

## The virtue of gratitude: A developmental and cultural approach

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### Abstract:

There has been a burgeoning interest in gratitude in adults, adolescents, and children, with most scholars examining the relations between variations in level of gratitude, treated largely as an emotional state, and measures of well-being. In this paper we explain why we think that gratitude should be defined as a virtue, as discussed by neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, rather than simply as an emotional state. Defining gratitude as a virtue has clear developmental implications (no child or adolescent could be considered virtuous in the Aristotelian sense), allowing us to consider its likely precursors. It also has cultural implications, as one might expect cultural variations in how gratitude is cultivated in the young. We then discuss methods we think are helpful in allowing an understanding of the development of gratitude, and provide some supportive evidence for its development in different cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Cultural values | Gratitude | Moral development

### Article:

In truth, O judges, while I wish to be adorned with every virtue, yet there is nothing which I can esteem more highly than the being and appearing grateful. For this one virtue is not only the greatest, but is also the parent of all the other virtues. [Cicero, 54 BC/2009, p. 80]

For centuries philosophers [Hume, 1739-1740; Mather, 1732; Smith, 1759/2000] and writers - e.g., Dickens, *Great Expectations* [1860-1861/1996], and Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear* [1605/2005] - have concurred with Cicero, at least considering gratitude as a virtue and ingratitude as an abomination. We will argue that Cicero was correct in the epigram quoted above, that gratitude is, in fact, a virtue. Following both philosophers [e.g., Annas, 2011; Berger, 1975; Comte-Sponville, 2001; Kristjánsson, 2013; McConnell, 1993, 2013; Roberts, 2004] and psychologists [e.g., Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; Emmons, 2009; Freitas, O'Brien, Nelson, & Marcovitch, 2012; Piaget, 1965/1995] who have treated gratitude as though it is a moral virtue, we define it as occurring when: (a) a benefactor has freely and intentionally helped or provided a

beneficiary with something; (b) the beneficiary recognizes the benefactor's intentionality; and (c) the beneficiary freely chooses to repay, if at all possible and appropriate, with something the benefactor needs or wants. If this is a disposition on the beneficiary's part, rather than something that rarely is felt or acted on, this seems like a virtue, and is likely to forge or strengthen connections between people.

By contrast, contemporary scholars interested in gratitude have largely treated gratitude as an emotional trait, one that positively correlates with various measures of well-being [Algoe, 2010; Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Buck, 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006]. Although there certainly is value in knowing the correlates of greater or lesser degrees of grateful feelings, we think that there are good reasons for examining gratitude as a virtue, an approach that has clear developmental implications. As developmental psychologists, we believe it is necessary to understand how such a virtue develops and the influences on its development, given that gratitude is neither innate nor something that emerges spontaneously in human beings [Emmons & Shelton, 2002].

Initially we will critique the way in which gratitude has primarily been studied, as an emotion, and then explain why we think that it makes more sense to consider it as a virtue, given the way in which the concept is typically defined. We will then provide a theoretical framework within which the development of gratitude as a virtue may be studied, before ending with a discussion about the ways in which we have instantiated this theory in our ongoing research.

### **Gratitude as a Positive Emotion**

Social psychologists typically view gratitude as a positive state that is either correlated with well-being or, in a few cases, is said to lead to well-being [Froh et al., 2014; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008]. Gratitude as an emotion [Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008], as a positive affect [Watkins, 2004], or as a “life orientation towards the positive” [Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 892] is as likely to be felt when viewing a sunset or recognizing one's good health as when one is the beneficiary of a kind deed. Being grateful for a beautiful sight or one's good health has nothing to do with recognizing another's intentional act on one's behalf; nor does it permit autonomously taking on any obligation to retribute.

These scholars have a very broad concept of gratitude. Those who provide a definition of the term commonly include in that definition: (a) the benefactor's intentionality, (b) the beneficiary's recognition of that intentionality, and sometimes that (c) the beneficiary should freely wish to repay [Froh et al., 2014; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Roberts, 1991]. However, the way in which the concept is operationalized does not combine well with that definition and instead loosens connections to gratitude as a virtue. “Gratitude has been conceptualized as an emotion, a virtue, a moral sentiment, a motive, a coping response, a skill, and an attitude. It is all of these and more” [Emmons & Crumpler, 2000, p. 56]. Thus Watkins, van Gelder, and Frias [2009] argued that the “benefactor” could be considered a supernatural or impersonal force or object and that “in these cases people are implicitly appraising intentional benevolence on the part of the impersonal benefactor” (p. 438). According to Wood et al. [2010], gratitude encompasses a positive appreciation for a fairly wide range of feelings and behaviors: an appreciation of other people, appreciating what one has, “feelings of awe when encountering

beauty,” behaviors that express gratitude, focusing on the positive, appreciating the fact that life is short, and making “positive social comparisons” [Wood et al., 2010, p. 891]. As Gulliford, Morgan, and Kristjánsson [2013] pointed out, it is not surprising that terminological confusion is often found in the psychological treatment of gratitude.

