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Gratitude in Terms of Transactional Analysis

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Editorial preface

This paper deals with the topic of gratitude, an under-researched area that involves both transaction and script theory. The study is unusual in that it takes advantage of the capabilities of new technologies in the narrative. The author refers to the words of the creators of the transactional analysis theory, which are posted on YouTube. I invite you to take a look at this experiment.

Zbigniew Wieczorek

Abstract

Gratitude is one of the rarest researched aspects of human interaction. Partially because in scientific reflection gratitude and gift-giving are generally treated as a sign of corruption. Research held in Polish public hospitals on the topic of gift-giving to medical staff shows that patients very precisely differentiate bribes from gifts as a token of gratitude.

In TA it is very difficult to find any reflection about gratitude, however, Erskine admits that the need of showing gratitude appears to be one of the most significant relational needs he noticed. Gratitude is not easy to analyse in TA terms because it is both an emotional and a cultural attitude. As an emotion, it is a kind of joy, one of the four authentic emotions according to Eric Berne. As a cultural response it activated equally three Ego States: Parent, Adult, and Child. What is more – a need for showing gratitude in a form of benevolent action toward the person someone feels gratitude for and this is an occasion to take a step towards intimacy.

Keywords: gift giving, hospitals, gratitude, bribery.

In one of his interviews, which was recorded as a short film, Eric Berne explained the dynamics of the functioning of the Ego states using his example. It was when he bought a sports Maserati, which he drove from his home on the California coast in Mount Carmel to San Francisco to his weekly Transactional Analysis seminars. He said that on the one hand, he needed a car as a transportation mean (Adult), and at the same time, an expensive foreign car reflected his financial position (Parent). At the same time, driving this car gave him enormous pleasure, which came from the Ego state – Child (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xF-2VH2q10).

This is a very interesting example when the concept of the Ego states is used not only to analyse transactions between people but also to explain the dynamics of how people experience their decisions and their consequences. It is also interesting that, as opposed to the transactional analysis, there are times when we are not completely immersed in a specific Ego state, but instead, we are staying in all three states at the same time. It seems that one can find more such situations or internal predispositions when we are aroused in all Ego states truly experiencing a certain situation. In this article, the attempt is made to present one such example that stands out from the sharp division into three separate Ego states: gratitude.

Gratitude is described in the literature as

the joyful emotion that comes from recognizing that you have received favor or help from another person, or a positive emotion that you feel after recognizing the value of a particular situation in life, from a person, received from an action, or gained from an object [...]. People with high gratitude are known to have the ability to find positive attributes and reinterpret them in a good way, even in situations that are easily interpreted negatively because of their flexible attribution [...]. In addition, people with high gratitude appreciate external favorable attention [...] and have the ability to find positive aspects in stressful situations and reconstruct the event [...] (Chang Seek Lee, 2020).

The above definition treats gratitude as a joyful emotion, which is in line with the approach adopted in the Transactional Analysis, where joy is considered one of the four genuine emotions alongside sadness, fear, and anger (Steward, Joines, 2016, p. 292). Nevertheless, in the light of research conducted in the years 2015–2021 on expressing gratitude in hospitals, gratitude seems to be more a specific attitude than an emotion. It results from observations and literature that gratitude is deeply rooted in culture. Moreover, it has the character of a predisposition or an ability as it can be learned. Therefore, gratitude turns out to be a culturally defined response that stimulates people to culturally specific behaviours that are valued very positively, usually manifested as gifts giving understood as a material expression of gratitude.

Research process

The idea of this article is based on the conclusions of research on showing gratitude in hospitals. During the research process, about 20 in-depth, partially structured interviews were conducted, of which 13 were selected for further analysis. The remaining interviews were rejected due to the lack of consent from the respondents or the lack of complete biographical data (some interviews were conducted spontaneously with unknown persons, in the car, and after the passenger left the car there was no chance to contact the respondent to obtain consent or information about him/her). The interviews were preceded by a several-year preparatory period full of many informal discussions on giving gifts in hospitals.

In addition, 109 questionnaires were conducted with young physicians during their specialisation training on their perception of the phenomenon of giving expressions of gratitude.

The research was also supplemented with studies on various forms of existing data, such as websites, blogs, journals, and other documents, such as codes of ethics.

Research problem

Gratitude is an interesting subject for scientific analysis as it combines aspects of emotion and cultural construct.

Gratitude was neglected throughout the history of psychology. Recently many scholars pay great attention to gratitude because it is a virtue that is recognized in the major monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as are expressed variously by almost all cultures in the world and provide many benefits for psychological health (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Gratitude is one of character strength that has the strongest relationship with global indicators of psychological health (Park, N., Peterson, C., Seligman, M.E.P., 2004); In facing difficulties, setbacks and challenges, young people who have character strength will experience fewer psychological and physical problems and will be helped in developing themselves to achieve expected outcomes such as school success (Park & Peterson, 2009). Roberts (2004) found that gratitude, as a virtue, increases or protects happiness and well-being. The grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have and so are less susceptible for, even they have a more powerful resource for overcoming many of the circumstances that disappoint, frustrate, and anger (Wardhani, 2020).

