

Gratitude Interventions: Beyond Stress Debriefing and Survivor Therapy in the Aftermath of the Sichuan Earthquake

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Gratitude interventions were introduced as a viable option in the treatment of choice for the long-term caring of surviving schoolchildren in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake. Support for this contention was considered through an overview of the conceptualization and assessment of gratitude, the research on the cultivation and practice of gratitude, and the suitability of the application of gratitude interventions in the Chinese cultural context. The call for research on the effectiveness of gratitude interventions for Chinese schoolchildren in the aftermath of disaster is emphasized.

Key words: gratitude, intervention, disaster, Chinese

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The year 2008 goes down in history as a very special year in Chinese civilization. It is the year when the century-old national dream of the Chinese people to host the Beijing Olympic Games comes true. It is also the year when the Sichuan earthquake on May 12 takes an enormously heavy toll of the nation's human lives and resources. As we mourn for the victims who lost their lives or who were injured, our hearts also go out to those who grieve for their loved ones and friends who were known dead or remained unaccounted for. Although we might be far away from the epicenters of these quakes, we feel close to those who were deeply wounded emotionally for fear, confusion, pain, and death caused by these unspeakable events. In particular, we are as educators deeply concerned about the well-being of thousands and thousands of surviving schoolchildren in the aftermath of the disaster. As we are about three months away from May 12 at the time of this writing, and as national and international rescue efforts gradually turn to rebuilding homes and communities, and reconstructing the self-efficacy and competence of survivors, we need to go beyond efforts aimed at critical incident stress debriefing and survivor therapy that help prevent the emergence of cases of acute stress disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder (see Herbert, 2002; Meichenbaum, 1994, 2000; Resick & Calhoun, 2001) and consider longer-term planning and efforts to rebuild resilience and strengths using positive interventions (see Joseph & Linley, 2006; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005).

Positive Interventions

By positive interventions, I refer to the approach or family of intervention efforts that emphasize or focus on human positives, in sharp contrast to the traditional approach that targets symptoms and their alleviation. While this positive approach has its roots in humanistic and existential psychology (e.g., Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961), it is only in recent years that it receives a renewed impetus through the positive psychology movement (Seligman, 2003; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Among the limited number of positive interventions, such as Fordyce's (1977) happiness intervention, Fava's (1999) well-being

therapy, and Frisch's (2006) quality-of-life therapy, the positive psychotherapy approach of Seligman and his colleagues (Seligman et al., 2006) is particularly noteworthy in that it is directly and primarily based on building positive emotions, character strengths, and meaning. Although this positive psychotherapy approach was first designed to treat depression, it has been suggested that the effective group exercises should have wider applications.

Among the effective group exercises, three exercises are particularly noteworthy (Seligman et al., 2006). Specifically, in the "using your strengths" exercise, participants were first asked to assess their character strengths through responding to a questionnaire. Then, based on the assessment, participants were asked to think of ways to use their top five strengths more in their daily life. In the "three good things/blessings" exercise, participants were asked to write down each evening three good things that happened and to give reasons as to why these things happened. In the "gratitude visit" exercise, participants were asked to write a letter describing their gratitude to the person to whom they were very grateful but who have never been properly thanked. Participants were also asked to read the letter to the person by phone or in person. These three exercises have been reported to be life-changing, as they initiated important changes in lowering depressive symptoms and increasing happiness that lasted for as long as six months. Thus, in searching for evidence-based positive intervention exercises, these three exercises could be regarded as potentially promising, and could even be suggested as intervention of choice for longer-term caring provided to survivors of the Sichuan earthquake.

I tend to group these intervention exercises under the approach which comes to be called "gratitude interventions" as I believe what these exercises have in common is the induction of participants or clients into adopting a stance of appreciation or gratitude. Specifically, clients come to be grateful for or appreciative of their assets or strengths, what they have or what happens to them, and express their appreciation or gratitude through returning or giving back the benefits in some ways to the benefactors.