This loose assessment of gratitude is reflected in the main scales that social psychologists have used to collect data on gratitude from adults, adolescents, or both. None of the items on the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) [McCullough et al., 2002], which seems to be the most widely used scale, the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC) [McCullough et al., 2002], the Gratitude, Resentment, Appreciation Test-Short Form (GRAT) [Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003; see also Froh et al., 2011], or the Appreciation Scale (AS) [Adler & Fagley, 2005] take into account the three key attributes of gratitude as a virtue. Only three of the six GQ-6 items, none of the GAC items, four of the 15 GRAT items, and nine of the 81 AS items even mention other people's actions as a possible reason for feeling grateful, with none including the idea of wishing to repay, in some way, for a kindness that was done or a gift that was given.

Although those who developed these scales, and those who use them in research, refer to them as “gratitude” scales, it is important to recognize that gratitude is not being treated as a virtue even when authors that used one or more of the scales initially defined the concept as including intentionality, recognition of that intentionality, and positive retribution as a goal. Items such as “I have so much in life to be thankful for” (GQ-6), to be “appreciative” (GAC), “Every Fall I really enjoy watching the leaves change colors” (GRAT), or “I recognize and acknowledge the positive value and meaning of things around me” (AS), certainly speak to a happy and appreciative feeling about life, but do not relate to gratitude as a virtue.

Where these scales are particularly effective is in their ability to distinguish among people with different degrees of some composite of gratitude, appreciation, and happiness, which makes it easy to conduct correlational analyses of this composite with various measures of well-being. In fact, most studies of gratitude are not focused on whether individuals can be described as being grateful (having the virtue of gratitude) or not; they are concerned instead with individual variations in the appreciation participants say they feel for the nicer things that life has to offer. Perhaps not surprisingly, this type of appreciation correlates positively with well-being and inversely with depression, hostility, vulnerability, and various measures of psychopathology [Watkins, 2004; Wood et al., 2010]. Similarly, relatively simple interventions (asking people to reflect on five things for which they are thankful, or keeping a gratitude diary) lead to people scoring higher on these measures of appreciation [Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Seligman, 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006]. But it is unclear whether these measures have anything to do with gratitude as a virtue, given that none of the scale items reference any sense of obligation to return a favor or help. The GRAT, for example, requires participants to respond to four items of this type: “I couldn't have gotten where I am today without the help of many people.” One can agree with that statement without feeling any obligation to repay that help.

## **Gratitude as a Virtue**

Beginning with Aristotle, virtue has been defined as “an acquired disposition to do good” [Comte-Sponville, 2001, p. 1]. Annas [2011] argued that a virtue is a persisting and reliable disposition to act in a virtuous way, a “characteristic” aspect of an individual that has been developed over the course of learning how to think, feel, and act virtuously. A brave person, for example:

... is someone whose existing character tendencies have been formed in such a way that he acts, reasons, and reacts bravely, rather than in some other way. This is why virtue is a disposition which is from the start an active and developing one. [Annas, 2011, p. 10]

One could easily substitute “grateful” (or any other virtue) for “brave” in this context: a grateful individual is one who has developed in such a way that she reasons, acts, and reacts gratefully. A behavioral component is thus necessarily involved, something not required by those viewing gratitude as an emotional state.

Considering gratitude as a virtue, that is, as a persisting and reliable disposition to behave in a morally praiseworthy manner, distinguishes it from gratitude as a positive emotional state, or even as an emotional disposition (a general tendency to feel appreciative about life). That is, a person can feel appreciative towards or happy about a benefactor, but failing to repay that benefactor in some way when they need assistance suggests ingratitude rather than gratitude. This is not to imply that gratitude, as a virtue, does not include emotion, but it cannot be defined by emotion alone. Similarly, being virtuously grateful might well correlate with feelings of well-being, as is the case for gratitude as defined as an emotional state. The reverse, however, is not true. Individuals scoring high in well-being should also score high on measures such as the GRAT or GQ-6, but would not necessarily exhibit gratitude as a virtue.

The definition of gratitude as a virtue thus has three very specific features: (a) a benefactor has freely and intentionally helped or provided a beneficiary with something; (b) the beneficiary recognizes the benefactor's intentionality; and (c) the beneficiary freely chooses to repay, if at all possible and appropriate, with something the benefactor needs or wants. We will delineate the components of this definition and outline the implications of each.

The first feature of gratitude as a virtue is that an individual has received help or a gift from another person or institution. In contrast to gratitude as a positive emotion, this definition requires another person or entity. This human connection, or relatedness, is distinctly different from a general feeling of well-being or an emotional state, neither of which need involve other people.

The second feature of this definition of gratitude is that the individual who has received this help or gift from another recognizes that the other individual has freely provided something for their benefit (rather than being forced to do so or providing it by mistake). In order to have gratitude, one must be paying attention and be cognitively aware enough to know that one has been given something of value by the benefactor and that this person freely intended to provide the benefit. Infants, for example, have not achieved the cognitive capacity to appreciate the help they receive. Cognitive capability, though necessary, is not sufficient. Even a dispositionally grateful person may, on occasion, fail to notice that another individual has provided aid for his or her

benefit. For example, I may clean up a spill in the bathroom so no one slips but those who next enter may neither be aware of the spill nor of my kind deed and so feel no sense of gratitude. Therefore, the first two requirements of this definition of gratitude as a virtue include another person, as well as awareness of that other person and his or her efforts.

