

The development of gratitude in Brazilian children and adolescents

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Abstract:

This study aimed to examine age-related changes in gratitude expression and spending preferences and the associations between children's greatest wish and gratitude expression. Participants were 285 children of ages 7 to 14 ($M = 10.87$, $SD = 2.27$, 54% girls) from public and private schools in Porto Alegre, a large urban center of Brazil. We found that verbal gratitude was the most common type of gratitude expression. Older children were more likely to express verbal and less likely to express concrete gratitude than were younger participants; they were also more likely to choose saving money for the future and less likely to choose donating to the poor. We also found a positive correlation between hedonistic wishes and concrete gratitude and between social well-being wishes and connective gratitude. Our results suggest that gratitude is linked to the ability of thinking about others, and may be hindered by a focus on immediate pleasure.

Keywords: gratitude | moral virtue | cultural values | development | Brazil

Article:

Brazil is the fifth-largest country in the world and the largest country in South America, with a great variety of cultures, customs, values, and accents. The country's diversity is deeply influenced by Brazil's history, shaping the composition of race and culture in the country. Brazil was colonized by Portugal, and it is currently the largest Lusophone country and the only country in South America with Portuguese as the official language. Before being colonized, what is now Brazilian territory was inhabited by more than a thousand different indigenous tribes. The indigenous population, estimated at around 11 million in 1500, was reduced by 90% over the next century, primarily as a result of infectious diseases introduced by the colonists (Survival International, 2017). During the colonization period, Portugal controlled the ports and needed

inexpensive labor to work in the sugarcane plantations of Brazil. This is one of the reasons why Brazil was one of the countries that received the greatest number of slaves (almost half of the slaves at the time went to Brazil); also, it was one of the last countries to abolish slavery in 1888.

Another relevant historical factor for the development of the country is that in the 19th century, the Brazilian government actively recruited immigrants to move there (primarily from Germany, Italy, and Portugal). The increase in the number of immigrants from Europe was influenced by several factors, including the crisis and wars in Europe, the abolition of slavery in Brazil, greater opportunities in the workforce in Brazil (mainly in agriculture), and the idea of “whitening” the population. The European immigration particularly affected the south and southeast regions of Brazil and has deeply influenced the culture of those regions. Overall, the cultural influences of diverse groups in Brazil are reflected in regional differences, with the largest population of African descendant living in northeastern Brazil and the largest population of European descendant concentrated southeastern Brazil.

The city of Porto Alegre, where the data for the present study were collected, is the capital city of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which is the southernmost Brazilian state. It is bordered by the state of Santa Catarina (north), the Atlantic Ocean (east), Uruguay (south), and Argentina (west). As mentioned above, the state is mostly composed of Brazilians of European descent such as Portuguese, German, and Italian immigrants. According to the Brazilian Census (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2010), the primary ethnic groups in Rio Grande do Sul based on self-identification report are (a) White (83.22%), (b) Mixed (10.57%), (c) Black (5.57%), and (d) Asian/Pampeano Indigenous (0.64%).

The inhabitants of Rio Grande do Sul are known as “Gaúchos,” the name attributed to the characteristics of the environment and the men living in the “Pampas” region of southern Brazil and northern Argentina. Until the mid-19th century, the term “Gaúcho” was used pejoratively, being directed to adventurers, cattle thieves, and lawbreakers living in the rural areas of the state (Zalla & Menegat, 2011). The Gaúchos were a result of an intermarriage (or at least sexual relations) among the indigenous population and immigrants primarily from Spain and Portugal. Over time, they changed from having a nomadic or outlaw identity and established themselves as indispensable for the care and upkeep of the vast herds of cattle that roamed over much of the state. Not surprisingly, their skills paralleled those of the North American “cowboy,” including horse riding and lassoing; these aspects are part of the Gaúcho tradition and identity. With changes to their work structure and routine, over time their customs were also altered, impacting their clothes and food habits. With integration into rural society, they have come to be viewed as specialized farm workers (Zalla & Menegat, 2011).

