

Athletes' Gratitude: Initialization, Development, and Prospects

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The study of "gratitude" has become an increasingly important hot topic in positive psychology field. Mention to the research achievement, various of theoretical concepts and empirical evidences have been accumulated and published. Follow - up "gratitude" research has been applied and extended from the general situation to the specific situation, such as some sports psychologists join the gratitude research. In the initial stages, the "gratitude in sport field" research had been questioned and ignored due to gratitude could not improve the athlete's energy and performance soon and directly. Fortunately, gratitude has been acknowledged and valued gradually due to it brings athletes' an additional function "psychologically healthier" beside prime goals "Faster – Higher – Stronger" all athletes pursue. This article aims to re-examine study results from specific sports gratitude on the analogy of general situation gratitude, and emphasize the characteristics and contributions of gratitude in the context of sports. This article is divided into three parts: the first part introduces the theoretical concept, measurement tool of gratitude, and then clarify contemporary theory underpinning the relationship between gratitude and athletes' well-being. Some intervention that aim to enhance the effects of gratitude on well-being are also reviewed. The second part is about a systematic review of the psychological process and theoretical boundaries of gratitude in sport psychology in particular during two stages of initial germination and development. The third part, finally, we propose a breakthrough about gratitude in sport psychology different from gratitude in general situation. Though Faster – Higher – Stronger is presented as the golden ideal in sport, some scholars (including us) have attempted to introduce concepts from positive psychology such as gratitude because we believe that optimal performance depends on psychological health as well as physical health. In the performance-oriented competitive environment, investigating the benefit of gratitude on athletes' well-being is not a well-went road, but it is nonetheless a worthy endeavor.

Keywords: *gratitude intervention, gratitude measurement, psychological health, sports psychology, well-being*

Extended Abstract

The study of gratitude has become an increasingly hot topic in the positive psychology field, which started to gain attention in psychology in the twentieth century due to its emphasis on the positive rather than the negative side of human mind and behavior. Gratitude, as a positive factor that can promote individual well-being, facilitate interpersonal relationships and increase group cohesion, is an important aspect of positive psychology. Research on gratitude in the general context has introduced various theoretical concepts and accumulated a wealth of empirical evidence. More recent research has applied and

extended the findings from the general context to various specific contexts, such as sports psychology. However, research on gratitude in the sports context seems to have been less appreciated than gratitude in the general context. In the initial stages, such research was questioned or ignored because gratitude could not improve athletes' energy and performance quickly or directly, which had long been the sole focus of sports psychology. Fortunately, gratitude has gradually become acknowledged and valued as it brings additional benefits, such as promoting athletes' well-being and relationships with their coaches.

If gratitude makes athletes psychologically healthier, it is a goal worth pursuing alongside the primary goals of “Faster – Higher – Stronger” that all athletes pursue.

This article reviews the constructs, theories and findings on gratitude in both the general and the sports context and provides advice on methods and future researches and concludes the article. Finally, it casts some light on future research developments in the field. The review aims to re-examine the findings from specific sports gratitude studies by comparing them with findings on gratitude in a general context, and to emphasize the characteristics and contributions of gratitude in the context of sport. The article is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the theoretical concepts and measurement tools used in gratitude research, and then clarifies contemporary theories underpinning the relationship between gratitude and athletes’ well-being. Some interventions aiming to enhance the effects of gratitude on well-being are also reviewed. The literature review revealed various definitions of gratitude, such as morality, a combination of positive emotion and cognition, affective trait, and so on. Looking on the bright side, we are more optimistic than ever before that we shall see a full flowering of the various definitions of gratitude mentioned above. Researchers must, of course, differentiate between the various definitions and meanings of gratitude before conducting further research or interventions. Because of the multiple definitions of gratitude, many researchers have designed questionnaires to measure different aspects of gratitude according to the various definitions. After verifying the reliability and validity of the measurement tools, the relationships between gratitude and other outcome variables, such as well-being have been verified.

The literature review suggests a consensus on the positive relationship between gratitude and well-being; however, there are diverse theories on the mechanisms by which gratitude enhances or mediates well-being. Such as someone can achieve well-being through more social support, positive thinking style and positive emotional characteristics. A more integrated and systematic theory interpret the process from gratitude to well-being is called broaden-and-build theory. This theory of gratitude

posits that gratitude can function to broaden individuals’ momentary thought-action repertoires and widen their array of thoughts and actions that come to mind (Fredrickson, 1998). And the specific benefits of gratitude including personal and social development, community strength and individual health and well-being. All of these proposed mechanisms for the effect of gratitude on well-being have been verified and supported by many empirical studies, meaning that gratitude can improve well-being in multiple ways. In addition to questionnaire surveys, many researchers have conducted intervention studies to exam the effect of gratitude on well-being and whether levels of gratitude could be enhanced. To our excitement, interventions such as “counting your blessings” and “gratitude visits” have been proven to have lasting effects on enhancing the level of gratitude. This means that gratitude can be cultivated and improved.

The second part of this article reviews the literature focusing on gratitude in the sports context. It provides a systematic review of the psychological process and theoretical boundaries of gratitude in sport psychology during the initial and developmental stages of the field.

In the initial stages, gratitude studies in sport did not go well and were often severely questioned. These questions could be divided into two categories: “does gratitude exist in the sports context?” and “can gratitude improve athletes’ performance?” To answer the question of whether gratitude exists in the sports context, we outline the obscure gratitude events in those sports situations by finding examples of gratitude in sport, so that the sports psychology community can clearly see the existence of gratitude. For example, we strive to make these distinctive anecdotal statements about gratitude, situations and events happen on sporting games.