The final prerequisite for gratitude as a virtue is that the beneficiary freely chooses to repay, if at all possible and appropriate, with something the benefactor needs or wants. A heart-felt “thank you” may be all that is necessary at the time of receiving the gift or help, but seeing the benefactor in need of help and ignoring the opportunity for helping them is surely a sign of ingratitude. There are, however, three qualifiers to this obligation to repay: (a) the individual must freely choose to repay; (b) it must be possible and appropriate to repay; and (c) the repayment should be something the benefactor needs or wants. We will expand upon each of these qualifiers.

The first is that this obligation must be autonomously accepted - that is, the beneficiary has to freely take on the obligation and not be forced to do so (i.e., heteronomous obligation) if the response is to be seen as virtuous. This casts doubt on Watkins' [2014] argument that feeling an obligation to repay (something that Watkins seems to assume involves heteronomy) is necessarily at odds with gratitude. It may still be the case that autonomously taking on an obligation to retribute might cause some difficulties, but, as Comte-Sponville wrote: “Gratitude is the most pleasant of virtues, though not the easiest” [2001, p. 132].

The second qualifier is that there is an obligation to repay in the event that repayment is possible and appropriate. Calling someone grateful does not mean that she *always* responds in appropriately grateful ways in conditions under which gratitude seems appropriate. As Hursthouse [2013] noted, to be virtuous is not an “all or none” issue. If this is true for virtues such as honesty (one can still be considered an honest individual even when not telling the truth when asked by a friend whether this new dress she just bought makes her look fat) or bravery (one can be thought brave even when retreating in the face of insurmountable odds) it is even more true of gratitude. One can have received great help but an opportunity to repay the favor might never present itself. Lack of retribution in such circumstances would not mean that one was not grateful (although on occasion such a debt can be repaid by helping others as a way to compensate for an inability to repay the benefactor).

Thus one can encounter situations in which a grateful person does not behave gratefully. One could have an opportunity to retribute appropriately in a specific situation but fail to do so because of temporary forgetfulness, being distracted, or a rival and more pressing claim [McConnell, 2015]. It is important to recognize that the obligation to retribute, if at all possible, is not some clear rule for how to behave, but requires a thoughtful assessment of the situation.

Thoughtful assessment is important. Becoming virtuous is analogous to learning a skill, according to Aristotle [Annas, 2011; Russell, 2015], but it is not the same as mastering a technique or a set response. A set of rules, such as assessing the monetary value of the help or gift and repaying it, or always providing a gift of equal value in exchange in some tit-for-tat fashion, is not an example of gratitude as a virtue. To be a virtue, the activity of acquiring it has to lead to understanding when it is appropriate to use and when not, and then to use the virtue

appropriately without necessarily having to think about it. Aristotle likened having a virtue to being a skilled builder who, through dint of much practice and experience, can create novel buildings without having to waste much energy considering the most mundane aspects of placing one brick above another [Russell, 2015]. The difference, he noted, is that one judges the builder by the objects created, but the virtuous individual in terms of her actions. The relation between a virtue and Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) then becomes clear, as does the argument for why young children, even when saying "thank you," cannot be said to have the virtue of gratitude. Gratitude is something that may be acquired over the course of development, by being actively engaged in its practice. Possessing a virtue means being able to explain what it means to have that virtue - someone would hardly be considered grateful if she simply acted in a grateful way (following some type of tit-for-tat rule, for example) but had no idea about why she should act that way - even though the virtuously grateful person will feel and express gratitude without having to work through the appropriate reasoning each time. Like a builder who relies on the skills developed in building different constructions to determine what is needed to build a new construction, so a grateful person uses practical wisdom, acquired in the course of past experience, to know how and when to appropriately express that gratitude.

In terms of the final qualifier, gratitude requires repayment with something of value to the benefactor. In order to possess or develop gratitude as a virtue, a prerequisite is the cognitive ability to take another's perspective. Young children are less able than those who are older to understand that another individual can have preferences that differ from their own. For example, a young child may be given assistance from an adult and chooses to repay with a teddy bear, an object of desire to the child, but likely not to the adult.

Thus, many of the features of gratitude in this sense are clearly not present in early childhood; gratitude, as a virtue, must develop from humbler beginnings. One of those beginnings is being persuaded to say "thank you" for a gift, something that many parents work hard to get their children to say, once "mama," "dada," and "bye-bye" have been mastered by their offspring [Visser, 2009]. But to understand a benefactor's intentionality, to be able to think about what that benefactor might appreciate in response, and to be able to act autonomously, requires at a minimum a good deal of cognitive and socio-emotional development. It also requires being in contexts in which gratitude is expressed by people whom the children or adolescents see as appropriate models and explanations about why expressing gratitude is a good thing to do, and why failure to do so shows ingratitude, something to be avoided.

