants of one such study (Gruszecka, 2011) were randomly divided into three groups, each group filled in either the general Well-being Scale, or the Social Trust Scale, or the Social Ties Scale. Next, all participants described the most important experience of gratitude in their life and estimated the amount of beneficiary experiences and gratitude they received in life. In order to assess this subjective balance we used a scale from 0 (never) to 8 (very often). The results suggested that gratitude is a widespread experience among Poles. This study did not reveal the existence of anybody who was excluded from the so-called exchange of good and valuable things and/or anybody who had not experienced gratitude. Only a few people claimed

that they rarely or very rarely received something good from others and rarely or very rarely experienced gratitude towards other people, and the percentage of people who confirmed they had received something valuable from others often or very often was much higher. The percentage of people who reported both receiving and giving rather a lot than rather a little in interpersonal relationships and also experiencing and expressing gratitude more rather than less often (placing their answers within the 5 to 8 range of the scale) was 70% and higher. This percentage went slightly down when participants were asked to assess gratitude others experienced towards them and gratitude shown by others to them. It is worth adding that the balance of gratitude in interpersonal relationships turned out to be egocentric. Participants believed they felt grateful towards others more often than others felt grateful to them and that they showed their gratitude towards others more often than others showed their gratitude to them (while also believing that they gave as much in their interpersonal relationships as they received).

The results showed also a positive relationship between the tendency to experience gratitude and express it, on one hand, and, satisfaction with the past life, life in general and the quality of social relationships and trust in people, on the other hand. No relationship was found between gratitude and present life satisfaction, expected future life and its specific aspects (partial satisfactions). It seems that the reason for the inconsistent results are differences in the psychological status of measures of well-being used in the study. Research shows (see Schwarz & Strack, 1999) that evaluations of the present and future life and evaluations of specific areas of life are verbalized ad hoc and are context-dependent, whereas evaluations of past life and life as a whole have a more established character.

A subjective balance of gratitude experiences - spanning across our whole life - reveals to what degree other people are a source of joy and support to us and to what extent we trust them. Thus, the more gratitude we experience over the course of our life the more satisfied we ought to be with our life in general and with our interpersonal relationships and the more trusting we should feel towards others. The study confirmed our predictions.

The correlations between gratitude felt towards others and that shown to others were statistically significant for most measures of emotional well-being used in the study. The more grateful participants felt towards others, the more satisfied they felt with their lives in the past, with their lives on the whole and with their interpersonal relationships (both the number and quality of them). Also, the more gratitude people experienced, the more trusting they felt towards people in general. The results were similar when it came to expressing gratitude, which happened to strongly correlate with general life satisfaction.

As it was said before, an increase of optimism and happiness was observed in many people who were encouraged to temporarily, or for a longer period of time, focus on experiences of goodness and gratitude. Analogical results obtained in a study where participants first completed well-being inventories and only then tried to evaluate

the balance in their experiences related to gratitude in interpersonal relationships, is a strong argument supporting the claim that gratitude is a solid contributing factor to happiness.

Because information about our gratitude is not always readily available to us, we inferred that the correlations obtained in this study would be stronger if participants had access to information about their feelings of gratitude and so we designed a follow-up study to verify this hypothesis. The correlational design of the our study does not allow us to precisely infer which variable in the relationships we observed is the cause and which variable, in the relationships we observed, is the cause and which is the result. Thus, it is impossible to say whether experiencing gratitude increases our sense of satisfaction with life, strengthens our personal relationships and builds our trust towards others, or whether it is satisfaction with these aspects of our life – our happiness essentially– that makes us more likely to accept goodness we experience in life with gratitude. In the study described below, we attempted to find a definite answer to the first question.