Although gratitude interventions might be regarded as a more recent addition to the traditional psychotherapy approaches, the central position

occupied by the discussion on gratitude in philosophical and theological theories testifies to the importance of the notion throughout history (Harpman, 2004). Indeed, many cultures have regarded the experience and expression of gratitude as beneficial, maintaining that responding with gratitude after receiving some benefits is a moral obligation. In addition, as a more enduring personality disposition, gratitude is viewed as a prized human virtue that contributes to living well. This view is evident in the Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish traditions (Dumas, Johnson, & Lynch, 2002; Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). Nonetheless, before considering gratitude interventions as the treatment of choice for long-term caring of Sichuan survivors, an overview of the conceptualization and assessment of gratitude might be helpful.

Conceptualization and Assessment of Gratitude

The word “gratitude” is derived from the Latin “gratia” which entails meanings of grace, gratefulness, and graciousness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The early theoretical treatments of gratitude were by philosophers and theologians in the virtue ethics tradition. Perhaps, an influential treatment from a broad communal perspective was by the political economist Adam Smith (1790/1976) who proposed that gratitude was a social emotion that served as a primary motivator of benevolent behaviors toward a benefactor. The sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) went further to suggest that people were socialized to have gratitude to sustain their reciprocal obligations, given that formal social structures (law and social contracts) were not adequate to regulate or ensure reciprocity in human interactions. Thus, according to the views of these thinkers, gratitude enhances an individual’s personal and relational well-being, and is beneficial for both individuals and society.

Chinese Conceptions of Gratitude

In the Chinese culture, gratitude has also been primarily considered from the civic ethics perspective, but with an additional emphasis on the feeling of indebtedness in association with the sense of gratitude. The

Chinese equivalent of gifts or benefits in gratitude is *en* or *enyi*. The experience and expression of gratitude is to acknowledge and appreciate the gifts or benefits, that is, to *gan'en* (to be thankful), and to have a feeling of indebtedness, that is, to *tubao* (to feel the need to repay). Ingratitude or a failure to repay is regarded as a vice, as embodied in the expression of *wang'en-fuyi* (forgetting about the benefits). Thus, it was written in the Chinese classic text on human relationships, *Cai-Gen-Tan* (Hong, 2007) that “*ren-you-en-yu-wo bu-ke-wang*” (I should not forget what others have given me), but what should not be remembered is *yuan* (resentment) as in the expression “*er-yuan-ze bu-ke-bu-wang*” (but resentment should not be remembered). Moreover, a grateful person should always repay hundredfold or thousandfold, as in “*de-zhi-dishui, bao-zhi-yongquan*” (getting a drop of water, giving back a spring).

This interesting separation of appreciation and indebtedness as two components of gratitude has also been noted in the Japanese culture (see Naito, Wangwan, & Tani, 2005). For example, the conventional expression of apology in the Japanese expression of *sumimasen* is also used to express the feelings of thanks. Similarly, the Chinese expression of *xie* (thank you) also has meanings of apology as in *xiezui* (offering an apology). The common Cantonese expression of expressing thankfulness is even more obvious as in the expression of *ng-gai* (literally meaning that I should not or I should not allow this) that there is a component of indebtedness. This conceptualization of the dual nature of gratitude, though not uniquely Chinese, has not been fully articulated in Western theorizing, and implications of this duality for prosocial behaviors is worthy of further exploration. Nonetheless, some researchers in recent years have suggested that gratitude and indebtedness should be regarded as distinct emotional states (e.g., Watkins, Sheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006).

Going beyond this level of personal gratitude, which is directed to the benefactor or the specific person providing the benefit, the Chinese also distinguish a level of transpersonal gratitude, which is gratefulness to a higher power, to God, or to the cosmos. Although this distinction is again not unique to the Chinese, the elaborated articulation of transpersonal gratitude as a Chinese way of life is particularly noteworthy.