Bibliographic research carried out on 22 September 2021 in the EBSCO database showed 1120 articles related to the term gratitude, thankfulness or gratefulness published in the years 2003-2021. There were 1,076 full texts in the database and 560 peer-reviewed articles. Most were in the field of psychology.

Even though the fact that gratitude is observed in many situations of everyday life, there is little reflection on it in other social sciences such as sociology, pedagogy, management science, let alone economics or legal sciences (the right to be grateful) (see Sypniewski, 2021). Even if behaviours connected with showing gratitude are common and well-known (e.g. showing gratitude in hospitals and schools), it is not reflected in research reflection, and even less so in organisational practice. Gratitude is ignored as a phenomenon accompanying stakeholder relations in the above-described organisations. It results from the fact that the phenomenon of gratitude and its various forms of expressions is commonly connected with corruption and giving bribes, regardless of the fact that these are completely different phenomena. Unfortunately, there is no definition in social sciences that clearly distinguishes a bribe from an expression of gratitude. In a sense, this can be understood as they both belong to one family of behaviours known as the gift exchange. The only field of social sciences dealing with the issue of gift exchange was social anthropology, beginning with the publication of Bronisław Malinowski's "Argonauts of the Western Pacific" ["Argonauści Zachodniego Pacyfiku"] and Marcel Mauss "The Gift". Unfortunately, other social sciences have described the exchange of gifts either from a legal position (as corruption, which is a violation of rules) or from an economic position (analysing financial and social costs of decisions made after receiving benefit given as an expression of gratitude). Even in discussions at scientific conferences, giving expressions of gratitude was most often associated with corruption (private talks at the EGOS and EURAM conferences, Brasov 2017, Tallinn 2018, Lisbon 2019).

Direct research in hospitals has identified four criteria that distinguish a bribe from an expression of gratitude. These criteria include:

- time;
- gift form;
- transparency;
- person.

The time of giving a gift refers to at what point in the relationship, process, or event the gift is being given. If the gift is given after completing an action for which the person wants to repay, it is an expression of gratitude. The key factor here is that the person who gives a gift does so without being forced by any external situation such as illness, dependence, or the expectation of benefits. On the other hand, a bribe is given in advance and has the characteristics of a commercial transaction – I'm giving it to you so you can give something back to me. The second criterion is that the expression of gratitude is an object or (less often) service, not money. In the event of a bribe, money is usually given in various forms. If things are given, their material value is emphasised. The gift which is given and which is an expression of gratitude, represents a person in

a way, and the respondents pointed out that the value of representing a given person may be more important than the material value. That is why, during interviews such things as, e.g., personally made handicraft (interview no. 16), drawings or portraits (interview no. 7), flowers from their garden, baked cakes or other products (e.g. sausage handed out by a farmer – interview no. 13) were mentioned. Obviously, there are things of high value – e.g., professional paediatric literature describes an expression of gratitude in the form of an expensive brooch given to the doctor by a couple of jewellers in gratitude for saving the child (Sharma et al., 2018). Another criterion is transparency or secrecy in giving the gift. A bribe is always secret or disguised, whilst people giving expressions of gratitude do it openly or do not care whether they will be seen as the most important thing is the relationship with the person to whom one wants to show gratitude. Moreover, giving an expression of gratitude is valued very positively, therefore the rules prohibiting giving the expressions of gratitude (e.g. in hospitals) are ignored. An important feature of gratitude is the fact that it is felt towards people, not institutions or organisations. As it does not directly affect activities of a given organisation (as it relates to decisions and actions that have already been conducted), it is very easy to ignore and, in principle, the administrative authorities ignored the facts of expressing gratitude in the inspected organisations. On the other hand, bribes greatly interfere with the activities of organisation, therefore they are given a lot of attention.

Gratitude is an interesting area for reflection when it comes to Transactional Analysis. First of all, it is because it cannot be associated with only one chosen Ego state. It can be also presented well and authentically from the point of view of the Parent, Adult, and Child. Probably the best qualification for gratitude will be to recognise that it has taken equally from each Ego state. Feeling grateful, we engage energy from both the Ego state – Parent (moral rule requiring the appreciation of the good that has been received), the Ego state – Adult (experience of objectively positive events and thoughts), and the Ego state – Child (feelings of joy). Therefore, even if a person that strongly experiences the feelings of gratitude in transactions with others at a given time will be able to genuinely enter into any complementary transaction without feeling dominated, and will not have problems with reactions in each of the Ego states. It is also an emotional state that stimulates to act, e.g., giving a gift as an expression of gratitude, though these may also be other activities aimed at other people, not necessarily those to whom one feels grateful. Even if being focused only on the efforts made to repay benefactors by giving gifts, it is very clear that people and possibly their loved ones invest a lot of energy, time, and resources to be able to express gratitude in a situation where they do not have to do so directly because the relationship and dependence of the person have ended (e.g. in the patient-doctor or teacher-student relationship). The fact that these people continue to put

a lot of effort into showing gratitude proves their emotional aspect (strongly engaging emotion of the Child), and the fact of connecting it with ethical attitude (Ego state-Parent) indicates the cultural aspects of this phenomenon. In terms of Transactional Analysis, the theses by Richard Erskine (the winner of, amongst others, Eric Berne Prize together with Marilyn Zalcman for the work "Script circulation: a model for the analysis of vicarious feelings"), in which he places the need to express gratitude amongst the 8 basic transactional needs (video entitled "The 8 relational needs - Richard Erskine - Transactional Analysis" of 10 January 2017 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwclJu1Hdfo&t=498s>) – read on 25.09.2021).