### **Purpose of the present study**

In this study we set out to replicate the results obtained in the study described above. The main aim of the study was to experimentally investigate the effect of a “grateful reflection” on well-being and life satisfaction (quality of life). As I have already mentioned, in this study I was interested not only in how gratitude affects happiness in the hedonistic understanding of the word (SWB) but also how it affects particular aspects of happiness in the eudemonistic understanding of the word (PWB); specifically I wanted to find out how it affects satisfaction with social ties and social trust. I decided on these dependent variables, despite the fact that there are many other components of mental well-being to chose from, because gratitude is a communion-related emotion and because there are studies which suggest that the specific path through which gratitude enhances well-being is its ability to build and tighten social ties and thereby also enhance social trust. By considering the three listed variables: satisfaction with life, goodness of social ties and social trust as measures of happiness I was hoping to put my finger on the unique contribution gratitude makes to a happy life. Schwarz & Strack (1999) proved that a sense of satisfaction with life is constructed in any given moment on the basis of currently available data (particularly pertaining to affective states). Thus, it is fairly obvious that experiencing gratitude or other joyful emotions, or for that matter just recalling such events, would enhance life satisfaction. But gratitude seems to also enhance life satisfaction via a relational path – by strengthening our trust in others, to which it is a testament, and by enhancing satisfaction derived from social ties which it builds and strengthens. We wanted also to explore the similarities and differences in the effects of experiencing gratitude and joy on aspects well-being listed above, because it is only logical to assume that it is joy (the dominant emotion in the experience of gratitude) that is “responsible” for

the correlation between gratitude and well-being noted in research. But certainly, joy and gratitude are not one and the same (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Gruszecka, 2011; Oatley & Jenkis, 1996). It is possible then that both of these emotions are equally important contributing factors to happiness, though the paths through which they lead to happiness may be partially divergent. Drawing together theoretical statements and previous empirical findings, we predict that:

- *Hypothesis 1.* Gratitude is conducive to happiness. Compared to those who do not, people who focus on gratitude report higher levels of happiness, perceive their interpersonal relationships as more satisfying and are more trusting towards others.
- *Hypothesis 2.* Satisfaction with life is connected with experiencing and expressing gratitude. The more we experience and express gratitude, the more satisfied we are with our lives.
- *Hypothesis 3.* Trust in people is connected with experiencing and expressing gratitude. The more we experience and express gratitude, the more trust we have in others.
- *Hypothesis 4.* How good our relationships with others are is dependent on experiencing and expressing gratitude. The more we experience and express gratitude the more relationships we have with others and the better quality they are.

## Method

### Participants

Ninety undergraduate students (52 women; mean age = 18,25 years). All participants gave their informed consent before they took part in the study.

### Procedure and materials

A randomly chosen 1/3 of the participants was asked to recall and describe an event from their past when they felt grateful. Another 1/3 was asked to recall and describe an event from their past when they felt joy. The final 1/3 of the participants was the control group and so no preliminary procedure was implemented. Next, all the participants filled in the Satisfaction with Life Scale, then (taking turns) the Scale of Social Relationships and the Trust in People Scale, and finally the Scale of Subjective Balance of Experienced Gratitude in Interpersonal Relationships.

**Satisfaction With Life Scale** (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985; polish adaptation: Juczyński, 2001). The scale is used to measure global life satisfaction ( $\alpha = 0,82$ ). The scale consists of five items. The first three focus on people's current life, e.g. *"In most ways my life is close to my ideal"* whereas the last two refer to the past, e.g. *"If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing"*. Participants responded to with each items on a 7-point scales (1- strongly disagree, 7 - strongly agree). The higher the overall score, the more satisfied one is with one's

life.

**Social Trust Scale** (Skarżyńska, 2002). The scale is used to measure social trust ( $\alpha = 0,68$ ). The scale consists of four items, two of which are declarative positive sentences, e.g. *"People wish others all the best"*, and two negative sentences, e.g. *"Our relationships with others are mainly based on fighting and competing"*. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). An arithmetic mean of all items (after taking into account the rotation of points assigned to items formulated in the negative). The higher the mean, the more trusting the participant is towards others.

**Social Ties Scale** (Skarżyńska, 2002). The scale is used to measure the goodness of social relationships ( $\alpha = 0,84$ ). The scale consists of six items, three of the items confirm the high quality or large number of interpersonal relationships one has, e.g. *"There are a lot of people in my life that I am close to"*, and three negate this, e.g. *"I often feel lonely"*. Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). The result is an arithmetic mean of all the answers (after taking into account the rotation of points assigned to items formulated in the negative). The higher the number, the higher the number and quality of social ties – the goodness of them.

