

# Educating gratitude: Some conceptual and moral misgivings

Blaire Morgan\*, Liz Gulliford and David Carr

*Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham*

## **Abstract:**

In a rapidly expanding academic literature on gratitude, psychologists, philosophers and educational theorists have argued that gratitude is not just of great psycho-social importance but also of moral significance. It would therefore seem to follow that the promotion of gratitude is also of moral educational significance. In this regard, recent attempts by psychologists to develop practical interventions designed to make people more grateful should be of some interest. However, while appreciating some benefits of such work, the present paper argues that much of it falls short of the educational task of developing an adequate pedagogy of gratitude focused on assisting learners' acquaintance with the complex normative grammar (moral and conceptual) of gratitude discourse. With reference to ongoing work by the authors, the paper proceeds to explore further this important dimension of educating gratitude.

**Keywords:** Gratitude, gratitude interventions, positive psychology, moral and conceptual issues

\*Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr Blaire Morgan:

Address: Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, U.K.

Email: [b.e.morgan@bham.ac.uk](mailto:b.e.morgan@bham.ac.uk)

Tel: 0121 414 4871

## Gratitude and education

As arguably a basic form of human association and reciprocation, gratitude has lately been subject to enormous attention from philosophers, psychologists and educational theorists who have sought to identify and/or demonstrate – empirically as well as conceptually – a wide range of personal, interpersonal and social benefits associated with the practice of *expressing thanks* for the favours or gifts of others, if not for good fortune in general, and even with simply experiencing *feelings of gratitude* (episodically or dispositionally).<sup>1</sup> While such benefits, as we shall see, have often been conceived in the psychological or pro-social terms of mental health, well-being and/or amicable relations with others, it also seems commonly held by philosophers and social scientists alike that such benefits have a distinct moral dimension. From this viewpoint, perhaps the bulk of the philosophical literature has been preoccupied with certain key questions concerning the moral status of gratitude – specifically with that of whether gratitude is best conceived as a duty (Berger, 1975) or as a virtue (Wellman, 1999). But it is probably safe to say that psychologists have also routinely assumed that gratitude is a significant moral quality or capacity: indeed, McCullough and colleagues (2001) have suggested that gratitude has three moral functions, firstly, as a *moral barometer*, whereby it gauges enhancement in one's well-being in response to moral action; secondly as a *moral motivator*, whereby beneficiaries are motivated to help others; and thirdly, as a *moral reinforcer* whereby the prosocial actions of benefactors are re-affirmed (by receiving expressions of thanks from the beneficiary).

That said, it is not the main concern of the present paper to defend further these ethical claims for gratitude, but rather to explore the educational or pedagogical implications of any such moral – duty- or virtue-based – conception of gratitude. First, at

the very least, to take gratitude to be of moral concern is surely to conceive it as a quality or capacity that deserves cultivation for the individual or common good; to view gratitude as of moral significance might seem to commit us to the widespread educational or other cultivation or promotion of thanks giving – or, in short, to turning those around us (perhaps especially the young) into grateful or thankful people. However, taking it to be a moral commitment or virtue in the manner of other moral commitments or virtues (such as justice, honesty or generosity) would suggest that gratitude is also a rational or reasons-responsive capacity, requiring some instruction in the grammar of gratitude discourse, including some reflection or deliberation on the occasions on which gratitude is appropriate or required. For example, one might question the intentions of the benefactor; were these intentions benevolent? Was there an ulterior motive involved in the benefaction? Was the benefit valuable, or at least intended to be so? Did the benefactor act out of duty? and so forth. In this light, we argue in this paper that the cultivation of gratitude must involve careful reflection on questions such as these and be responsive to *relevant* reasons rather than indiscriminate; gratitude reflection or reasoning should, in turn, lead to appropriate attitudes of gratitude and suitable grateful behaviours and responses.