With regard to the second question, at present there is really no direct evidence that gratitude can promote athletes’ performance. However, perhaps the question of whether gratitude can improve athletes’ performance should be challenged. The question has its origins in the robust and prevalent belief that athletes’ performance is the only important pursuit and the emphasis on the Olympic motto, “higher, faster, stronger.”

This motto reveals that athletes’ practice and

preparation is aimed only at achieving these three goals. All athletes work hard to achieve these goals through modern scientific training, supported by evidence from physiology, mechanics, nutrition, and other disciplines. This leads athletes to focus on the factors that directly promote performance, such as muscle strength and cardiopulmonary function, with the fastest results; however, this generally leads them to ignore indirect factors such as good mental health, which may be promoted by factors such as gratitude. The athletes gain on one side and lose on another. Therefore, the second question "can sports-domain gratitude improve athletes' performance?" should be challenged.

Fortunately, as the field has begun to develop, researchers across the world have begun to apply some field-specific concepts to test the psychological mechanism of gratitude among athletes. The results of systematic research on gratitude in the sports context suggest that the relationship between gratitude and mental health indicators found in general gratitude research is also relevant to the sports context. Although these studies were conducted at different times and in different places, similar results were obtained. The findings show that gratitude has a stable positive benefit for athletes. It echoes the findings of general psychology in the past, and also provides evidence that gratitude has the same positive effect on individual culture (American) of collectivism culture (cultural Chinese).

Research in the developmental phase has made at least two important contributions: first, the construction of gratitude scales specifically for athletes, and second, the finding that gratitude has long-lasting effects on athletes. The sport gratitude questionnaire (GQ-S) (Chen & Kee, 2008) was developed based on the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ6) (McCullough et al., 2002). They changed some of the wording to make it relevant for the sports field; for example: "I have so much to be thankful for, during the course of my training"; "If I had to list everything in my sport career that I felt grateful for, I think it would be a very long list"; and "I am grateful to many coaches or teammates." Chen and Chang (2017) compared the validity of the GQ-S and GQ6. Their findings showed that the GQ-S has incremental

validity and better predictive power, and thus answers the call for sports psychology to develop sports-specific measurements. The GQ-S version of the gratitude scale has better context sensitivity than the original scale and provides an important tool for research. The research results have been verified under both collectivist and individualist cultures. This evidence confirms the external validity of the GQ-S. With regard to the second contribution, Hsu et al. (in press) used qualitative methods to interview nine Olympic athletes who had engaged in their sport for at least 17 years. The study revealed a dynamic system of gratitude experiences circulating from the input, process and the output stages utilized by elite athletes who manifest the power of grateful emotions. The effects of gratitude on athletes were shown to last for decades. The study contributes to gratitude-relevant research in the field of sports psychology.

In this third section, we propose how researchers can further develop the concept of gratitude in sport psychology as different from gratitude in a general context. Gratitude has long been an important concept in the positive psychology field. More than 500 papers on gratitude have been published, and the concept has been applied in diverse fields, including business (Lee, Bradburn, Johnson, Lin, & Chang, in press), medical care (Aparicio, Centeno, Robinson, & Arantzamendi, in press), and education (Froh et al., 2008). However, since the first study on gratitude among athletes in 2008, it has taken more than 10 years for studies in this field to be noted. Although some problems have been solved and small achievements have finally been made, more sustained effort is needed. We believe that there are four key research areas deserving further exploration. The first involves how athletes' gratitude is specifically demonstrated in competitive sports. The second seeks to answer the question of whether athletes' gratitude is at the individual or group level. The third is the application of multiple methods; it is particularly recommended to use qualitative research methods to explore the psychological process of gratitude and its significance to different types of sports and life stages of athletes. The fourth is to explore how cultural differences might affect athletes' gratitude.

This article has reviewed the research literature on gratitude in the field of sports. The study not only shows that research findings on general gratitude are reproducible or verifiable in specific sports situations, but more importantly, it shows that gratitude research provides inspiration and adds the concept of “healthier” to the “higher, faster, stronger” core goals of competitive sports. An important point is that we do not oppose the pursuit of strategies that directly strengthen athletes’ physical fitness. After all, winning is still the core goal in the competitive sports arena. However, we believe that while athletes spend a lot of time and energy exercising to maintain their physical fitness, they must also invest the same resources to maintain their mental health. Neither should be biased. There may also be readers who believe that sports psychology has actually put a lot of effort into assisting athletes in the past (Foster, Maynard, Butt, & Hays, 2016), but digging into these studies is

still designed to improve athletic performance. There are fundamental differences to our research team in essence from the idea of mental health. Our research team has made long-term efforts not only to provide empirical evidence to show the positive effects of gratitude, nor just to prove that general gratitude is reproducible or verifiable in specific sports situations, but also to bring about a change in thinking, so that athletes can go further, longer, and healthier.

To summarize, although “faster, higher, stronger” is presented as the golden ideal in sport, some scholars (including us) have attempted to introduce concepts from positive psychology such as gratitude because we believe that optimal performance in sport depends on psychological health. In the performance-oriented competitive environment, investigating the benefits of gratitude on athletes’ well-being is not a well-travelled road, but it is nonetheless a worthy endeavor.