Transpersonal gratitude characterizes the noble knowledgeable person (*daren*) who knows the meanings of life (*zhi-ming*) through appreciating the gifts of life and the gifts in life. The grateful person is always amazed by some simple things occurring in his daily life with the feeling of a sense of wonder and appreciation. This outlook in life is precisely what a Zen master would call *pingchang-xin* (appreciative stance). Tang Dynasty Zen master Zhaozhou interpreted it to mean that every day is a good day, as the many flowers in spring and the moon in autumn (*chun-you-baihua-qiu-you-yue*), the cool breeze in summer and the snow in winter (*xia-you-liangfeng-dong-you-xue*) will make any day a good day (see Zheng, 2007).

The appreciative stance or outlook in life allows the grateful person to find benefits not only in positive but also negative aspects of life. The story of “Saiweng Lost His Horse” as recorded in the classic Chinese text of *Huainanzi* nicely illustrates this life orientation (Yang, 1987). The following is my free translation focusing only on the message of the story.

Saiweng lived in the border town to the south of the people of Hu tribes. One day, his horse for unknown reasons fled north. People came to comfort him on his loss. In response to their kind words, he reassured them of his view that the loss could be a blessing.

Several months later, his horse returned together with a fine Hu horse. People came to congratulate him on his gain. Surprisingly, he remarked that the gain could be a misfortune.

During a ride with the Hu horse, his son fell and broke his hipbone. People again came to comfort the father who returned with the remark that his son’s accident could be a blessing.

A year later, the young men in the border town were recruited to fight against the invasion of the Hu people. Nine out of every ten young men died in combat. Saiweng and his son survived the invasion, as his crippled son was not recruited to the army.

Therefore, a blessing might turn out to be a misfortune, and a misfortune a blessing.

Although this story is often interpreted to illustrate the uncertainties of life, and the interdependence of *fu* (happiness) and *huo* (disaster), I think this is also a story of gratitude, the full appreciation of the positive and negative aspects of life. Saiweng's remarks represent his experience and expression of gratitude at the transpersonal level, his grateful attitude toward life, and his tendency to see all of life as a gift.

Conceptions of Gratitude as an Affect

The conceptualization and theorizing of gratitude from a more psychological perspective has attracted attention only in recent years (see Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2007; Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007a). In general, gratitude has been conceptualized at several levels of analysis ranging from momentary affects to long-term dispositions. As an affect or emotion, gratitude has been regarded as a subjective experience of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation of benefits received from other people or even from nonhuman sources such as God, nature, and the cosmos (e.g., McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004). As a personality trait or disposition, gratitude is viewed as an enduring characteristic of thankfulness that is sustained across situation and over time (e.g., McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Accordingly, grateful individuals would more likely experience and express thankfulness in responding to benefits or gifts from others.

Perhaps, one of the earliest serious attempts to derive a conceptual view of gratitude was undertaken by McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) who defined gratitude as a moral affect, that is, an affect with moral precursors and consequences. They suggested that the person, in experiencing gratitude, is motivated to engage in prosocial behaviors, becomes energized to sustain prosocial behaviors, and is inhibited from performing destructive interpersonal behaviors.

Specifically, they delineated that gratitude serves three moral functions, as a moral barometer, as a moral motive, and as a moral reinforcer. The emotion of gratitude, acting as a moral barometer,

indicates a change in the individual's social relationships and suggests the perception that another person has treated the individual prosocially. As a moral motive, the experience of gratitude motivates the individual as a beneficiary of the prosocial behavior to treat kindness with kindness or inhibit destructive behaviors toward a benefactor immediately or in the future. As a moral reinforcer, the expression of gratitude makes it more likely for the benefactor to provide help in the future. By adducing evidence from a wide variety of studies in personality, social, developmental, and evolutionary psychology, McCullough and his colleagues have shown that gratitude can indeed be regarded as a moral emotion. Notably, experiencing and expressing gratitude has been shown to relate strongly to well-being, bringing peace of mind, more satisfying personal relationships, and happiness in general (e.g., Adler & Fagley, 2005; McCullough et al., 2002, 2004; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003; Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007b). In summary, the experience and expression of gratitude may maximize positive outcomes in relationships, leading to the building and maintaining of supportive networks of relationships.