Whilst the received academic literature on gratitude – both psychological and philosophical – has had much of interest and importance to say about these questions, there is apparently some uncertainty or confusion over the general question of what it might mean to cultivate or develop gratitude – especially as a form of rational moral agency – as well as over the educational status of many of the approaches to promoting gratitude typically recommended. In this regard, the present paper argues that – despite its frequent insights – a large psychological gratitude literature, primarily concerned with

the development of interventions devoted to producing states of personal and pro-social well-being, has largely failed to address the key pedagogical issue of how we might most effectively assist young people (or others) to understand the normatively complex grammar of gratitude discourse. In the next section, we first examine what the psychological literature has had to say on these issues.

### **Current attempts to teach or foster gratitude**

At this juncture, we might first ask here the fundamental question of *why would we want to teach gratitude?* To cut a long story short, an extensive psychological literature has suggested that experiencing gratitude has multiple benefits: for example, increases in subjective well-being and life satisfaction (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008); improvements in physical health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003); better interpersonal relationships (Algoe, 2012; Bartlett, 2012); and increases in pro-social behaviour (Barlett, 2006; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). One particularly interesting finding, specifically related to developing gratitude in school settings, is that gratitude has been found to increase adolescents' level of satisfaction with school experience (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008) and academic attainment (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono & Wilson, 2011). Given the significant correlations between gratitude and positive psychological, social and emotional benefits that have been reported in recent years, it is not surprising that research has homed in on how feelings and experiences of gratitude can be increased. This is what we shall now focus upon.

There are three gratitude exercises that frequently appear in the gratitude literature; counting blessings, gratitude journals and diaries, and gratitude visits. The premise behind the first two exercises is quite simple: by writing down the things that

you are grateful for, you shift awareness towards what you do have rather than do not have and begin to notice the positive things in your life or the people that benefit you. In the latter exercise, participants are asked to write and deliver a letter to someone to whom they were grateful but had never taken the opportunity to thank properly (thereby (re)inducing an experience of gratitude and prompting an expression of gratitude). These three particular exercises have been tested over various different time-frames and with different populations (presumably because they are relatively simple to administer and adhere to – especially the first two options).

One of the best known studies of this kind comes from Emmons and McCullough (2003). In three studies, these researchers examined the effects of counting five blessings once a week for 10 weeks (Study 1), and listing grateful experiences once a day for 2 weeks (Study 2) or 3 weeks (Study 3), and tested these exercises with both ‘normal’ populations (Studies 1 & 2) and individuals with neuromuscular diseases (Study 3). The results appear to demonstrate that engaging in gratitude exercises leads agents to entertain more positive appraisals of their lives in general; to increased optimism when thinking about the week ahead; to fewer physical complaints; to improved pro-social behaviours; to increases in positive affect; and to decreases in negative affect. Such results have also been indicated in subsequent studies, including those employing student samples (Froh et al., 2008; Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).

Another technique that seems to enhance gratitude is ‘grateful reframing’. In essence, this refers to reframing a situation in a positive way. An example from the COPE scale (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989) is: ‘I try to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive’. Positive reframing of a situation may indeed have some benefits for

developing gratitude; for example, Wood and colleagues (2007) highlighted positive reinterpretation as an adaptive coping style that is positively correlated with gratitude.

Still, whilst many salient lessons may be learnt from these various interventions, we believe that they also raise some concerns; both conceptual and moral misgivings about current approaches are raised in the following sections.

### **Motivation and Engagement: the focus on extrinsic benefits**

A major concern with such gratitude interventions surrounds participants' and educators' motivations to take part. That is, why are adult participants engaged in these programmes in the first place, and why do educators want younger participants to *become* engaged in them? Is the overall goal to increase levels of positive affect or well-being; to provide individuals with the skills to improve their social and personal relationships; or to help them acquire coping strategies, or to sleep better?

*What is the problem with this?*, one might ask. On the face of it, there may seem to be nothing objectionable about such outcomes. However, if gratitude is regarded as a moral virtue, then virtues should (according to virtue-ethical theories) be promoted for their intrinsic value to the end of flourishing life rather than for their instrumental value only; in other words, learners should come to conceive virtue as its own reward rather than as a mere means to some other end (Kristjánsson, 2013). So while none of the aforementioned extrinsic ends of gratitude may seem damaging or harmful as such, they less clearly fit the bill as components of *moral* flourishing. Thus, it seems that the goal commonly adopted by gratitude researchers (see, for example, Seligman 2003, pp. 62–75) is not to develop gratitude for its intrinsic worth, but rather to increase gratitude because it leads to other beneficial effects. Indeed, this instrumental way of thinking turns

the attention away from the intrinsic worth of gratitude to such a radical extent that gratitude becomes, in principle, substitutable by any other psychological quality that produces the beneficial side-effects more effectively.