**Scale of Subjective Sense of Balance in Gratitude Experiences** (BDW; Gruszecka, 2007). The scale is used to measure our subjective sense of balance or lack of thereof with respect to gratitude experienced in interpersonal relationships ( $\alpha = 0,87$ ) and is based on a similar scale by Grzelak (2005) which allows us to measure the balance of good vs. bad experiences in interpersonal relationships. The BDW scale is made up of six items (questions) of which the first two relate to the frequency of help received from others and that of help provided to others, the next two refer to the frequency with which one experiences gratitude towards others and the frequency with which others experience gratitude towards one, and the last two questions refer to the frequency with which one expresses gratitude towards others and the frequency with which others express their gratitude towards them. All of the questions refer to experiences spanning across one's whole lifespan. *How often in your life have you felt grateful to others?* is an example of the questions found in the inventory. Answers are given on a 9 –point scales (from 0 – never, to 8 - very often). The higher the end score the more goodness and gratitude one has experienced in the: me-others exchange.

## Results

### Causality between gratitude and well-being.

Table 1 presents a comparison of results obtained in the two experimental groups and those obtained in the control group. There is no separate comparison of results obtained in the two experimental groups as they did not differ with respect to any of the measured aspects of well-being ( $t < 1$ ).

**Table 1. Differences in the level of happiness, trust in other people and the goodness of one's social relationships in the experimental groups and the control group (SD are shown in brackets)**

Measures of well-being	Gratitude	Control	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	Joy	Control	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>N</i> = 30	<i>N</i> = 30			<i>N</i> = 30	<i>N</i> = 30		
Global life satisfaction	4,45 (0,91)	3,86 (1,41)	1,93*	0,51	4,33 (1,11)	3,86 (1,41)	1,44 <sup>+</sup>	0,38
Social trust	2,88 (0,58)	2,61 (0,65)	1,73*	0,40	2,94 (0,87)	2,61 (0,65)	1,69*	0,45
Goodness of one's social relationships	4,02 (0,65)	3,73 (0,82)	1,50 <sup>+</sup>	0,39	3,94 (0,82)	3,73 (0,82)	< 1	-

Note. <sup>+</sup>  $p \leq 0,07$ ; \*  $p < 0,05$  (one-tailed test)

Results shown on the left hand side of the table confirm the first hypothesis of the study. However, the *d* indexes inform that the noted differences were at most moderate. Results shown on the right hand side of the table suggest that the effects of joy and gratitude on happiness levels (barely above the cut-off line) and trust in others are very similar, although the effect of gratitude was more pronounced and stronger. Joy did not intensify the assessment of social ties' goodness. Additional analyses of satisfaction with one's present (the first three items of the SWLS scale) and past life (two last items of the SWLS scale) revealed that participants from the experimental group, in whom feelings of gratitude were evoked, reported greater satisfaction with their life at present than their control group counterparts ( $t(58) = 1,70$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ,  $d = 0,45$  ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 0,86$  vs  $M = 4,12$ ;  $SD = 1,36$ ) and also greater satisfaction with their past ( $t(58) = 1,90$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ,  $d = 0,50$  ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 1,26$  vs  $M = 3,47$ ;  $SD = 1,69$ ). Similar results were obtained in the experimental group in which feelings of joy were evoked but these were not statistically significant.

### Balance of good and gratitude.

Table 2 shows the percentage distribution of participants' answers to questions that measured the balance of good and gratitude in their lives as they experience it in their personal relationships.