The Gaúchos can be considered facilitators of the Portuguese settlement in southern Brazil, also contributing to the border defense in the “Platine” Region (the south and west borders between Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay), actively engaging in the political life of the country. The recognition of the Gaúchos’ cattle-raising abilities and bravery in the wars contributed to the loss of the pejorative connotation of the term. After the “Farroupilha” Revolution (1835-1845), the term *Gaúcho* was considered a synonym of dignity, bravery, fearlessness, and patriotism (Zalla & Menegat, 2011). Overall, the Gaúcho people are portrayed in literature as proud, irreverent, and as warriors, marked by the intermingling of indigenous peoples and groups that

sought better life conditions in southern Brazil. The people of Rio Grande do Sul highly value their history and usually commend the courage and bravery of their ancestors and express, through their traditions, their attachment to their land and love of freedom.

The capital city of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, has approximately 1,481,000 inhabitants. Porto Alegre has three public and several private universities. Around 56.6% of individuals in the city (15-year-olds or older) had a high school diploma and 48.7% (25-year-olds or older) had completed a college degree by 2010 (IBGE, 2010). The city's economy is gradually developing with increasing numbers of white-collar occupations and opportunities in more technologically sophisticated fields, such as information and communication technology (ICT), health, banking, and education. Although Porto Alegre's economy accounts for only about 17% of the state's GDP, approximately 30% to 50% of activities in these fields occur in Porto Alegre. Also, these economic areas add challenges to the local economy, given that they involve higher job qualification demands.

According to Hofstede's (2017) paradigm, Brazil is considered a collectivist society, in which "people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups (especially represented by the extended family)" (para. 2). However, this unidimensional approach to cultural values has been criticized as too simplistic, especially in a country as diverse as Brazil. Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007) theory unpacks this cultural unidimensional approach by proposing two dimensions. One dimension is related to agency (autonomy–heteronomy) and the other to personal distance (relatedness–separateness). As explained in Chapter 1, Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) based her theory on studies conducted in Turkey. However, because Brazil is also considered a majority world country that has experienced urbanization and the growth of higher education, we could consider individuals living in urban areas of the country, such as Porto Alegre, as predominantly valuing relatedness–autonomy. Some evidence supports this idea, suggesting that educated mothers in urban areas of Brazil valued higher degrees of autonomy–relatedness when compared with less educated mothers living in small cities. This evidence was revealed by Brazilian mothers' socialization goals related to self-maximization (linked to autonomy) and proper demeanor (linked to relatedness) in urban areas (Seidl-de-Moura, Carvalho, & Vieira, 2013; Seidl-de-Moura et al., 2008; Seidl-de-Moura, Mendes, et al., 2013).

In light of the country's cultural heritage and values, the aim of the present study is to explore how youth in southern Brazil express gratitude, keeping in mind the region's unique culture. We are also interested in the associations between what children wish for and how they express gratitude, age-related differences in the expression of gratitude, and the relations between their wishes and their spending preferences.

Method

Participants

A total of 285 children and adolescents of ages 7 to 14 participated in this study ($M = 10.87$, $SD = 2.27$, 54% girls). The samples were drawn from public (73%) and private schools (27%) in Porto Alegre.

Measures

Full details of the methods and instruments can be found in Tudge, Freitas, O'Brien, and Mokrova (2018). In brief, consent forms were sent to the parents in participating schools. Children whose parents consented and who also gave their own assent completed four measures during the school day. Data discussed in this study are drawn from the children's open-ended responses to the first two questions of the Wishes and Gratitude Survey (WAGS; Freitas, Tudge, & McConnell, 2008, derived from Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938) and the Imaginary Windfall (Tudge & Freitas, 2011, derived from Kasser, 2005). At least 24% of the responses to both questions were coded by two of the co-authors, with the reliability of kappa $>.89$. All disagreements were discussed and resolved.

Results

Descriptive statistics of all principal variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2, including frequencies and means of types of wish, types of gratitude, and spending preferences. As expected, overall Brazilian children and adolescents were more likely to express connective gratitude than concrete gratitude. However, verbal gratitude was the most common type of gratitude expression.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Binary Variables of Wishes and Gratitude ($N = 278$).

	Boys		Girls		All	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Wishes						
Hedonistic	63	49.2	72	52	141	50.7
Self well-being	74	57.8	85	56.7	159	57.2
Social well-being	15	11.7	26	17.3	41	14.7
Total	152	118.7	189	126	341	122.6
Gratitude						
Verbal	53	41.4	75	50	128	46
Concrete	32	25	39	26	71	25.5
Connective	46	35.9	54	36	100	36
Total	131	102.3	168	112	299	107.5

Note. % = percentage of children expressing that type of wish/gratitude.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Variables of Age and Spending Preferences ($N = 278$).