### **A Theoretical Approach to Studying Developmental Precursors of Gratitude**

From a developmental perspective, it is worth noting that human beings, as members of a social species, at least have the potential to develop gratitude. As scholars such as de Waal [2006, 2010] and Warneken and Tomasello [2009] have suggested, nonhuman primates such as chimpanzees seem to exhibit gratitude in rudimentary ways and children during the second year of life seem predisposed to help others in some circumstances [Carlo, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Narvaez, 2015; Thompson, 2015]. In ontogenesis, the earliest precursor may simply be a beneficiary feeling good when being helped or given a gift. Somewhat later, the beneficiary might experience a positive emotional response not only to the gift or help, but also to the benefactor's action and then to the benefactor him- or herself, and even later the idea might arise

that it could be good to give something back to the benefactor. Finally, the beneficiary might develop the cognitive capacity and socio-emotional wherewithal to wish to repay, if at all possible, with something assumed to be of interest or need to the benefactor, and wish to do so if and when an opportunity presents itself. Not surprisingly, development of this type of gratitude, a virtuous act, needs time, experience, and, perhaps, encouragement.

What are the relevant factors that influence the development of this virtue? There is no single cause that should be sought; as with all human development, multiple, interrelated, factors, working synergistically, need to be studied. This position is not new [see Pepper, 1942 for his discussion of the “contextualist” paradigm], but recent years have seen rich theoretical grounding and compelling empirical evidence supportive of this complex paradigm [Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Lerner & Overton, 2008; Michel, 2014; Overton, 2015; Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003; Tudge, 2008; Witherington, 2014], perhaps better termed the relational developmental systems paradigm [Lerner, 2015].

There are four interrelated factors, discussed separately here for heuristic purposes, that seem particularly relevant to the development of gratitude. The first, and most immediately relevant, is what Bronfenbrenner [Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006] termed “proximal processes,” or the typically occurring everyday activities and interactions in which the developing individuals of interest engage. The second relates to the personal characteristics of the individuals and their common social partners, including (and most relevant for our current purposes) a child's level of cognitive development - for what one expects of someone in terms of understanding, feeling, and expressing gratitude varies greatly depending on that level, at least during childhood and adolescence. The third factor has to do with the contexts in which everyday activities and interactions take place, both local (where gifts and help are proffered, and under what conditions) and cultural (the current values and beliefs about gift- and help-giving and responses considered appropriate in any given cultural group). The fourth and final factor is time - both ontogenetic and socio-historical. As children reach adolescence and then enter adulthood we should expect changes in their understandings, feelings, and expression of gratitude. Along with changes during ontogenesis, values (including those related to the expression of gratitude) in any given culture undergo changes over time, for example, as the extent or form of education changes, or as the economy grows or shrinks. Thus in cultural groups undergoing rapid social change one should consider the combination of both ontogenetic and socio-historical changes on the expression of gratitude.

These four factors are clearly interrelated; cultural values do not determine the expression of gratitude any more than level of cognitive development does, and everyday activities and interactions are always influenced simultaneously by the interacting individuals' personal characteristics and by the contexts of which they are a part - contexts that are themselves constantly undergoing change.

### Everyday Activities and Interactions

Key to development is what Bronfenbrenner termed “proximal processes,” what cultural developmentalists [e.g., Cole & Cagigas, 2010; Rogoff, 2003] call “cultural practices,” and what Tudge [2008] referred to as “everyday activities and interactions.” This, of course, fits well with

an Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics, which is not only a developmental approach but one that stresses the importance of repeated engagement in the practice of exercising the virtue [Annas, 2011; Russell, 2015]. For virtue ethicists, one develops a virtue by engaging in relevant activities, initially in a simple way but in conjunction with more skilled others, just as a composer is likely to have started practicing scales with a more competent teacher. As Annas stated: “What has emerged from examining the acquiring of virtue is that virtue itself is an essentially developmental notion” [2011, p. 38].

As with the learning of all skills, however, it is the missteps, as well as the activity done correctly, that aid growing understanding. Sometimes children hear people expressing thanks for things that are not gifts (after they have received help to do something, or emotional comfort), and on other occasions expressions of thanks are not forthcoming in what seem to be identical circumstances. Children are helped, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the social context, to understand when it is appropriate to express (and to feel) gratitude, but mostly they do so by trying out the words, seeing what works and what does not. Gratitude, then, like any virtue, needs to be practiced in order for it to become a part of us, but children get help from those around them in the course of their everyday activities and interactions with others, particularly with others who are more competent in the prevailing culturally approved practices. Froh et al. [2014] found evidence that children from 8 to 11 not only scored significantly higher than they had in a pretest on a gratitude scale, but also were more likely to help others, following a very brief intervention designed to encourage attention to the thoughtfulness of a benefactor. Similar encouragement, over an extended period of time, by a parent, teacher, or friend might be expected to have a greater impact. As Annas [2011] stated, “Virtue is understood in part by the way it is learnt, and that it is learnt always in an embedded context - a particular family, city, religion, and country” (p. 52).

Although everyday activities and interactions around gift- and help-getting, the encouragement of expressing gratitude, and coming to feel it spontaneously are the driving forces for its development, those activities and interactions are heavily influenced both by the personal characteristics of the interacting individuals and by the contexts, both local and cultural, in which those activities and interactions occur.