A related problem with focusing only on instrumental benefits – highlighted in the work of philosophers and psychologists alike – is the possibility that extrinsic motivations may actually have negative effects. Barry Schwartz (2014), for example, has cogently argued that extrinsic motivations (or ‘incentives’ as he calls them) ‘are the enemy of the motivation to do the right thing because it’s the right thing’. Schwartz points out that an extrinsic motivator (such as a monetary fine) can actually lead to decreased motivations to act morally rather than vice versa.

Clearly, such claims present a warning to researchers and educationalists regarding the potential harms of purely promoting the instrumental benefits of gratitude. A focus on the intrinsic worth of gratitude may be in order if we are to avoid the potential negative effects of gratitude interventions.

### **Gratitude as ‘positive’: an indiscriminate response?**

The observations above already suggest that gratitude interventions, without careful moral evaluation, could have a merely fortuitous, if not a negative, impact on participants. Indeed, one method of cultivating gratitude that might be particularly troublesome in this regard is positive reframing, which is not always appropriate and should be promoted with caution. Sometimes it may, in fact, be appropriate to focus in and reflect on negative affect or other negative outcomes of a situation. In this regard, promoting reframing as a way of enhancing gratitude or other positive emotions may well undermine the construct of gratitude itself by turning it into an indiscriminate, rather than

appropriately reasoned, response. If we take an Aristotelian perspective on virtue, gratitude would only count as appropriate when felt ‘at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way’ (Aristotle, 1985, p. 44 [1106b17–35]). In order to experience gratitude as and when required, careful deliberation (or the exercise of practical wisdom) concerning the occasions of its use is needed. Such reflection requires weighing up which particular situations call for gratitude and which do not. For instance, should we be grateful to benefactors acting out of self-interest or reserve our gratitude for more benevolent acts? Should we be grateful to individuals who are fulfilling the requirements of their job or only those who perform supererogatory acts (that go above and beyond the call of duty)? Thus, forced reframing may cloud an individual’s judgement about when and where gratitude *should be* experienced and/or expressed.

Positive reframing has been suggested as a way of regulating negative emotions (Froh & Bono, 2014; Watkins, 2013) which, when used appropriately, may well help individuals to navigate adverse situations. Clearly, however, as already suggested, there is a limit to the usefulness of this strategy; for always ignoring negative affect, or constantly reframing negative outcomes as positive ones, may well be unwise and unhelpful. Insofar as life inevitably has light and shade, it is surely important that we are able to experience both positive *and* negative emotions; for how else will we learn to cope with negative events? Relatedly, how might we foster such virtues as compassion if we are unable to appreciate the problems and negative affect of others? One author who offers an eloquent perspective on the mixed psychological economy of positive and negative emotions is Giovanna Colombetti (2005). She suggests that a common problem arising from a focus on positive/negative emotions is that of ‘conflation’, where positive (or negative)



emotions are thought to entail positive (or negative) aspects. However, Colombetti suggests that feelings or emotions such as relief and contentment are not necessarily either good or bad. This is precisely how the present authors are inclined to regard gratitude. While it may be easier to conceive our emotional responses to situations as purely positive or negative, it seems that most of the time our feelings are mixed. As Colombetti argues, ‘the take-away message is that an emotion and specific behaviours, feelings, etc. need not [go] together because they all have the same ‘valence sign’ (p.115); ‘a different view would allow true phenomenological mixtures, as in a sweet-and-sour flavour. [ ] I do not really seem to be able to pay attention to the sourness in isolation from the sweetness, and vice versa. Perhaps mixed feelings are sweet-and-sour-like’ (pp. 116 – 117).