From the table shown above we can infer that none of the participants felt totally excluded from the phenomenon of social exchange or had never experienced gratitude. Only a rare few participants considered their experiences of gratitude to be quite rare; a far greater number of participants perceived them as frequent or very frequent. The number of participants who reported having both received and provided rather a lot than rather a little good in their interpersonal relationships was around the 70% mark. The same percentages were obtained with respect to participants' sense of experiencing gratitude towards others and expressing their gratitude to others – they also mostly reported both experiencing and expressing rather a lot than rather a little gratitude (within the 5 to 8 range of the scale). This percentage went slightly down when participants

**Table 2. A whole life-spanning balance of good and gratitude (BDW scale)**

Questions from the BDW scale	The percentage of indications made in each group (0 – 8 scale)							
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	8
During the course of your entire life, how much good have others done you	1,1	2,2	1,1	8,8	15,6	26,7	24,4	5,6
During the course of your entire life, how much good have you done to others?	2,2	2,2	1,1	7,8	10,0	23,1	40,0	3,3
How often in your life up to now have you felt grateful to other people?	2,2	3,3	3,3	6,7	15,6	22,2	28,9	4,4
During the course of your entire life, how often have people felt grateful to you?	2,2	1,1	5,6	4,4	24,4	26,6	22,2	7,8
During the course of your entire life, have you felt grateful to others?	4,4	1,1	0,0	8,8	16,7	27,8	20,0	4,4
During the course of your entire life, have people expressed their gratitude towards you ?	2,2	3,3	3,3	12,2	18,9	27,8	18,9	4,4

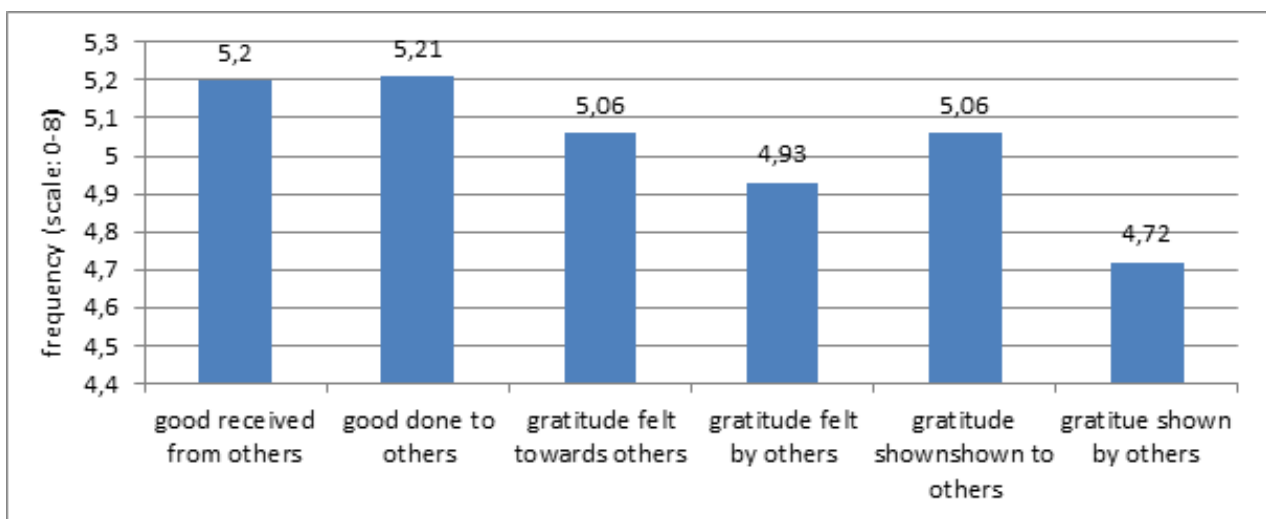
Key: 0 = nothing/never, 8 = a lot/very often;

**Table 3. Correlations of gratitude intensity in interpersonal relationships – me vs. others balance – with three measures of well-being.**

Measures of well-being	Gratitude			
	Felt		Expressed	
	Towards others	By others	To others	By others
Global life satisfaction	0,19*	0,31***	0,04	0,27**
Social trust	0,53****	0,21**	0,31**	0,49****
Goodness of one’s social relationships	0,49****	0,46****	0,40****	0,39****

Note. \*  $p < 0,05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0,01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0,001$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0,0001$