### Personal Characteristics

Given the definition of gratitude as a virtue, it is essential that one is able to think logically, take another's perspective, and act autonomously in order to engage in gratitude. Prosocial feelings, such as feeling empathy for others, recognizing prosocial actions on the part of others, and wanting to cooperate, are also likely to be preconditions. There is increasing evidence [for reviews see Carlo, 2014, and Killen & Smetana, 2015] that during the first year of life infants show more interest in puppets that have acted prosocially than in those that have acted in antisocial ways. During the second year of life, infants show concern for others who seem to be hurt, try to help those who appear in need, and even show rudimentary evidence for preferring fair to unfair distribution of resources. Although such prosocial tendencies might be part of what makes us human [Narvaez, 2015; Thompson, 2015], there are clearly individual differences in the extent to which these tendencies are displayed, and parental child-rearing practices seem relevant. Parents' controlling, heteronomy-inducing practices are negatively related to their



young children's prosocial behaviors, whereas those practices that are supportive and autonomy-inducing are positively related [Carlo, 2014].

During the early school years children become increasingly able to take others' points of view as they recognize that others may see the world differently than they themselves do [Killen & Smetana, 2015], and by middle childhood children are increasingly able to understand others' intentionality, even in fairly complex situations [Jambon & Smetana, 2014]. They also, particularly thanks to having parents who are supportive rather than controlling, or spending time with peers, are more likely to develop autonomous, rather than heteronomous, notions about moral judgments [Dunn, 2014; Grusec, Chaparro, Johnston, & Sherman, 2014; Piaget, 1965/1995].

Adolescents are increasingly able to reason abstractly, allowing them to consider possible outcomes and consequences of behavior, to think more broadly and critically about the society in which they live and its place in the world. Piaget thus wrote that they can construct “a scale of values that also goes beyond the restricted circle of [their] immediate surroundings,” and are able to construct “theories that make it possible for [them] to judge or to perfect the society around [them]” [Piaget, 1965/1995, p. 299]. The propensity to enact change can be seen in their attempts to construct a better, fairer, society, particularly when encouraged to engage in service-learning activities [Flanagan, Kim, Collura, & Kopish, 2015; Hart, Matsuba, & Atkins, 2008; Lerner, 2015; Yates & Youniss, 1999]. Adolescents also become increasingly exposed to values, quite possibly different from those of their parents and teachers, from the media with which they interact - television, Internet, and books [Carr & Harrison, 2015].

Context: Local

Although children's age-related experiences involving interactions with others around gift- and help-getting are important, so too are the contexts in which children are raised. The local contexts, what Bronfenbrenner [2001] termed microsystems, are important to the development of gratitude because it is there, where the developing children are situated, that they are most obviously engaged in relevant activities and interactions. Children are not only at home, where the parents are the source of authority, but in school, where other rules are enforced, and where children have greater opportunity to engage in conflict, and resolve those conflicts, with peers [Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993]. They are also more likely to spend at least some time away from adult authority, and be only in the company of peers, where they will be exposed to different views about what counts as right and wrong.

The ideas of Annas [2011] are particularly relevant here. She noted that a virtue, to escape being merely parochial or relativistic (i.e., what is normatively done in my group constitutes a virtue), must allow for the development of a critique of one's familial ideas of what is virtuous, and even of one's sociocultural group. Otherwise, a child would only learn the specific qualities of character considered virtuous within his or her culture at the current historical time and would not be able to reflect critically on those virtues. The appropriation of a virtue must mean more than simply mimicking the virtues of those around them. As Annas commented, children may first learn to be honest, for example, in the context of their family, but then come to realize that their family members are not always honest. Her argument is that children are thus part of at

least two communities - their family and the community of those they consider honest, and the latter might not coincide 100% of the time with the former. “We can think of a progressive enlargement of understanding as a progressive enlargement of the shared community” [Annas, p. 56]. Not everyone does that, of course: “Rather than deal with the fact that our family is dishonest, our country jingoistic, the values we have learnt inadequate, we make rationalizations, or simply refuse to face facts” [Annas, p. 57]. Although Annas does not make this point, the fact that children grow up in more settings than simply their own family (they are in relatives' or friends' houses, exposed to different ideas and practices through the media, in books, and in school, and with their peers) makes this questioning process easier.

#### Context: Cultural

While the local contexts in which children and adolescents spend their time are relevant to the development of gratitude, so too are the cultural contexts of which they are a part. Parents', teachers', and friends' values regarding gratitude and their beliefs about how and when gratitude should be expressed are related to their cultural group. Visser [2009] described the different conditions under which different cultural groups consider saying “thank you” for something is warranted.

One promising avenue that should be explored further when considering cultural influences on the development of gratitude is Kağıtçıbaşı's [2007, 2012] work on autonomy-relatedness. Gratitude as a virtue requires individuals to autonomously accept the obligation to repay, if appropriate and possible. However, the very act of repaying a benefactor with something valued by that person also builds or strengthens relations between the two individuals.

Kağıtçıbaşı [2007] proposed that there are two orthogonal value dimensions for parental socialization, one having to do with agency and the other with interpersonal distance. Along the vertical axis, parents encourage their children to be relatively autonomous or relatively heteronomous (or obedient to their parents and others). Along the horizontal axis parents vary in the extent to which they encourage their children to be separate from others or more related to others. Some cultures, traditionally termed collectivist, stress obedience to elders (rather than autonomy) and close connections to the group. Other cultures, traditionally termed individualistic, are strongly encouraging of autonomy, but less so of close connections with the group. Of most interest to the study of the virtue of gratitude is a third group of cultures, in which parents encourage both autonomy and relatedness. This group, Kağıtçıbaşı argued, is to be found in urban areas of the “majority world” (where the majority of the world's children live) among educated parents. (Kağıtçıbaşı argued that the fourth group, in which heteronomy and separation are valued, is rarely found.)