So even if it is appropriate to conceive gratitude as a wholly positive emotion in terms of valence/affect, it would not follow that it should be promoted indiscriminately to the exclusion of negatively valenced emotions. However, there is another conceptual issue here that seems largely ignored in the current gratitude literature: this is that gratitude is often *not* deemed to be wholly pleasant, and that gratitude experience does not necessarily lead to positive affect.

Conceptually (and empirically)<sup>2</sup> gratitude often seems to imply or entail obligation. So while, as Claudia Card has remarked, ‘a duty of gratitude sounds like a joke’, it is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, not to feel some obligation to respond gratefully to the favours or gifts of benefactors, and such obligations may be experienced as burdensome rather than pleasant. In this regard, philosopher Terry McConnell (1993) regards gratitude as a kind of ‘moral obligation’. On the other hand, such theorists as Robert Roberts have suggested that a sense of obligation to repay benefits is contrary to

the spirit of genuine gratitude: thus, in the words of Roberts, ‘many people do, of course, feel a compulsion to pay off their generous benefactors, but to do so is not to exemplify gratitude, but instead something like a (misapplied) virtue of justice’ (2007, p. 8). All the same, it seems that some connection between gratitude and experience of obligation is a common experience. Indeed, our own prototype analysis of gratitude (Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2014) revealed that obligation was frequently named as a characteristic that is typical of instances of gratitude (see Table 1 of Morgan et al., 2014). Such association seems indicative of a deep connection between gratitude and at least the idea of something owed by virtue of benefits bestowed or services rendered<sup>3</sup>.

By the same token, it is difficult to divorce gratitude entirely from a second negatively perceived construct or source of affect: that of indebtedness. Once again, our recent prototype analysis of gratitude in the UK revealed that a sense of indebtedness was frequently named as a feature of gratitude. That said, while this does suggest that these two concepts are commonly associated, other researchers, for instance Watkins and colleagues, have nevertheless argued that gratitude should be kept *separate* from negative concepts such as indebtedness (Watkins, 2013; Watkins, Sheer, Ovnicek & Kolts 2006). But, even if one accepts that gratitude and indebtedness are *different* constructs that feel different and have different implications for action (Watkins et al., 2006), some basic conceptual connection between gratitude and indebtedness seems hardly deniable. From this viewpoint, it is unsurprising that feelings of grateful appreciation and indebtedness are liable to arise simultaneously on occasions of favour or benefit. Indeed, such correlations between these two constructs have been reported in gratitude studies (e.g., Tesser, Gatewood & Driver, 1968; Watkins et al., 2006). Moreover, a recent investigation of laypeople’s understanding and experience of gratitude has precisely revealed the co-

occurrence of feelings of grateful appreciation and indebtedness (Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjánsson, forthcoming). Using vignettes, the researchers asked participants to imagine a situation wherein a colleague nominates them for an award. They were further asked to imagine that they feel indebted to this colleague. Following this, these participants were asked whether they feel *grateful* to the colleague (answered on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree), and about the extent of the gratitude that they feel (from 0 = not at all grateful to 100 = most grateful you could feel). Responses revealed that participants were likely to feel grateful to the colleague regardless of also feeling indebted (71% of 420 participants agree/strongly agree that they would feel grateful). However, interestingly, when comparing the degree of gratitude experienced (out of 100) to a situation in which only gratitude was experienced and no indebtedness, the degree of reported gratitude decreased significantly (61/100 gratitude and indebtedness; 68/100 gratitude only (difference significant at the level of .001)). This finding therefore suggests that while gratitude may co-occur with feelings of indebtedness, feelings of indebtedness may impact upon the *degree* of gratitude that is felt. This seems to offer more fine-grained evidence that these two constructs are connected.

Such relationships between gratitude and indebtedness or obligation have clear and important implications for gratitude interventions and/or education. Firstly, given that gratitude and indebtedness or obligation are likely, at least sometimes, to coincide, should we be educating students about gratitude without some reference to indebtedness and obligation? Indeed, how might one even begin to explain all the conceptual dimensions of gratitude without some understanding of social norms of reciprocation that are clearly linked to obligation and indebtedness?

