
Gratitudine

Una risorsa promettente per il benessere oltre i tratti di personalità in studenti universitari

Annamaria Di Fabio¹ e Letizia Palazzeschi²

Sommario

In letteratura è emerso un interesse per la ricerca sulle relazioni tra gratitudine e benessere. In questo quadro, questo studio ha inteso esaminare le associazioni tra gratitudine e benessere sia edonico che eudaimonico, controllando per i tratti di personalità, in 143 studenti universitari italiani. La gratitudine spiega una percentuale di varianza incrementale rispetto ai tratti di personalità sia per il benessere edonico che per il benessere eudaimonico. La gratitudine rappresenta una promettente risorsa per il benessere in *strength-based prevention perspectives* e quindi potrebbe aprire prospettive future anche per affrontare le sfide della sostenibilità e dello sviluppo sostenibile in particolare in relazione al terzo obiettivo «*Good health and well-being*» dell'Agenda 2030.

Parole chiave

Gratitudine, Buona salute e benessere, Tratti di personalità, *Strength-based prevention perspectives*, sostenibilità, Sviluppo sostenibile.

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Gratitude

A Promising Resource for Well-Being Beyond Personality Traits in University Students

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Abstract

In literature, an interest has emerged regarding research on the relationships between gratitude and well-being. In this framework, this study aimed to examine the associations between gratitude and both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, controlling for personality traits, in 143 Italian university students. Gratitude explained additional variance over personality traits for both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Gratitude represents a promising resource for well-being in strength-based prevention perspectives and thus could also open future perspectives in order to face the challenges of sustainability and sustainable development, particularly in relation to the third goal «good health and well-being» of the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords

Gratitude, Good health and well-being, Personality traits, Strength-based prevention perspectives, Sustainability, Sustainable development.

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Introduction

The term «gratitude» is common in most languages in the world. Regarding the definition of the construct, scientific psychological literature has underlined two principal aspects of gratitude: the cognitive aspect (Weiner, 1986) and the emotional aspect (Lazarus, 1991, 1994), since the beginning. From a cognitive point of view, gratitude emerges from a cognitive process composed of two phases. In the first phase, individuals recognize that they have reached a favourable outcome related to happiness. In the second phase, individuals ascribe their happiness to sources other than themselves (Weiner, 1986). From an emotional point of view, gratitude is an empathic emotion since people feel gratitude only when they grant what others realize for them (Lazarus, 1991, 1994). Furthermore, gratitude is a «generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains» (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 112). In line with this conception of gratitude, McCullough et al. (2002) realized the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6), which is the first tool developed to detect gratitude, considering it as unidimensional. Subsequently, Watkins et al. (2003) introduced a multidimensional definition of the construct of gratitude that continues, still today, to be the most accredited in the literature. According to this definition, gratitude comprises three dimensions: Sense of abundance (Lack of sense of deprivation – gratitude for life in general, for having received so much in life), Appreciation of simple pleasure (gratitude for simple things in life), and Appreciation of others (gratitude for the support from others). Watkins et al. (2003) also developed the Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT, Watkins et al., 2003; Italian version Di Fabio, 2016b; short version GRAT-RS; Thomas & Watkins, 2003; Italian version Palazzeschi et al., 2022), which is a multidimensional measure of the construct of gratitude.

After this multidimensional articulation of the gratitude construct (Watkins et al., 2003), which remains the most widely recognized in the literature, other multidimensional models have been proposed. Adler and Fagley (2005) referred to eight dimensions of gratitude: Interpersonal, Personal assets, Present moment, Rituals of gratitude, Astonishment, Social comparisons, Appreciation of life in general, and Expression of gratitude. According to this model of gratitude, Adler and Fagley (2005) developed the multidimensional Appreciation Scale. In 2017 Morgan et al. proposed another multifactorial model of gratitude with four dimensions: Conceptions of gratitude, Grateful emotions, Attitudes towards gratitude, and Behaviours related to gratitude. According to this model, Morgan et al. (2017) realized the Multi-Component Gratitude Measure (MCGM).