Variables	Boys		Girls		All	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	10.81	2.16	10.69	2.17	10.75	2.16
Spending preferences						
Buy for self	23.55	15.38	18.47	14.22	20.81	14.97
Gifts for others	16.60	11.31	16.47	12.23	16.53	11.79
Save	37.19	23.85	39	26.48	38.17	25.28
Give to charity	22.77	18.94	25.80	18.70	24.39	18.83

Relations Between Types of Gratitude and Age, Gender, and Wish Types

To examine the relations between gratitude and age, gender, and types of wishes, we conducted a series of binomial logistic regression analyses with each type of gratitude (verbal, concrete, and

connective) as the dependent variable. In each set of analyses, age and gender were included in the first model to examine main effects of those variables. In the second model, the three types of wishes (hedonistic, self-, and social-oriented wishes) were included as predictors. Results of those binomial logistic regression analyses for the second model are shown in Table 3. Figure 1 shows the expression of gratitude by age.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Analyses of Type of Gratitude on Age, Gender, and Wish Types ($N = 278$).

Predictor	Verbal			Concrete			Connective		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	e^B	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	e^B	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	e^B
Age	0.17**	0.06	1.18	-0.15*	0.07	0.86	0.47	0.06	1.05
Gender	-0.37	0.25	0.69	0.02	0.29	1.02	0.04	0.25	1.04
Wish types									
Hedonistic	-0.41	0.31	0.66	0.98**	0.38	2.66	0.29	0.31	1.33
Self well-being	-0.25	0.31	0.65	-0.22	0.34	0.80	0.50	0.31	1.64
Other well-being	0.41	0.38	1.21	0.15	0.47	1.16	0.77*	0.38	2.16
Nagelkerke R^2		.08			.12			.03	
χ^2		16.81**			23.80***			7.16	

Note. Gender, coded boys = 0 (reference category); girls = 1. e^B = exponentiated *B*; *SE* = standard error. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

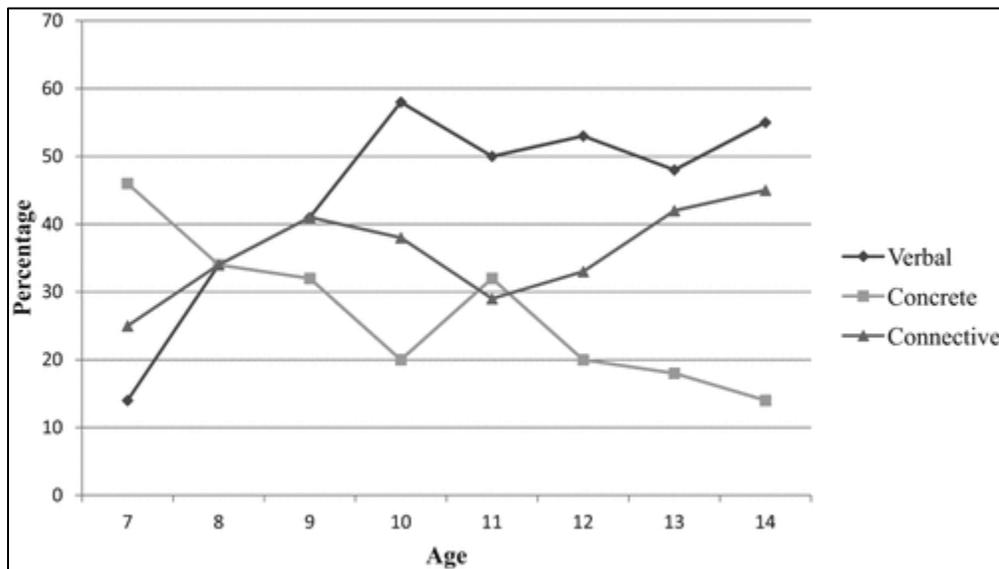


Figure 1. Types of gratitude by age.

Verbal gratitude. The results showed that age had a significant main effect on the expression of verbal gratitude ($B = 0.17$, $e^B = 1.18$, $p = .005$); for each year increase in age, children were about 1.18 times more likely to report verbal gratitude. None of the wish types was associated with the expression of verbal gratitude.