Further to this, if indebtedness and/or obligation involve negative or uncomfortable feelings, and if advocates of gratitude interventions remain insistent that gratitude is entirely and always positive, this could well have confusing and potentially damaging effects on the subjects of such interventions. Instead, it would seem wiser to acknowledge that gratitude may be accompanied by negative emotions (including, but not limited, to indebtedness and obligation – since other examples of negative emotions associated with gratitude could include guilt, awkwardness and embarrassment; see Morgan et al., 2014). Indeed, such concession might allow space for the exploration of a range of other gratitude related emotions, and perhaps for illuminating reflection on why in some situations we *fail* to feel grateful.

### **When is gratitude ‘appropriate’? Further moral and conceptual complexities**

That gratitude should *not* be promoted indiscriminately is supported by philosopher Claudia Card. In a recent video presentation on ‘reflections on gratitude’, Card distinguishes between ‘appropriate and inappropriate gratitude, observing that: ‘my focus is not about what is good about gratitude but on that distinction: When is gratitude appropriate? When is it not?’ She goes on to state how she is ‘sceptical of promoting gratitude as an orientation toward life,’ ‘an indiscriminate approach [ ] can be self-destructive’. In agreement with this, the present authors argue that rather than uncritically fostering gratitude programmes or interventions, teachers and other educators should be encouraging discussion and reflection on what gratitude is and when it is appropriate.

In this light, the crucial question, from a pedagogical point of view, is whether it is the business of educators to ‘*make* children more grateful’ rather than teach them about what gratitude means? To be sure, the former has been a key aim in a number of recent

gratitude interventions. For instance, one school-based curriculum teaches children to ‘think gratefully’ by fostering gratitude-inducing socio-cognitive appraisals with regard to receiving benefits (Froh, et al., 2014). In this programme, young people (aged 8 – 11 years) are encouraged to reflect on the personal *value* of a benefit received, and on a benefactor’s *intentions* and the *cost* to her or him of the benefit. The goal of this curriculum appears to be that of educating students to recognise the circumstances of gratitude and the reasons why one might feel grateful. However, while one may appreciate how contemplating such judgements could increase gratitude and thus ‘tune[s] individuals into seeing the best in other people’ (Froh and Bono, 2014, p. 194), this particular curriculum rather assumes that benefactors’ motives are benign and that apparently benevolent acts are always free from more dubious motives such as self-interest or ingratiation. That is, programmes such as these may teach students to look exclusively for the positive (e.g., positive intentions and positive affect) and as a result blind them to the negative. In short, the focus of such educational interventions still appears to be more upon appreciation of the reasons *for* gratitude than on more critical understanding of when or where gratitude may be appropriate. While one might say that by learning the former one automatically learns the latter, the danger remains that the predominantly positive emphasis of such social-cognitive skills still errs on the side of uncritical or indiscriminating appraisal of gratitude as an unmixed good – especially if such positive appraisal is associated with enhanced positive affect. Indeed, Froh and colleagues (2014, p. 143) found that students in their intervention gained 0.019 units of positive affect each week, whereas the control group stayed relatively flat – which also led to significant differences in mean levels of positive affect 12 and 20 weeks later. Arguably, however, the educational goal should *not* be to make agents grateful simply to

generate or improve positive affect, since this has the potentially dangerous consequence of disabling agents' critical appreciation of the true nature – for good or ill – of any apparent benefaction. Rather, the educational goal should be to enable positive appraisals only when they are justified, and for individuals to feel equally justified in giving situations negative appraisals in cases of 'bogus benefaction'.

Thus, in the present view, children and young people should be taught to reflect on gratitude with much greater discernment than the educational interventions of Froh and colleagues seem to allow. In consequence, we would argue that the primary educational task should not be the prescriptive task of *making* children more 'indiscriminately' grateful, but of stimulating reflection on understanding the grammar and *meaning* of gratitude and its appropriateness in a given situation. Such proper understanding of gratitude should precede any attempt to form grateful agents as such. To take a parallel case, it would seem morally indefensible to teach children to be indiscriminately forgiving – even if, say, it were shown that it is better for their mental health – *without* teaching them about when and where forgiveness is or is not appropriate. In this regard, positive interventions devoted to making children and young people more grateful or forgiving court the danger of blinding them to the less welcome realities of human moral and other association and of therefore exposing them to the risk of exploitation or manipulation. Thus, while we do not object *in principle* to the idea of helping people to be more genuinely grateful, we believe that this cannot be properly accomplished without attention to the necessary discriminative capacities that such genuine gratitude would involve.