Dispositional Gratitude and Its Assessment

Gratitude has been studied as a personality characteristic, suggesting that dispositionally grateful people might feel more gratitude than others. McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) distinguished four facets of grateful disposition: intensity, frequency, span, and density. Accordingly, grateful people may feel gratitude more intensely for a positive event, and may report gratitude more frequently or more easily throughout the day. They may have a wider span of life circumstances for which they are grateful at any given time with a variety of other benefits (e.g., for their families, their jobs, their health, and life itself), and they may experience gratitude with greater density (i.e., toward more people) for a single positive outcome or life circumstance. To examine the nature and correlates of gratitude as a disposition, McCullough and his colleagues (2002) developed the 6-item self-report Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), which assesses the four facets of grateful disposition. Scores on the GQ-6 were found to converge with observer ratings, and correlate

positively with positive affect, well-being, prosocial behaviors/traits, and religiousness/spirituality.

Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts (2003) conceptualized dispositional gratitude differently as a combination of four distinct characteristics: acknowledgment of the importance of expressing and experiencing gratitude, lack of resentment (feelings of a sense of abundance rather than deprivation), appreciation for the contributions of others, and appreciation for simple pleasures. To assess these characteristics, they developed the 44-item self-report Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test (GRAT). They found evidence of construct validity of three factors labeled as a sense of abundance, simple appreciation, and appreciation of others. The GRAT scores were found to relate positively with satisfaction with life and negatively with depression.

With a slightly different emphasis in the conceptualization of gratitude, Adler and Fagley (2005) chose to focus broadly on appreciation in terms of eight dimensions: appreciation of people, possessions, the present moment, rituals, the feeling of awe, social comparisons, existential concerns, and gratitude behaviors. They developed the 57-item Appreciation Scale (AS) to assess these eight dimensions of appreciation. An 18-item abbreviated scale was also constructed based on factor analysis of the full scale. In their study, they also reported positive and significant correlations between the AS scores and life satisfaction as well as positive affect.

While self-report measures of gratitude (e.g., GQ-6, GRAT) were generally used to assess gratitude in different studies, other approaches have also been employed (see Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). One approach was to ask people to list things which they felt grateful, or to write about their lives, and researchers could arrive at gratefulness themes based on coding these vignettes. Another approach is to measure gratitude behaviorally through observing thank-you or grateful responses from individuals receiving benefits as a result of the prosocial behavior of other people. It is believed that combining multiple sources of data in addition to self-reports will foster a better understanding of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in the experience and expression of gratitude.

The Cultivation and Practice of Gratitude

Despite the recognition of the importance of gratitude conceptualized as an emotion and as a disposition throughout human history, the upsurge in research interests on gratitude within psychology has a history of only less than a decade. Most research has considered the short-term effects of the grateful emotion, and the longer-term effects of having a grateful disposition, and few studies have focused on applying gratitude in practice. However, it is reassuring that evidence is fast accumulating that there is a strong connection between gratitude and well-being or mental health, and that gratitude as a character strength could play an important role in strength-based counseling and psychotherapy that leads individuals to live a good and satisfying life (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Smith, 2006). For example, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) in their study of 24 character strengths, found that gratitude was more strongly related to life satisfaction than all but two strengths. Research studies have also indicated that interventions aimed at enhancing gratitude consistently have resulted in benefits, suggesting that gratitude interventions may have considerable applications to coaching and psychotherapy. Earlier, I have already referred to the effective gratitude interventions developed by Seligman and his colleagues (Seligman et al., 2005, 2006).

Perhaps, one of the first pioneering studies on gratitude interventions was the three studies by Emmons and McCullough (2003). In the first study, they compared people who kept weekly gratitude journals with those who recorded either neutral or negative (life stresses) in their diaries. The weekly-gratitude-journal group exercised more regularly, felt better about their lives, and was more optimistic about the coming week. In the second study, the daily-gratitude-journal group replaced the weekly-gratitude-journal group. This group reported greater enthusiasm, alertness, and determination, and was significantly more likely to make progress toward important goals pertaining to health, interpersonal relationships, and academic performances. Those in this group also were more likely to have helped or offer emotional support to another person. In the third study, people with neuromuscular conditions were randomly assigned to either a gratitude condition or a control

condition. Those in the gratitude condition were more optimistic, more energetic, more connected to others, and more likely to have restful sleep.