Concrete gratitude. There were significant age-related differences in the expression of concrete gratitude ($B = -0.15$, $e^B = 0.86$, $p = .031$). That is, for each year increase in age, children were 1.16 times less likely to report concrete gratitude. We also found that those with hedonistic wishes were almost 3 times more likely to report concrete gratitude ($B = 0.98$, $e^B = 2.66$, $p = .009$).

Connective gratitude. For connective gratitude, we found no significant main effect of age or gender. However, we found that children who wished for the well-being of others were more than twice as likely to express connective gratitude ($B = 0.77$, $e^B = 2.16$, $p = .042$).

Relations Between Spending Preferences and Age, Gender, and Wish Types

To examine the relation between spending preferences and types of wishes, we conducted four linear regression analyses with each type of spending preference (buy things for oneself, save for the future, buy gifts for the family and friends, and donate to charity or the poor) as the dependent variable. We first included only age and gender in the model as predictors. Next, we added each type of wish as independent variables. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Linear Regression Analyses of Spending Preferences on Age, Gender, and Wish Types ($N = 278$).

Predictor	Buy			Gifts			Save			Poor		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β									
Age	0.47	0.43	.07	-0.34	0.34	-.06	1.48	0.73	.13*	-1.56	0.55	-.18**
Gender	-4.76	1.78	-.16**	-0.12	1.41	-.01	1.47	3.03	.03	3.06	2.55	.08
Wish types												
Hedonistic	-0.16	2.24	-.01	-1.46	1.78	-.62	4.64	3.82	.09	-2.90	2.84	-.08
Self well-being	-2.32	2.22	-.08	-4.45	1.76	-.19*	4.55	3.77	.09	2.60	2.80	.07
Other well-being	-5.17	2.71	-.12†	-1.25	2.15	-.38	7.96	4.63	.11†	-1.32	3.43	-.02
Nagelkerke R^2		.05			.36			.03			.04	
χ^2		2.76*			2.01†			1.93†			2.35*	

Note. Gender, coded boys = 0 (reference category); girls = 1. *B* = unstandardized parameter predicting the outcome variable from the independent variable; β = standardized parameter; *SE* = standard error. † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The results indicated that age had a significant effect on both saving money for the future and giving money to charity or the poor. Older children were more likely to report saving money ($\beta = .13$, $p = .03$), but less likely to report giving to charity ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .005$). We also found that those individuals who expressed a wish for self well-being were significantly less likely to report the desire to spend their money on gifts for friends or family ($\beta = -.19$, $p = .01$). Although only marginally significant, children who expressed social well-being wishes were more likely to choose saving money for the future ($\beta = .11$, $p = .09$). In addition, we found that boys were more likely than were girls to choose buying things for themselves ($\beta = -.16$, $p = .009$).

Discussion

Based on Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007, 2012) perspective, we had expected that people in Porto Alegre would value both autonomy and relatedness, and, therefore, that Brazilian children in this city would express higher rates of connective gratitude and lower rates of concrete gratitude. This hypothesis was based on the idea that connective gratitude involves a sense of autonomy (willingness to reciprocate considering the benefactors' needs and wishes) and a sense of close connection with others, both of which are valued in urbanized areas of the majority world, such as Porto Alegre. Furthermore, we had expected that older children would be more likely to

express connective gratitude and less likely to express concrete gratitude. We also anticipated a positive and significant correlation between hedonistic wishes and concrete gratitude, and between social well-being wishes and connective gratitude.

As expected, Brazilian children were more likely to express gratitude connectively rather than concretely (36% vs. 25.5%, respectively). This provides some evidence that the cultural value of relatedness may impact how children express gratitude for this group. Also, as hypothesized, the expression of concrete gratitude was less common among older children and adolescents. This suggests that the development of cognitive abilities may play a role in expressing gratitude in a less egocentric way (e.g., Freitas, Pieta, & Tudge, 2011; Wang, Wang, & Tudge, 2015).

However, our findings only partially supported our hypotheses for connective gratitude, given that we did not find a significant age-related change for this type of gratitude. When we look at the age trends in the expression of connective gratitude (Figure 1), we see an increased tendency among 7- to 9-year-olds and 13- to 14-year-olds, with a decrease for the 11-year-olds (concrete gratitude seems to be a more likely response than connective gratitude, for this specific age).