### **A tailored approach to educating gratitude: Some pragmatic considerations**

Understandings of gratitude can be, and *inevitably are*, complex. It is, therefore, important to encourage exploration of the concept without predetermining its meaning or importance. In support of this, Kerry Howells, a teacher educator who has researched the educational significance of gratitude, has noted in her 2012 book on the topic that she: ‘had previously believed that gratitude was something that could be clearly defined in a way that everyone could, and should understand’ (p. 24). However after attending a primary school workshop she found she ‘was no longer able to take refuge in (Henry) Sidgwick’s notion of gratitude as a “truly universal intuition”’ (p.25).

The complexity in experience and understanding of gratitude is particularly apparent when looking to the dyadic/triadic distinction of gratitude (see, for some recent discussion of this distinction, Carr 2013; Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjánsson, 2013; Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009). Triadic gratitude, as the name suggests, is a three place relation involving a beneficiary, a benefit, and a benefactor. This type of gratitude is most commonly referred to in the literature, with the majority of accounts incorporating these three components. Dyadic gratitude (also known as ‘generalised gratitude’; Lambert et al., 2009), on the other hand, has only two components – a benefit and beneficiary – and, in this case, there is no specific benefactor involved to direct gratitude towards. Examples of the dyadic form might be experiencing gratitude towards nature, or feeling grateful for one’s situation at a particular time. Indeed, while some theorists, such as philosopher Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, have suggested that one can just be grateful full-stop without attributing such gratitude to anyone in particular, others view gratitude as always involving a triadic form and would instead regard dyadic gratitude as a more general form of appreciation (Adler & Fagley, 2005). Similarly, whilst some individuals might experience gratitude only for benefits that are valuable, others may believe that it’s

the thought that counts. Some people may be grateful to individuals who are simply fulfilling the requirements of their job (for example, feeling grateful to a cashier, a teacher, or a lifeguard), other may reserve gratitude for those who are going above and beyond the call of duty (i.e., in a supererogatory acts). Sensitivity to such complexities in the conceptualisation of gratitude should be borne in mind when promoting or teaching about gratitude as this is likely to have an impact on students' understandings and experiences of gratitude.

Another rather different though not unrelated issue pertains to the *diversity* of gratitude constructs. For example an important point to bear in mind when educating on gratitude may be the particular culture in which gratitude is being explored. Research by some present authors has demonstrated that ideas about gratitude do seem to differ from one culture to another. In a prototype analysis of gratitude – the first stage of which asked participants to name all of the features and characteristics that they take to be typical of instances of gratitude (see Morgan et al., 2014) – the UK findings were compared with those from a US sample (Lambert et al., 2009). This comparison demonstrated a variety of differences between the two samples; for example, a greater number of negatively valenced features of gratitude were pinpointed by participants in the UK. Examples of such UK associations included experiences of indebtedness, obligation, guilt, embarrassment and awkwardness in relation to perceived benefaction. Such discrepancy between these two samples suggests that while conceptualisations of gratitude may overlap across cultures, they are by no means identical. Thus, while we have previously suggested that gratitude might have a common core shared across different cultures – in addition to certain socially constructed elements that are specific to one particular culture (also see Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010, p. 13) – our recent work has demonstrated



differences between two well-developed Western cultures. However, it may be that the differences between Western and Eastern cultures are even more marked.

Indeed, Appadurai's (1985) research seems to be a case in point. This researcher demonstrated that expressions of gratitude and the task of identifying precisely *when* one should be grateful are rather complex in Tamil culture – where higher status individuals have a *responsibility* to provide for those of lower status – than in other cultures. This means that individuals in this culture may find it hard to distinguish benefits bestowed voluntarily from those bestowed out of a sense of duty. It also raises the question of whether the beneficiary feels as grateful to those of higher status from whom benefits are expected. Appadurai also indicates that Tamil gratitude focuses more on the benefits of benefaction than on the benefactor (see also Cohen, 2006) – which might suggest a different relationship between beneficiary and benefactor than is common in Western cultures.