We suspect, in fact, that the socialization of values is more complex than Kağıtçıbaşı [2007, 2012] implies, and that even in the industrialized world, cultural groups can be found that also value autonomy-relatedness and, indeed, heteronomy-relatedness [see, for example, Kohn, 1995; Luster, Rhoades, & Haas, 1989; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Siraj & Mayo, 2014; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008; Tudge et al., in press]. The essential point, however, is that the cultural group into which children are born also has a profound influence on the extent to which children are encouraged to think about others (relatedness) and to act autonomously

(reciprocation, or even just thanking others, because one feels that it is the right thing to do rather than because one has been told to).

## Historical Time

It is impossible to consider culture-related values without taking into account changes over historical time. In fact, Kağıtçıbaşı's [2007, 2012] work is an excellent example of this. As she pointed out, families with little or no education living in rural parts of the majority world raise their children with heteronomous-related values. However, as people move into cities, where the traditional ways may not be so relevant but where educational possibilities may become more widely available, values may begin to change. As Kağıtçıbaşı and Ataca [2005] showed in their study of three generations, urban and educated parents in the majority world are likely to still want to raise their children to feel connected to the group but also to make their own decisions about their future, particularly with reference to their education and occupation (autonomous-related).

In other words, in both the majority world and the industrialized world there is differential encouragement from parents for children to act in more heteronomous or autonomous ways. These cultural contextual factors, and changes over historical time in the cultures themselves, have to be considered as well as children's ontogenetic development in making sense of the development of gratitude. For children to take on an autonomous obligation to repay a benefactor is neither as simple as the developmental move from unilateral respect and a heteronomous sense of obligation to mutual respect and autonomous obligation, nor as straightforward as growing up in cultural groups that differentially encourage autonomy and relatedness.

In summary, this paradigm, as a basis for studying the development of gratitude, privileges everyday interactions involving opportunities to feel gratitude in principle (the receipt of gifts or help) and its actual feeling and expression. The extent to which these types of interactions happen and the ways in which gratitude is felt and expressed are heavily influenced by individual and contextual factors, as well as by changes occurring over historical time. Individual factors have to do with the child's level of development and other age-related experiences. Contextual factors can be considered at both the local level (for example, the extent to which the child receives help and gifts, and how much encouragement and modelling is provided by the child's parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and so on) and at the distal level (the extent to which the culture as a whole values and supports the expression of gratitude). Cultural values and beliefs about the appropriate ways for people of different ages to express gratitude are far from unchanging, however.

## **Appropriate Methods to Study the Development of the Virtue of Gratitude**

How can this paradigm be instantiated? We will illustrate this by reference to our ongoing research on the development of gratitude, with funding generously provided by the John Templeton Foundation. It should be clear from the preceding description that it would make little sense, given how we have defined gratitude, to use any of the measures most commonly used by scholars interested in the concept, broadly considered. Instead we have used three approaches that, we think, better assess children's developing understanding of gratitude.

The first is an adaptation of the approach used by the first scholar interested in the development of gratitude, Franziska Baumgarten-Tramer [1938]. She initially asked her Swiss 7- to 15-year-old participants to write what their greatest wish was, and then asked what they would do for the person who granted them that wish. She thus did not try to assess the emotional state of gratitude or measure *how* grateful her respondents said they were, but to tie their expression of gratitude to a benefactor having granted them their wish.

Based on these children's responses, Baumgarten-Tramer [1938] classified gratitude into three primary types: verbal, concrete, and connective. She found that verbal gratitude (expressing one's thanks, which could be simply an expression of politeness, as Freitas, Pieta, and Tudge [2011] noted) did not vary greatly with age, although it was most likely to be expressed by the 15-year-olds. The younger children in her sample were most likely to say that they would repay their benefactor with a gift, money, a hug, and so on. Baumgarten-Tramer termed this type of response "concrete gratitude" and noted that although those expressing concrete gratitude view retribution as important, the response is essentially egocentric, not taking account of what the benefactor might actually like or need. For example, a child who wished for a new dollhouse might offer to give the benefactor a doll. Baumgarten-Tramer found that this type of gratitude declined between ages 7 and 15. By contrast, what she termed "connective gratitude" increased across this age range. Children expressing this type of gratitude not only recognize that repayment of a gift or help is necessary, but also that what is done should be something that is helpful or appropriate to the benefactor.

This approach allows us to assess the extent to which there are age-related differences in the type of gratitude children and adolescents say that they express when given something they perceive to be of value as well as take into account the proximal effect of the particular relationship with the benefactor. In line with Baumgarten-Tramer's [1938] results, we found no consistent increase or decrease in the extent to which 7- to 14-year-olds expressed verbal gratitude in samples in the United States, Brazil, Russia, or China, but in general concrete gratitude was less likely to be expressed with age whereas older participants were more likely to express connective gratitude than were those who were younger [Freitas et al., 2011; Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, & Wang, 2015a; Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, Wang, & O'Brien, 2015b; Wang, Wang, & Tudge, 2015].