**Figure 1. Mean values obtained in the measure of me vs. others balance of good and gratitude in interpersonal relationships.**



were asked to assess how much gratitude they felt towards others and to compare it to how much gratitude they felt others felt towards them. An analysis of variance showed that the general (mean) indexes of all six measures of the me-others balance of good and gratitude did not differ among the participants who completed the Scale of Social Ties and Scale of Social Trust in the reverse order (see Method) before completing the BDW Scale. Thus, we can assume that although participants were exposed to different circumstances before deciding on the balance of good and gratitude in their lives this did not affect the results and so further analyses can be performed collectively. A collective illustration of the obtained balance is shown in Figure 1.

The *t*-Student test for dependent samples showed that participants of the study assessed that they had received more or less the same amount of good from others as they felt they had provided to others. They felt the same about gratitude – that they felt grateful to others about as much as others felt grateful to them but at the same time they believed they expressed their gratitude towards others more often than others expressed gratitude towards them ( $t(89) = 1,89$ ;  $p < 0,05$ ;  $d = 0,40$ ).

**Balance of gratitude and well-being.**

The results of analyses that tested hypotheses 2 - 4 are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen, the greater the intensity of gratitude felt and expressed by participants towards others, the greater the rates of well-being measured in the study which is in line with our hypotheses. The exception is the lack of a significant relationship between expressing gratitude and overall satisfaction with one’s life. It is worth looking at the results which were not accounted for by the hypotheses and which consistently point to the existence of a positive correlation between gratitude felt and expressed by others towards study participants and all the measures of well-being.

**Discussion**

In line with our predictions, it turned out that deliberately focusing on gratitude leads to higher rates of satisfaction with life as well as interpersonal relationships and also increases people’s propensity to trust others. These results allow us to infer the existence of a causal relationship between gratitude and happiness and are consistent with



those obtained in studies conducted within other paradigms and in other cultures. At the same time, they are consistent with the assumption that gratitude can lead to happiness via different paths. Not only through the experience of positive emotions but also through a marked improvement of social ties – which are the result of gratitude or are strengthened by it - and through an enhancement of trust in others – of which it is a testament. Follow-up studies should provide more detailed information on this phenomenon.

People who recalled a past experience of gratitude declared greater satisfaction with life (both past and present), declared greater trust towards others and evaluated their interpersonal relationships more favorably than participants from the control group. The effects of recalling a past experience of joy were weaker and limited to measures of satisfaction with life (barely over the cut off line) and trusting others. Such a pattern of results suggests that the influence of gratitude on happiness is more solid than the influence of joy (see: Peterson et al., 2007) and that gratitude increases our happiness by setting off a spiral of positive exchange which results in the increase of both the number and quality of one's interpersonal relationships - and this is undeniably a contributing factor to happiness. However, in order to be able to fully grasp and confirm the unique contribution of gratitude to our sense of happiness more studies have to be conducted, including studies that would compare the effects of gratitude with other positive emotions besides joy.

Having confirmed the existence of a causal relationship between gratitude and a sense of happiness does not exclude the possibility that these two variables interact in a mutual feedback cycle rather than in a linear fashion. It is a very logical and theoretically grounded supposition that happiness increases our propensity to welcome and experience good in accordance with the pattern observed in gratitude. The happier we are, the higher our self-esteem is but also the higher our esteem of others is, and the more we trust others (Dunn, & Schweitzer, 2005) and are willing to help them, the more we help others the more friends we make and the more support we get from them (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2011; Haidt, 2007; Trzebińska, 2008; Wojciszke, 2011). This in turn leads to a greater propensity to accept unsolicited help. This supposition needs to be verified by means of an experimental study in the course of which happiness would be primed in participants and then they would be placed in the middle of a situation that required them to help another person and their propensity to do so would then be measured.