### **Future recommendations for the teaching of gratitude**

Nothing we have said so far denies that an educational focus on gratitude can have a beneficial effect on both students and teachers (Chan et al., 2010; Froh et al., 2008). Our argument has been more that care must be taken when designing and delivering programmes dedicated to educational appreciation of the normative and moral complexities of gratitude. More specifically, we have argued that learning gratitude should involve exploration of: issues of *moral motivation* (for example, the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the beneficiary); issues concerning the *conceptual nature* of gratitude (for example, its relationship to obligation and indebtedness and of when gratitude is 'appropriate'); as well as *pragmatic issues* (for

example, concerning the ‘tailoring’ of gratitude to allow for diverse cultural understandings).

As already indicated, two of the present authors have been conducting an in-depth examination of how gratitude is understood in the UK. Our approach has been to examine gratitude both theoretically and empirically, combining an interdisciplinary literature review of the concept of gratitude in philosophy and psychology (see Gulliford et al., 2013) with an empirical attempt to elucidate the conceptual contours of gratitude from a lay perspective. We believe it is important to try to determine whether, and to what *degree*, the conceptual controversies about gratitude evident in the academic literature actually reflect or inform peoples’ (including students’) understanding of the concept. In this regard, it is at least arguable that much existing empirical and theoretical work has superimposed, explicitly or implicitly, certain assumptions about the meaning of gratitude onto research – and this also applies to the practical gratitude interventions under scrutiny in this paper. We have endeavoured to discover lay concepts of gratitude, including those of children, in order to bring together such views with those of philosophers and psychologists.

At all events, gratitude is clearly a complex concept with many contested features. Take, for example, the aforementioned considerations of intentions of, and cost to, the benefactor, or deliberations on duty and value. Whilst we cannot describe all of the complexities that are involved in the normative grammar of gratitude here, we might direct you to one of our previous papers for an in depth discussion on this topic (Gulliford et al., 2013).

The controversies about gratitude that we have here and elsewhere highlighted (see also Third Author 2013) have also been incorporated (by some of the present

authors) into four story workbooks for children aged 8-11. These workbooks explore various situations wherein gratitude may or may not be experienced depending on the individuals' own conception of gratitude. Benefactors in these stories exhibit a range of motives for giving (some benevolent, some not so) and vary in the degree of effort and/or cost they incur in bestowing the benefit. Children are also encouraged to reflect on benefits that are deemed either valuable or of little to no value, and as desired or unwanted. There is also space in the workbooks for children to answer questions that more deeply probe their understanding of gratitude. Some questions invite open responses while others take a Likert format to explore the *amount* of gratitude children believe that different characters in a story might feel in situations of potential benefactor manipulation. The issues raised in such explorations focus on questions of gratitude and duty, benefactor intention and effort, the value of the benefit, and of whether a benefit must materialise. The workbooks have also attempted to probe children's understanding of triadic (interpersonal) and dyadic (generalised) gratitude. The findings from this gratitude research will be published separately. The important point for now, however, is that these stories – designed primarily to examine children's *beliefs* about factors that influence gratitude – are also clearly employable as teaching resources to promote classroom exploration of what it means to *understand* gratitude. In short, there is a surely a good educational case for helping young people to appreciate the complex grammar of gratitude discourse, irrespective of whether this may make them more grateful. As described, the gratitude stories examine various motives for benefaction that might serve as a basis on which to stimulate reflective class discussion about appropriate gratitude.

While 'gratitude recognitions' have been shown to amplify gratefulness and associated positive attitudes or emotions, there is no reason why such interventions could

not be formulated in a more nuanced and reflective way and embedded within an educational programme in which exploration of the moral and conceptual grammar of gratitude – as well as its ‘shadow side’ (manipulation, coercion and power dynamics) – might be conducted in an age-appropriate way. For, as we have seen, a number of philosophers have been particularly concerned to emphasise that gratitude is not as inherently positive as some psychologists have supposed.

