

## The development of the virtue of gratitude: Theoretical foundations and cross-cultural issues

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### **Abstract:**

The expression of gratitude by children and young adolescents in different societies is the topic of this special issue. We introduce the concept of gratitude as a virtue, explaining its differences from gratitude viewed as a positive emotion. Although most research on gratitude uses samples from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (primarily from the United States), we discuss the importance of studying the development of gratitude across different cultural groups. Despite the evidence to suggest that the expression of gratitude is viewed as desirable across multiple societies and historical periods, there is no reason to assume that developmental pathways found in one or other WEIRD society would be found in non-WEIRD societies or that the latter would have similar pathways. Children's gratitude expression across countries is explored in this special issue using Baumgarten-Tramer's (1938) paradigm as well as Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007) framework to address both differences and similarities across cultures.

**Keywords:** gratitude | moral virtue | cross-cultural research | development

### **Article:**

The articles in this special issue are devoted to the development of gratitude in different cultural contexts. There has been a growing interest in gratitude, particularly since the start of this century (Tudge & Freitas, 2018), but it has been conceptualized and studied in different ways (Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013). Gratitude has been mostly studied as a positive emotion linked to a tendency to respond with grateful emotion to experiences (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). From this

perspective, there is no need of reciprocation toward a benefactor, as what counts is the feeling triggered by receiving a benefit or experiencing a positive event.

However, there are problems with this conceptualization of gratitude. One can imagine an individual who feels a positive emotion toward a benefactor but who fails to do anything for that benefactor when he or she subsequently needs help. If such behavior typically occurred, it might be more reasonable to term this individual ungrateful, no matter the degree of positive emotion felt. In other words, gratitude must be more than simply a positive emotion toward something gained or for an experience (Morgan, Gulliford, & Kristjánsson, 2017).

In this special issue, we treat gratitude as a moral virtue; as such, it involves one person (the beneficiary) (a) receiving a freely given benefit (a gift, favor, help, etc.) from another (the benefactor), (b) feeling positive about what the benefactor intentionally did, and (c) freely wishing to reciprocate with something of benefit to the benefactor. Various social, cognitive, and moral processes are involved here, such as the ability to consider others' points of view and to autonomously wish to reciprocate (McConnell, 1993; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008; Tudge, Freitas, & O'Brien, 2015).

The first two points listed as part of the definition are widely accepted in the literature, particularly by those scholars who write about gratitude as a *targeted, discriminate, prepositional, or triadic* concept (see, for example, Carr & Harrison, 2018; Gulliford et al., 2013; McConnell, 2016). Whichever of these terms is used, scholars using them view gratitude as having to do with the relation between a beneficiary and an intentional benefactor. There are, however, some clearly divergent positions; some authors argue that an intentional benefactor is not a necessary condition for gratitude to be felt and expressed, and others disagree that gratitude entails reciprocity, the third point of the definition we use.

Regarding the first position, some authors have suggested that an intentional benefactor is not required—one can feel gratitude to inanimate objects or to events (e.g., Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2016; McAleer, 2012); in this sense, gratitude may be termed *non-targeted, indiscriminate, prepositional, or dyadic*. However, as Roberts (2016) noted, “to the extent that the construct really posits no benefactor, it just amounts to gladness about the benefit” (p. 68). Similarly, McConnell argued that “at its core, gratitude is a discriminate notion; we are grateful to someone for something” (2016, p. 23) and Fagley’s (2016) thesis is that much of what is viewed as nontargeted, or indiscriminate, gratitude would be better termed “appreciation.” We agree with the latter three positions; to say that one is grateful for the fact that it has stopped raining is no different from saying that one is glad, happy, or appreciative for the cessation of rain. The term *gratitude* should, we believe, be more tightly defined.

The second argument relates to the issue of reciprocity, and our position (expressed as the third point in the definition provided above) is in the minority. Much of the argument rests on the view that duty, obligation, or debt are the marks of a business transaction. Or, as Card (1988) stated, “The idea of a debt of gratitude seems paradoxical. If that for which gratitude is due was neither for sale nor a mere loan but was in some sense *gratis*, what sense does it make to feel indebted for it” (p. 115)? And if one has a debt of gratitude, paying that debt “from duty seems to betray an absence of gratitude” (p. 117). Similarly, Wellman (1999) argued that failure to reciprocate,

given a good opportunity to do so, is a moral failing, but not one that has implications for gratitude for “there are no duties of gratitude” (p. 284). From a neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethics perspective, however, it is impossible for an individual to have simultaneously the moral virtue of gratitude and the moral failing that looks a good deal like ingratitude (Annas, 2011; Hughes, 2013).