Gratitude was studied from the beginning as being related to well-being, obtaining positive associations (McCullough et al., 2002). In this study, regarding

the development of the gratitude questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002), this measure of gratitude showed positive associations with optimism and hope and inverse associations with anxiety and depression in undergraduate students. In a following study (Wood et al., 2008a), gratitude (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) explained additional variance over personality traits in relation to satisfaction with life in undergraduate students. In another study among undergraduate students (Wood et al., 2009), gratitude (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) explained additional variance over personality traits in relation to Ryff and Keyes' (1995) scales of psychological well-being. Gratitude (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) was also positively associated with authenticity in terms of authentic living and negatively associated with self-alienation (Wood et al., 2008b). Gratitude as a unidimensional construct (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) has been widely studied in the literature in relation to well-being as proven by the meta-analytic review by Portocarrero et al. (2020). This meta-analytic review highlighted that gratitude (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) was associated with different measures of subjective well-being and psychological well-being. The effect sizes between gratitude and subjective and psychological measures of well-being did not differ significantly, suggesting that grateful people seem to perceive equally strong hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being.

With regards to studies using measures other than GQ-6 (McCullough et al., 2002), the following results emerged. Considering gratitude according to the multidimensional (GRAT) model by Watkins et al. (2003), this measure of gratitude displayed associations with both affective and cognitive aspects of hedonic well-being in university students (Watkins, 2004). Using the short version of GRAT, the GRAT-RS (Thomas & Watkins, 2003), these findings emerged. The GRAT-RS (Thomas & Watkins, 2003) resulted in association with greater positive affect, life satisfaction and psychological well-being in university students (Diessner & Lewis, 2007; Watkins et al., 2008). GRAT-RS showed an inverse association with negative affect in university students (Diessner & Lewis, 2007; Watkins et al., 2008). With workers in the Italian context, gratitude detected through the GRAT-RS (Thomas & Watkins, 2003) showed relationships with both hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being (Palazzeschi et al., 2022).

In literature, there are also further studies that used other multidimensional models of gratitude construct. Gratitude according to the multidimensional model by Adler and Fagley (2005) was positively related to positive affect and life satisfaction and inversely to negative affect in undergraduate students. In a following study (Fagley, 2018), gratitude according to the model by Adler and Fagley (2005) in undergraduate students offered a contribution to positive and negative affects beyond personality traits (Fagley, 2018). Regarding the multi-

dimensional model of gratitude by Morgan et al. (2017), associations emerged between gratitude and both positive affect and life satisfaction in participants from the general population in the UK.

Nevertheless, from an analysis of the literature, as far as we know, there are no studies that specifically use the multidimensional GRAT model (Watkins et al., 2003) in relation to both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (especially considering both meaning in life and flourishing) beyond personality traits.

Consequently, the hypotheses of the present study are as follows. Controlling for personality traits:

- H1. A positive association will emerge between gratitude and positive affect;
- H2. An inverse association will emerge between gratitude and negative affect;
- H3. A positive association will emerge between gratitude and life satisfaction;
- H4. A positive association will emerge between gratitude and meaning in life;
- H5. A positive association will emerge between gratitude and flourishing.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-three university students from the University of Florence (66.43% females and 33.57% males; mean age = 23.54 years, $SD = 1.98$) participated in the study. The university students participated voluntarily in the research.

Measures

Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ; Caprara et al., 1993): 132 items (1 = «*Absolutely false*» to 5 = «*Absolutely true*») with the following Cronbach's alphas: Emotional stability .90, Extraversion .81, Conscientiousness .81, Openness .75, Agreeableness .73.

Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT; Watkins et al., 2003; Italian version Di Fabio, 2016b): 44 items (1 = «*Strongly disagree*» to 5 = «*Strongly agree*») and three dimensions (Sense of abundance, Simple appreciation, Appreciation of others). Alpha coefficients were: Simple appreciation .88, Appreciation of others .87, Sense of abundance .86.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988; Italian version Terraciano et al., 2003): 20 adjectives (10 for Positive Affect PA and 10 for Negative Affect NA) with answers from 1 = «*Very slightly or not at all*» to 5 = «*Extremely*». Cronbach's alphas coefficients: Positive Affect .83; Negative Affect .85.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985; Italian version Di Fabio and Gori, 2016b): 5 items (from 1 = «*Strongly disagree*» to 7 = «*Strongly agree*»). Alpha coefficient: .85.

Meaning in Life Measure (MLM; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Italian version Di Fabio, 2014): 23 items (from 1 = «*Strongly disagree*» to 7 = «*Strongly agree*») with five dimensions (Exciting life, Accomplished life, Principled life, Purposeful life, Valued life). Alpha coefficient for the total score used in the present study was .85.

Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010, Italian version by Di Fabio, 2016a): 8 items (from 1 = «*Strongly disagree*» to 7 = «*Strongly agree*»). Alpha coefficient: .88.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in groups by specialized personnel in accordance with Italian privacy laws (DL-196/2003; EU 2016/679). All participants gave their informed consent. The administration order of the measures was balanced in order to contain presentation order effects.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, Pearson's r correlations and hierarchical regressions were carried out utilizing IBM SPSS Statistics software (version 28).

Results

Descriptive statistics and Pearson's r correlations among the variables under study are presented in Table 1.

Table 2 showed the findings of hierarchical regressions.

Regarding Positive affect, Personality traits explained 19% of the variance (first step), the GRAT dimensions added 7% of the variance (second step) (total variance of the model: 26%).

With regards to Negative affect, Personality traits explained 19% of the variance; the GRAT dimensions added 11% (total variance of the model: 30%).

In relation to Satisfaction with Life, Personality traits explained 15% of the variance; the GRAT dimensions added 29% (total variance of the model: 44%).

Concerning Meaning in Life, Personality traits explained 16% of the variance; the GRAT dimensions added 17% (total variance of the model: 33%).

With regard to Flourishing, Personality traits explained 11% of the variance; the GRAT dimensions added 30% (total variance of the model: 41%).

Table 1

Correlations among BFQ, GRAT, PANAS, SWLS, MLM, FS

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Extraversion	76.18	10.75	-												
2. Agreeableness	78.24	9.83	.24**	-											
3. Conscientiousness	84.90	10.26	.12	.25**	-										
4. Emotional stability	67.97	11.14	.14	.14	.12	-									
5. Openness	79.14	9.82	.49**	.23**	.34**	.10	-								
6. Sense of abundance	55.56	7.07	.19*	.21*	.31**	.11	.06	-							
7. Simple appreciation	49.38	6.14	.05	.16	.03	.18*	.06	.28**	-						
8. Appreciation of others	42.65	5.49	.05	.18*	.12	.15	.01	.14	.41**	-					
9. Positive affect	37.27	5.68	.33**	.01	.20*	.14	.37**	.17*	.14	.18*	-				
10. Negative affect	22.08	6.45	-.22**	-.04	-.11	-.36**	-.17*	.25**	-.10	-.15	-.17	-			
11. Satisfaction with life	23.83	5.62	.04	.19*	.03	.18*	.16	.43**	.12	.40**	.07	-.31**	-		
12. Meaning in life	119.52	17.47	.26**	.12	.22**	.22**	.23**	.18*	.15	.37**	.34**	-.27**	.56**	-	
13. Flourishing	44.25	6.05	.20*	.16	.10	.15	.14	.18*	.40**	.43**	.34**	-.37**	.55**	.66**	-

Note. N = 143. * < .05, ** < .01.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression: contribution of personality traits (BFQ) and GRAT dimensions in relation to PANAS, SWLS, MLM, FS