Indeed, within the framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics, moral responses may be considered *virtuous* only insofar as they are directed towards the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way. While it is contested whether gratitude was regarded as a virtue by Aristotle *himself*, it may yet be possible to give a useful virtue ethical account of it along these Aristotelian lines (Kristjánsson, 2013). As noted, however, the account given of gratitude by many psychologists and educators – as an unambiguous and unproblematic quality – is at odds with any such virtuous gratitude in neglecting to consider whether gratitude is appropriate in a given situation: on the Aristotelian view, gratitude would be being discriminatingly grateful to the *right* person, for the *right* reason and to the *right* degree.

Thus, notwithstanding that gratitude may often feel good, or may be shown to have beneficial effects for personal wellbeing, it is educationally crucial to teach children to be able to assess gratitude critically and to be alert to instances of potentially non-virtuous gratitude. For example, in one of the stories developed by present authors, a child nominates a classmate for a school award, only to ask subsequently whether she can copy the nominee’s answers in an upcoming spelling test. Similarly dubious motives shape the intentions of a character in ‘The Class Councillor’ in which a shy boy is nominated to lead his class at the school council meetings. His name is put forward by a

classmate whose motive is *malicious*, insofar as he wants to embarrass the boy and see him make a fool of himself. These and other stories offer opportunities for discussion of whether gratitude is *always* appropriate and explore situations in which children might easily find themselves.

This issue about the intricacies of ascertaining whether gratitude is *always* virtuous is not limited to childhood. Robert C. Roberts (2013) has drawn attention to the ways in which gratitude and generosity can take less than fully virtuous shapes in his examination of the checkered pathologies of gratitude and generosity in Dickens' *Bleak House*. Discerning what it means to manifest a virtue such as gratitude must involve and engage practical wisdom with regard to its complexities. It is just *this* concern with stimulating reflection, sensitivity and judgement about what such virtues as gratitude *are*, and about the appropriate contexts of their exercise, that should occupy educators more than any promotion of gratitude (or of hope or forgiveness, for that matter) as salutary character strengths that bring a variety of putative benefits.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has argued that many previous gratitude interventions seem to have had the relatively narrow aim of setting out to make young people more grateful. By contrast, we have argued that more appropriate and morally acceptable *educational* gratitude interventions should be pursued in the context of stimulating children's understanding of what gratitude means, and of reflecting on when or where it is appropriate. Whilst this might well lead to the same instrumental benefits that are claimed in the positive psychology literature, it would also allow students to appreciate the 'grammar' of gratitude.. We have also argued that this educational task may be well assisted by providing opportunities for young people to reflect on the complexities of gratitude as a

key feature of basic human association. One promising route to this might be to use stories – drawn from literature or real life – that concern key gratitude themes. Failing this, encouraging or compelling children to become more grateful without providing a space for them to learn what gratitude *is*, or being equipped to recognise instances of inappropriate gratitude, may seem to put the cart before the horse.

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## Authors' Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We view gratitude in terms of a multi-component model which incorporates feelings of gratitude (an emotion component); attitudes/beliefs about the concept (attitude component); and gratitude-related behaviours (behaviour component). These three components (which are also linked to a fourth conceptual component) are particularly relevant to the arguments we present in this paper. Therefore, within the following sections we draw upon issues that relate to gratitude as an emotion; gratitude as an attitude; and gratitude behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we refer to 'conceptual' links between gratitude and obligation/ indebtedness as pertaining to meaning or understanding of the constructs; whilst 'empirical' links refer to those that are tested through practical or experimental techniques.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst we make the argument here that gratitude *might* coincide with a perceived obligation to return gifts or favours, it is important to note that we do not view gratitude as merely equivalent to reciprocation. The connection between gratitude and the obligation to reciprocate that has been noted in our own research has likely arisen because both are appropriate responses to being benefitted. However, gratitude is not equal to, nor does it necessitate, the desire to pay back benefits received. Similarly, obligation may be viewed as a duty to feel or express (rather than pay back) gratitude (Berger, 1975) or could involve no source of obligation whatsoever (Wellman, 1999).

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