Our second approach is to ask our participants to respond to vignettes in which one character helps another and subsequently is in need of assistance. The respondents are asked to explain how the characters in the story feel and what, if anything, the recipient of help should do. Although this approach does not allow assessment of the different types of gratitude that children and adolescents may express, it permits us to judge whether or not they think that repaying a favor or help is something that should be done, as well as understand their reasoning. The results of a recent study suggested that the majority of the children attributed positive feelings to the beneficiary and valued the benefactor's action (helping the beneficiary), but not the benefactor him- or herself [Rava & Freitas, 2013]. However, there were age differences in the manner in which the children understood the obligation to return a favor to a benefactor: (a) the 5- to 6-year-old children focused primarily on the negative consequences that a failure to repay would have on the benefactor (for example, she would be sad); (b) this type of response was less likely among older children; (c) returning a favor as a heteronomous obligation (for example, to ensure

that the beneficiary was not viewed as ungrateful or rude) was most common among children aged 7 and older; (d) repayment as a moral good, or as an autonomous obligation (for example, that it is good to repay or it is good to make the benefactor happy) was only found among some of the 11- to 12-year-olds [Castro, Rava, Hoefelmann, Pieta, & Freitas, 2011; Rava & Freitas, 2013].

The same vignettes were used with the 5-year-olds in a longitudinal study with children between ages 3 and 5, and the results indicated, as expected, that the ability to recognize emotions and tie them appropriately to social situations is important for the understanding of the most basic aspects of gratitude - that the beneficiary has to feel positively, to tie that positive feeling with the benefit received, and to understand the benefactor's mental state (namely that the benefactor has intentionally acted to fulfill his or her need or desire). The results of this study suggest that children with a better early understanding of emotions and mental states understand more about gratitude. Mental state knowledge at age 4 mediated the relation between emotional knowledge at age 3 and gratitude understanding at age 5 [Nelson et al., 2013].

Our third approach is to use two measures that assess both the extent to which children feel that they have been helped or given things and how grateful to their benefactor they feel. One measure is a questionnaire, with responses on a 5-point scale ranging from “never” to “yes, always”; the other uses the same questions, but in the form of an interview allowing our respondents to go into more depth in their answers. These measures provide a more detailed portrayal regarding their cognitive processes related to gratitude. These data are as yet unanalyzed.

In order to understand the everyday interactions related to gratitude we interviewed parents, asking them about their perceptions of the extent to which their children feel and express gratitude, the conditions under which they are most (and least) likely to express it, what, if anything, the parents do to try to encourage gratitude, and how they try to do that. We also interview the children about their perceptions of how likely they are to receive gifts or help from others.

As they are part of the local context most relevant to the formation and development of gratitude, the parents are also asked about how much they feel like they themselves are helped, and the extent to which they feel and express gratitude, to help us understand why parents might differentially encourage the expression of gratitude in their children and whether there is any link between parents' and children's gratitude. One major factor that could influence the extent to which, and the manner in which, parents try to encourage feelings and expressions of gratitude is the cultural group in which the families are situated. To assess the cultural context that may be the most relevant to the development of gratitude, we collect our data from sociocultural groups that we think differ in terms of Kağitçibaşı's [2007] orthogonal dimensions of autonomy-heteronomy and separation-relatedness, both within the United States (groups distinguished in terms of both race/ethnicity and social class) and from other societies (including Brazil, Russia, and China). The parents also provide information on the extent to which they value the development of autonomy and relatedness in their children [Liang, Mokra, & Tudge, 2015; Tudge et al., 2015c].

The age-related differences we described in the types of gratitude expressed are important, but so too are the cultural variations. Chinese 7- and 8-year-olds were more likely than any other group to indicate that they would express verbal gratitude when receiving something that they really wanted. No fewer than 70% of their responses were of this type, whereas only between 15 and 40% of the responses of same-age children in the other societies featured verbal gratitude [Tudge et al., 2015b]. Among our Brazilian participants, the percentage of responses that included verbal gratitude increased from about 15-30% among the younger children, to about 45-60% of all responses among 13- to 14-year-olds. By contrast, although the Russian children until about age 11 were more likely than those in the United States to express verbal gratitude (around 40-50% of responses compared to 20-30% in the US sample), the older children in these countries expressed very similar amounts of this type of gratitude (between 30 and 40%). If it is the case that verbal gratitude is simply a reflection of being taught to be polite when receiving something one wished for, younger Chinese children were more than twice as likely as their counterparts in Brazil or the United States to be polite [Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, & Wang, 2015a].

Regarding concrete gratitude, the most interesting cross-cultural differences were that the American children, of all ages, were the most likely to express concrete gratitude (with more than 50% of the responses of 7-year-olds being of this type) and the Russian children, at least from the age of 9 and older, were consistently least likely (20% of responses) to express this type of gratitude. The Brazilian children fell between these two groups. In other words, there were similar age differences across these four groups; however, they differed by the age of their tipping points. In the case of China, however, fewer than 15% of the responses of the 7-year-olds were of concrete gratitude, with little variation across age. These younger Chinese children were much more likely to express verbal gratitude and much less likely to express concrete gratitude than were children in the other countries.

We have argued that connective gratitude, by taking into account the wishes and feelings of the benefactor, thereby strengthening the relationship, best qualifies as a virtue. We were interested to know, therefore, whether there was any evidence of this type of gratitude in children, whether it was more commonly expressed among older children, and whether children in different cultures might express this type of gratitude to different extents.