Taken together, these studies suggested that gratitude has a causal influence on well-being, and that an effective strategy to enhance well-being is to lead people to count their blessings or to reflect daily on those aspects of their lives for which they are grateful. The effectiveness of this count-your-blessings approach has also been supported by subsequent studies (e.g., Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman et al., 2005, 2006).

In view of the positive benefits that can accrue from the conscious practice of gratitude, there are specific programs developed for nurturing or cultivating gratitude in one's life. For example, Miller (1995) provided a simple four-step cognitive-behavioral approach for learning gratitude through identifying nongrateful thoughts, formulating gratitude-supporting thoughts, substituting the gratitude-supporting thoughts for the nongrateful thoughts, and translating the inner feeling into outward action. Another alternative way to enhance a person's sense of gratitude is provided by Naikan therapy, a Japanese form of meditation (Reynolds, 1981). Specifically, the individual learns to meditate daily on three gratitude-related questions: What did I receive? What did I give? What troubles and difficulties did I cause to others? In so doing, gratitude meditation helps to bring about feelings of gratitude, indebtedness, and the motivation to reciprocate.

Gratitude Interventions in the Chinese Crisis Context

Although the suggestion for employing gratitude interventions in coaching and psychotherapy seems to be justified, one may still raise the question whether gratitude interventions could be regarded as an evidence-based procedure for helping clients in the aftermath of a disaster. Admittedly, there is not much work addressing the efficacy and effectiveness of gratitude interventions in a crisis situation. At best, there is some supporting evidence that gratitude could help people in crisis. For example, Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, and Larkin (2003)

found that gratitude was rated the second most commonly experienced emotion after compassion in a list of 20 common emotions. They found that positive emotions including gratitude were critical characteristics that actively helped resilient people cope with the disaster that they encountered. One plausible reason was that these people might come through the crisis and discover benefits in that experience, a process called benefit finding (Affleck & Tennen, 1996). Indeed, research studies have suggested that benefit finding can help people cope with disasters, deadly diseases, and bereavement (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2002; Tennen & Affleck, 2002). In the same connection, McAdams and Bauer's (2004) analyses of redemption sequences revealed that even painful experiences could become something for which people feel grateful.

Perhaps, another question that might be raised is the suitability of gratitude interventions as a viable treatment option in the Chinese cultural context. Given that gratitude, *en* and *gan'en*, is highly valued in Chinese culture, and that the appreciative stance as an outlook in life is considered to be the ultimate path to a full life among Chinese people (see also Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005), the group exercises in gratitude interventions could be considered well-suited for the long-term caring of survivors in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake. Specifically, the count-your-blessings exercise, akin to the asking of three questions in Naikin meditation, is very much in line with the Confucian teaching of daily self-reflection (*wu-ri-sanxing-wushen*) in the *Analects* (Wu, 2003). The daily reflection exercise, reframed as Naikin-like questions, could foster the recognition of human interdependence, and the realization of how much we have received from others, how much gratitude is due them, and how little we have demonstrated this gratitude. Along with the recognition that we have been loved and appreciated in spite of our weaknesses, misfortunes, and crisis situations comes the upwelling of gratitude and a desire to be of service to others. Much like the narrative approaches to therapy, a new life story could then be constructed after ridding ourselves of the victim roles that affect us in the aftermath of the disaster (Payne, 2006).

In summary, recent theorizing and research studies have expanded our understanding of the role that gratitude could play in providing a

viable treatment option in the long-term caring of survivors in the aftermath of a disaster. It is believed that gratitude interventions such as the count-your-blessings or daily reflection exercise, already existing as a part of Chinese cultural practice, could be a well-suited treatment option for the Chinese people. The effectiveness of such procedures in the context of crisis situations warrants careful exploration, and the call for rigorous investigation in this area needs to be emphasized in our future research agenda.

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