	PANAS PA	PANAS NA	SWLS	MLM	FS
	β	β	β	β	β
Step 1					
Extraversion	.17	-.14	.19*	.25*	.27*
Agreeableness	.05	-.02	.31**	.16	.24*
Conscientiousness	.11	-.16	.06	.15	.03
Emotional stability	.10	-.33**	.20*	.19*	.12
Openness	.25**	-.11	.37**	.01	.07
Step 2					
Sense of abundance	.18*	-.38**	.45**	.18*	.32**
Simple appreciation	.01	-.06	.06	.01	.38**
Appreciation of others	.20*	-.01	.36**	.40**	.23*
<i>R² step 1</i>	.19***	.19***	.15***	.16***	.11***
ΔR^2 step 2	.07**	.11***	.29***	.17***	.30***
<i>R² total</i>	.26***	.30***	.44***	.33***	.41***

Note. $N = 143$; * $< .05$, ** $< .01$, *** $p < .001$.

PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; MLM = Meaning in Life Measure; FS = Flourishing Scale.

Discussion

The present study examined for the first time the associations between gratitude according to the multidimensional (GRAT) model by Watkins et al. (2003) and both hedonic (positive and negative affects, life satisfaction) and eudaimonic well-being (meaning in life, flourishing), controlling for personality traits, among Italian university students. The findings supported the formulated hypotheses.

With regards to hedonic well-being, the results confirmed the first hypothesis. A positive association emerged between gratitude and positive affect beyond personality traits, emphasizing a significant relationship between gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003) and positive emotional activation (Watson et al., 1988). The findings also confirmed the second hypothesis, underlining an inverse relationship between gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003) and negative emotional activation

(Watson et al., 1988) beyond personality traits. In literature, various definitions of gratitude (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; McCullough et al., 2002; Weiner, 1986), including that by Watkins et al. (2003) used in the present study, underlined that gratitude has a positive emotional value and it is embedded in basic tendencies to feel positive emotions. Grateful individuals appreciate others for the help and support received from them (Watkins et al., 2003) and this, also in the present study, seems to generate a virtuous circle, where individuals feel more affirmed, esteemed, and valued and thus could experience more positive activation and, on the other hand, less negative activation (McCullough et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the third hypothesis was confirmed, highlighting a positive association between gratitude and life satisfaction beyond personality traits. These findings emphasized that a greater gratitude (Watkins et al., 2003) was related to higher overall positive evaluation of one's own existence (Diener et al., 1985). In the present study, grateful people seem: to be more inclined to life satisfaction; to have a vision of life in which everything they have is conceived as a gift, to perceive a sense of wealth, and to appreciate simple things in life. In our study, this conception of existence seems to lead grateful individuals to having a greater satisfaction with their life, which is considered as a gift for them. Overall, our results regarding hedonic well-being add to the existing literature, confirming and extending the findings already obtained using GQ-6 (McCullough et al., 2002), providing evidence for the associations between gratitude and different aspects of hedonic well-being, controlling for personality traits using the multidimensional (GRAT) model by Watkins et al. (2003).

Regarding eudaimonic well-being, the results confirmed the fourth hypothesis, highlighting a positive association between gratitude and meaning in life, controlling for personality traits. These findings showed that in the participants in this study, greater gratitude is related to greater acknowledgement of meaningful and authentic goals (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). A positive association between gratitude and flourishing also emerged, confirming the fifth hypothesis. The findings indicated that in the participants in this study, higher gratitude is related to a higher perception of psychological well-being with regards to «relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism» (Diener et al., 2010, p. 143). In our study, grateful people perceive thankfulness for having received so much in life, for simple pleasure in life, and for the help received from others (Watkins et al., 2003) and thus they seem to have a greater meaning in life, in terms of purpose, value and self-realization (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). Furthermore, recognizing the worth of what people have received from life and the contribution of others in their life (Watkins et al., 2003) seems to help them in being connected more to flourishing processes (Diener et al., 2010). Gratitude seems thus to also contribute to aspects of eudaimonic well-being, in terms of meaningfulness in life and flourishing, in the university students participating in this study.