We can safely assume that the paths through which gratitude improves well-being – suggested by the research results – do not exhaust the possibilities of how gratitude can affect our happiness. As a communion emotion, gratitude should particularly enhance those aspects of well-being that pertain to the outside world. When we experience gratitude we communicate that our society and the people who live in it are fundamentally good – this is especially so when we experience gratitude despite enduring hardships and pain, which is often the case (Gruszecka, 2003). That is why it is plausible that gratitude may enhance our sense

of purpose in life and thereby be conducive to overall happiness. As far as I know, no studies have yet been done on whether gratitude affect OUR sense of purpose in life but studies have confirmed the existence of a link between a sense of purpose in life and well-being in the eudaimonic understanding (Krok, 2012).

The correlation part of the study replicates the results yielded by the preceding study (Gruszecka, 2011) with the exception of the result that points to a lack of relationship between the frequency of displaying gratitude and satisfaction with one's life. This particular result is hard to explain in light of the results obtained in the preceding study and those obtained by other researchers which strongly suggest that expressing gratitude increases one's sense of well-being (see e.g. Lyubomirsky, 2008; Watkins, 2004; Wood et al., 2010). This result could be random. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of there being a greater meaning to this result. There are research results that show that publicly expressing gratitude conflicts with the tendency to attribute successes to oneself (Baumeister & Ilko, 1995). Expressing gratitude does not go very well with autonomy or the need to be self-sufficient, both of which are highly valued in today's world. These values are particularly valued by people who are just coming of age, precisely the people that happened to be the sole participants of our study. Moreover, the feeling of gratitude and the display of this emotion need not be comfortable to everyone (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). To be grateful means to allow oneself to be placed in the position of a recipient—to feel indebted and aware of one's dependence on others. It is also possible that the point of penning letters expressing gratitude for a particular thing addressed to a particular person (other researchers) is different to assessing the balance of such experiences (current study).

Going beyond the results accounted for in the predictions and hypotheses, we ought to emphasize the fact that the results obtained in our study support the thesis that showing others support has no lesser an effect –or maybe even a greater effect - on well-being than receiving support (see Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, Smith, 2003). It was shown that the more often other people felt grateful to the participants (in the participants' view) and the more they expressed their gratitude towards the participants the happier the participants felt, the more value they attributed to their relationships and the more trust they placed in others.

One limitation of the current study and the studies of other researchers that explore the relationship between gratitude and well-being is the unspoken assumption that people have the same definition of "gratitude". All the while, the colloquial understanding of gratitude stretches from that described in the first paragraph of this paper to a definition that holds that it is a type of currency that is subjected to the laws of economic exchange. Not all people value gratitude, which means that in some people the experience of gratitude may result in a decrease in mood (Trzebińska, 2008). Because of these reasons, we should not expect a boost in mood or an increase in happiness in all instances of experiencing or displaying gratitude. The

above mentioned reasons point to the need to specify the limits of gratitude's positive effect on well-being. It has to also be said that, due to the fact that the participants of our study were young people, there was a limited number of ways in which we could prime gratitude. Hence, we should replicate the study in different age groups and include different types of relationships (e.g. romantic) and different types of situations (i.e. a situation of illness). Another limitation of the study is the relatively small number of participants which did not allow us to run more advanced statistical analyses, for example mediation analyses which would allow us to better interpret the data collected. Yet another limitation of the study is the fact that participants assigned to the control group did not perform any cognitive task before the measurement of the dependent variable whereas participants from the other groups were asked to recall a moment during which they experienced gratitude or joy. Thus, we cannot be sure if this lack of cognitive activity preceding the measurement of the dependent variable did not affect the results. Therefore, were we to replicate this study, we ought to ask participants from the control group to recall an emotionally neutral event from their lives.

### Conclusions

The results of the study provide us with confirmation of the thesis about the causal relationship between gratitude and the good life and are consistent with those obtained by other researchers in accordance with other paradigms and in different cultures. At the same time, these results suggest that happiness can be attained in many different ways. Perhaps the most specific way gratitude makes our lives happier is through its inherent ability to set off a spiral of positivity in our interpersonal relationships. It looks as though other people's gratitude towards us is an important contributing factor to happiness. This is a new problem and undeniably an important one in psychological research that aims to define the nature of the relationship between gratitude and happiness. Not to mention the fact that it stands to offer very practical implications for society.

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