Several things are worth noting. First, between 15 and 30% of the responses of 7- to 8-year-olds from each of the societies where we collected data were examples of connective gratitude; the expression of this type of gratitude is thus not only found in young adolescents. Second, 11- to 14-year-old Russian youth were most likely to express this type of gratitude (around 60% of their responses), and 10- to 13-year-old Chinese youth were similarly likely to express connective gratitude (around 50% of their responses). Finally, although Brazilian 7- and 8-year-olds were more likely than any other same-age group to express this type of gratitude (a little over 30% of their responses), there was no increase in expressions of connective gratitude among older children, as there was in the Russian, Chinese, and American samples [Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, & Wang, 2015a].

Thus it seems clear that the precursors for the development of gratitude as a virtue are present in children at least as young as 7. Moreover, the cultural variability that we found suggests that culture-wide sets of child-rearing values and beliefs have an influence on how children respond

to being given something. If it is the case that culture-wide values influence children's responses to help and gifts, it is most likely that the parents are one of the important mediating factors. Are Chinese parents, for example, more likely than those in other societies to stress to their young children the importance of thanking? Do Russian and Chinese parents exemplify more collectivist or relatedness values, thereby encouraging their youth to think about others, rather than have them focus on the individual? Do American parents, by focusing more on the gifts themselves than on the people providing those gifts, encourage their children to think in terms of reciprocating with gifts rather than on strengthening relationships?

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Much of the recent work on gratitude has come from social psychologists who have provided evidence that children, adolescents, and adults who score higher on measures of gratitude also score higher on various measures of well-being. This is important work; we want people to feel grateful, appreciative, and happy for the experiences they have. If, by writing gratitude journals or reflecting on all that one has to be grateful for, one's feelings of well-being increase, then we should certainly encourage it. However, we think that the term "gratitude" has been loosened too much. Is it really the same feeling (a) to be thankful that one owns many possessions; as (b) to look at the beautiful autumn foliage on a sunny day; as (c) to be appreciative of the fact that one has lived a full life and still enjoys good health; as (d) to feel a moral obligation to do something for a benefactor?

A different approach is to define the term as have some philosophers and psychologists - as a self-imposed moral obligation to repay, if at all possible, a benefactor in some way that is helpful or pleasurable to that benefactor. If an individual has developed the disposition to commonly take on this moral obligation in response to being intentionally and freely provided some benefit, it seems reasonable to think of that individual as being grateful, and to view him or her as having the virtue of gratitude.

As developmental psychologists it is essential to ask: how do individuals develop this virtue? Baumgarten-Tramer [1938] was the first to analyze age-related patterns of responses and identified three major types of gratitude, types that she termed verbal, concrete, and connective, each of which represented a more sophisticated type of gratitude. In work conducted recently in different countries (Brazil, China, Russia, and the United States) similar patterns of responses were found as Baumgarten-Tramer had in Switzerland. Responding to a question about what children or adolescents would do when someone granted their greatest wish should not be taken as evidence that they would either act that way in reality or that responding with connective gratitude means that they are virtuous individuals. However, one can say that feeling and expressing connective gratitude is a necessary (though by no means sufficient) precursor to developing the virtue of gratitude.

At least in the 7- to 14-year-old age group that we have studied, there seem to be age-related differences in the expression of these types of gratitude, particularly in the case of concrete gratitude (which was exhibited more by our younger than older participants) and connective gratitude (which was expressed more frequently by older participants). Differences with age were not so clearly seen in the case of verbal gratitude. Although the 13- and 14-year-olds were

more likely to express connective gratitude than were the younger ones, many did not. Similarly, although more younger than older children expressed concrete gratitude, there was a good deal of individual variability. It is therefore worth conducting research to understand the source of these individual variations, some of which are most likely related to the everyday experiences and interactions around gift- and help-giving and how partners in those activities (particularly parents, but also peers and teachers) act and express themselves.

If parents and other social partners have an influence on the ways in which children develop the feeling and expression of gratitude, then culture must play a large part in this, given that parents' approaches to socialization are culturally related. It is thus not sufficient to study the development of gratitude in a single society or recruit members of just one cultural group as participants. Although the age-related patterns that we found in the expression of different types of gratitude were not restricted to a single society, there were some striking differences, particularly from the Chinese participants.

We should be cautious, of course, about the fact that our data were only gathered from a single city in each of the four societies. Without replication from different regions and/or different racial/ethnic groups within each society we are unable to ascertain whether the society-related differences that we found are more widespread or specific to the particular region in which we collected our data. Regardless of whether or not our findings can be generalized to other parts of each country, more work is clearly needed in order to understand the reasons for the society-related differences that we found and, as we have argued, this involves interviewing parents.

If parents have an impact on how their children react upon receiving help or a gift, then the next step is to understand what they are currently doing to influence their children's feelings and expressions of gratitude. Then, if we wish to encourage the development of gratitude as a virtue, we need to find ways to persuade them to focus less on the gift itself and more on the giver. In other words, we should not only think of gratitude as being the parent of all virtues, as Cicero stated, but also what parents can do to ensure that gratitude as a virtue is developed in their children.

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