Further reflections can be emphasized in relation to the contribution of gratitude to different forms of well-being as well as the differentiated involvements of the three dimensions of gratitude. In the present research, the contribution of gratitude was greater for eudaimonic well-being (especially for flourishing), followed by satisfaction with life for hedonic well-being. Gratitude seems to be related to a greater flourishing regarding relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism (Diener et al., 2010) and secondarily associated with a greater cognitive reflection on global satisfaction with one's own life (Diener et al., 1985). On the other hand, regarding the different contributions of the three dimensions of gratitude to different types of well-being, in this study, Sense of abundance better explained negative affect (inversely) and satisfaction with life; Simple appreciation better explained flourishing; Appreciation of others better explained meaning in life and also positive affect. In more detail, by examining the relationships of each aspect of well-being with the three dimensions of gratitude, this study allows us to observe the following associations, controlling for personality traits: positive affect was more associated with Appreciation of others, followed by Sense of abundance, highlighting that the aspects of gratitude relative to thankfulness towards others and also the perception of a lack of sense of deprivation in life (Watkins et al., 2003) are associated with positive emotional activation (Watson et al., 1988). Negative affect was more inversely associated with Sense of abundance, underlining that the aspects of gratitude relative to a sense of deprivation in life (Watkins et al., 2003) are associated with negative emotional activation (Watkins et al., 2003). Satisfaction with life was more associated with Sense of abundance, followed by Appreciation of others, highlighting that the aspects of gratitude regarding thankfulness to other people and also the perception of lack of deprivation (Watkins et al., 2003) are associated with the positive cognitive aspect of hedonic well-being (as for positive affect). Moving on to aspects of eudaimonic well-being, meaning in life was more associated with Appreciation of others, followed by Sense of abundance, underlining that the aspects of gratitude relative to the appreciation and recognition of others especially for one's own positive realization, and also, to a lesser extent, the perception of a sense of abundance in life (Watkins et al., 2003) are linked to a greater life meaningfulness (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). Finally, flourishing was associated with all three dimensions of gratitude in the following order of importance: Simple appreciation, Sense of abundance, Appreciation of others. This could be explained by the fact that all three facets of gratitude, although mainly the aspects regarding gratitude for simple things in life (Watkins et al., 2003), are associated with a comprehensive concept of eudaimonic well-being as flourishing (Diener et al., 2010).

Despite its promising results, this study shows a limitation regarding its participants, who are students at a single university in Central Italy, and thus not representative of all Italian university students. Future studies should involve

students from other parts of Italy. Moreover, it could also be interesting to analyse the examined relationships in other types of student, for example high-school students, as well as other targets, such as workers. Furthermore, future studies could examine the associations of gratitude according to the multidimensional model by Watkins et al. (2003) with other positive variables such as, for example, acceptance of change (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016a), hope (Snyder et al., 1991), and optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1985), controlling for personality traits.

If the findings of this study are further confirmed, future perspectives could emerge at an intervention level for gratitude in relation to well-being. Gratitude is amenable to training (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Rash et al., 2011; Siu et al., 2014), differently from personality traits, which are considered steady (Costa and McCrae, 1992), and thus it could be seen as a promising positive resource in strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021) and also in a primary prevention perspective (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2021; Hage et al., 2007).

Well-being is an essential goal of the 2030 Agenda (third goal «Good health and well-being») and thus gratitude could be configured as a promising variable, capable of responding to the contemporary issues of sustainability and sustainable development within the framework of The Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development (Di Fabio, 2017a, 2017b; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018, Di Fabio & Rosen, 2020). This current research area emphasizes the worth of a preventive perspective and the focus on positive psychological aspects in order to advance towards sustainability and sustainable development.

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