Overall, verbal gratitude was the most common type of gratitude expressed among Brazilian children and adolescents (around 46% of children expressed this type of gratitude); this was especially so for older children. This may be an indication that politeness is highly valued in this Brazilian context, and, therefore, is viewed as the proper way of expressing gratitude, at least among older children and adolescents.

As for children's wishes, our results indicated that the most common type of wish was related to well-being of the self, followed by hedonistic wishes, and finally wishes for social well-being (only around 15% of children expressed this type of wish). As expected, we found a positive correlation between wishing for hedonistic things and the expression of concrete gratitude, controlling for age. Also, in line with our expectations, children who wished for others' well-being were also more likely to express connective gratitude. Those results indicate that children who are more focused on immediate desires for their own pleasure are also less likely to take others into consideration when expressing gratitude. In contrast, children who wish for others' well-being are more likely to express gratitude in a way that considers others' needs and wishes. Thus, it seems that gratitude as a moral virtue can be fostered by encouraging children to think less about immediate desires (such as material things) and more about others' well-being.

Regarding spending preferences, we found that older children were more likely to choose to save money for the future than were younger children. This result supports the notion that older adolescents are more future-oriented than are younger children (Steinberg et al., 2009). However, older children were also less likely to give money to charity and the poor. We also found a gender effect, in which boys were more likely than were girls to buy things for themselves. This is aligned with findings that boys hold higher materialist values than do girls (Achenreiner, 1997; Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio, & Bamossy, 2003; Kasser, 2005).

Moreover, children and adolescents who expressed self-oriented wishes were also less likely to choose spending their money on presents for the family and friends. This finding suggests that children who are more self-centered choose to spend less money on others. We also found that

participants who wished for others' well-being tended to be more likely to save money for the future, which may suggest that children with greater capacity to think of future expenses are also more likely to think of others' well-being.

Conclusion

The most common types of gratitude expression used by Brazilian children and adolescents was verbal gratitude, followed by connective gratitude. Furthermore, the type of gratitude closest to a moral virtue (connective) was positively associated with wishing for others' well-being, indicating a common basis for what one wishes for and how one expresses gratitude—that is, thinking of others' well-being and being willing to express gratitude taking the benefactor's needs and wishes into account. By contrast, wishing for things for one's immediate pleasure was linked to the type of gratitude expression that is more egocentric (concrete gratitude).

Overall, these results indicate that one way to foster gratitude as a moral virtue among Brazilian children and adolescents involves encouraging thinking less about ephemeral things for one's own pleasure and more about others. It is troublesome that most of our Brazilian participants expressed wishes either for immediate pleasure or for themselves in the future; only a small proportion of the children expressed wishes for others. This may be result of the media's influence and encouragement of consumerism in contemporary society, which seems, then, to impact interpersonal relations and how people will respond to benefits received.

In addition, our findings also show that our older participants were more likely to think of the future and choose to save resources than were those who were younger. However, the older children were less likely to choose donating the money to charity or the poor. It may be that older children attribute greater value to the importance of having money for oneself in the future, also thinking from an individual perspective and in a self-centered way. Furthermore, children who expressed wishes for themselves in the future were also less likely to be willing to spend money buying presents for family members or friends.

Although the present study contributes greatly to the literature on gratitude development, it is important to consider some limitations. First the data are cross-sectional, not allowing inferences about causality. In addition, the data are drawn from a specific cultural context in Brazil. As discussed earlier, the southernmost state in Brazil was greatly influenced by European immigrants and the Gaúchos, which shaped the identity and values of its inhabitants. Thus, our findings cannot be generalized to other states/regions in Brazil, or even to rural areas of the state, where different cultural values might be endorsed. Finally, it has been given that socioeconomic status impacts children's expression of gratitude (Merçon-Vargas, Pieta, Freitas, & Tudge, 2016), future research should further address how parental values and social-class backgrounds impact the expression of gratitude.

In sum, our results suggest that the moral virtue of gratitude seems to be linked to the ability of thinking about others, and may be hindered by a focus on immediate pleasure. Also, older children seem more focused on the future and on self-success, and less on pleasing and helping others. Although it is likely that cognitive abilities play a role in how children express gratitude,

the cultural context in which children are embedded also seems to be an important component in understanding children's expression of gratitude, as is evidenced in this special issue.

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