Giving expressions of gratitude can also be seen as a very healthy way of teaching people to enter into Intimacy-Closeness (in terms of the Structuring of Time). It is especially important in this aspect for people who wish to find an alternative to psychological games and who may already realise that entering into psychological games is a failed attempt to enter into Intimacy-Closeness. People may have difficulty entering into Closeness for various reasons (one of them may be script dependencies and vicarious feelings described by R. Erskine), however, transactional needs push them into interactions that may result in Closeness. Therefore, experiencing gratitude and entering into transactions with another person based on gratitude, for example by giving them a gift-an expression of gratitude, can be good training in dealing with the fear of being hurt that prevents an individual from entering into Closeness.

Limitations of gratitude and giving expressions of gratitude in social practice

The positive effect of gratitude and the resulting need to show gratitude to a specific person can unfortunately be stopped or rejected due to at least several reasons. As already described in Transactional Analysis, an individual can enter into misunderstanding and ignore the situation that gives them a chance to feel grateful. This is where there can be mismatches at all levels of the mismatch matrix: a failure to recognise the fact, its meaning, the ability to react, and the person's ability to express gratitude. (Steward, Joines, 2016, p. 253). There may also be obstacles related to the limitations and failure to recognise the other person (refusal to accept gratitude, refusal to accept thank you, refusal to accept an expression of gratitude). There are also external obstacles for expressing gratitude that is imposed by the legal system, work organisations, or organisational culture of a given environment (e.g. a categorical ban on giving and accepting expressions of gratitude in some hospitals (<https://www.rp.pl/>

orzecznictwo/art15695001-czy-butelka-koniaku-dla-lekarza-to-lapowka – accessed on 25.09.2021).

Conclusion

Gratitude as a very wide type of phenomenon includes emotional elements (as defined in psychology) as well as cultural aspects that are learned and socially transferred. The relationship between these aspects still needs to be studied - to what extent gratitude as a learned cultural attitude is the source of genuine emotion, and to what extent it is biologically assigned to our species. Most likely, however, the relationship between these sources of gratitude is very deep and the answer to this question will not be explicit. From the point of view of Transactional Analysis, gratitude also shows its extraordinary character, consisting in the fact that it can engage all Ego states of the subject and leads to the fulfilment of the need of showing gratitude, which can result in a very effective entry into a Closeness relationship with another person. When we deal with giving gifts that are not the result of gratitude but pure calculation, then the above-said emotional states do not take place, same as there is no gratitude. This is where the difference between gratitude and calculation and their practical manifestation is very clear: giving expressions of gratitude or a bribe. Despite the external similarity of these two gift-giving examples, they result from totally different attitudes and emotions. Nevertheless, the study of the practice of gratitude is a very interesting area and it is very possible that shortly it will be a consciously realised social need.

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Wdzięczność w ujęciu analizy transakcyjnej

Streszczenie

Wdzięczność jest jednym z najrzadziej badanych aspektów interakcji międzyludzkich. Częściowo dlatego, że w refleksji naukowej wdzięczność i dawanie prezentów są na ogół traktowane jako przejaw korupcji. Badania na temat wręczania upominków personelowi medycznemu, przeprowadzane w polskich szpitalach publicznych, pokazują, że pacjenci potrafią bardzo precyzyjnie odróżnić łapówki od prezentów wręczanych jako wyraz wdzięczności. W AT bardzo trudno znaleźć refleksję na temat wdzięczności, jednak Erskine przyznaje, że potrzeba okazania wdzięczności wydaje się być jedną z najważniejszych potrzeb relacyjnych, jakie zauważył. Wdzięczność nie jest łatwa do przeanalizowania w kategoriach AT, ponieważ jest to postawa zarówno emocjonalna, jak i kulturowa. Jako emocja jest rodzajem radości, jednej z czterech autentycznych emocji opisanych w teorii Erica Berne'a. Jako reakcja kulturowa aktywuje w równym stopniu trzy Stany Ja: Rodzic, Dorosły i Dziecko. Co więcej, potrzeba okazania wdzięczności w postaci życzliwego działania wobec osoby, do której ktoś czuje wdzięczność, to okazja do wykonania kroku w kierunku intymności.

Słowa kluczowe: wręczanie prezentów, szpital, wdzięczność, przekupstwo.