The problem is caused by the confusion between duties, debts, and obligations that one *has* to accept (in the sense of some type of contract) and which, when paid, are fully discharged, and the duties, debts, and obligations that one takes on freely. As Card (1988) noted, “Contractual bonds are not the only ethically significant interpersonal ties” (p. 120), and she wrote about the difference between formal (contractual) and informal ties of obligation, such as those of friendship. Similarly, Roberts (2016) drew a parallel between gratitude and love: “You feel a kind of happy ‘pressure’ to acknowledge lovingly the other’s love . . . This is the only sense in which you want to *pay* the debt” (p. 61). In other words, it is an obligation created and fostered in the relationship itself. Such a debt of gratitude is not paid off when reciprocating—it is not the completion of a contract—and it is felt and paid willingly.

Another way of thinking about this is to distinguish between a heteronomous (externally provided) and an autonomous (internal) sense of obligation (see Mendonça & Palhares, 2018). Contracts are externally controlled; if one feels a heteronomous obligation to repay a benefit with something as a way of “paying off the debt” in a “tit for tat” way, this is not evidence of gratitude as a virtue. The latter requires that one freely and willingly accepts the moral obligation to reciprocate in an appropriate way, should an opportunity present itself. This is what grateful individuals do.

Ingratitude, by contrast, is viewed as the “king of the vices” (Emmons, 2016), because there is the expectation that when benefactors have, freely and intentionally, provided a beneficiary with a significant benefit, that beneficiary will try to reciprocate if at all possible, and would be considered morally suspect if never doing so. Simply feeling a positive emotional response to a benefactor is not enough. Therefore, in our view (see Tudge & Freitas, 2018; Tudge, Freitas, & O’Brien, 2015), the issue of reciprocity cannot be left out of the definition of gratitude as a virtue.

Reciprocity is not, of course, a sufficient marker of gratitude. One can reciprocate merely to pay off a debt to a benefactor, one can reciprocate in the appropriate manner but only on rare occasions, or reciprocate only because one is forced to do so (by a parent, perhaps). In none of these cases would one be considered to be virtuously grateful. Gratitude can be considered a virtue when it is an enduring feature and characteristic of a person; that is, for a person to be considered grateful, it is not enough to feel and act gratefully once in a while, if these actions and feelings are not *typically* felt and done. In other words, gratitude must be practiced habitually and consistently, although not necessarily on each and every occasion—there are situations in which an apparently kind act does not warrant a grateful response (Morgan & Gulliford, 2018) or when there are mitigating circumstances that justify not reciprocating even when given a suitable opportunity (McConnell, 2013). Nonetheless, it can be considered a reliable disposition that is socially admirable and that shapes other peoples’ expectations regarding the way the person will feel and act when gratitude is an appropriate response (Annas, 2011; Tudge & Freitas, 2018).

As Kristjánsson (2013) pointed out: “Truly virtuous persons do not only perform the right actions, but they perform them for the right reasons and from the right motives” (p. 202). Not surprisingly, gratitude is not innate but develops with age (Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; Do Vale, 2012; Freitas, Pieta, & Tudge, 2011; Nelson et al., 2013; Tudge, Freitas, & O’Brien, 2015). Becoming virtuous takes time and is developed through education, habituation, and life experiences (Annas, 2011). It is first through interactions with adults and later with peers that children learn normative values that regulate their relationships with others, which contributes to the development of moral values, including gratitude (Prestes, Castro, Tudge, & Freitas, 2014).

These moral values are likely to vary across different sociocultural groups (Prinz, 2009), and one of the foremost goals of moral education is to help establishing moral schemas in children and adolescents by encouraging them to act in accordance with their society’s moral values (Kristjánsson, 2015). According to La Taille (2000), the moral values embodied in gratitude are positively regarded by most people and cultures, and are viewed as a standard of a desirable character. But is gratitude therefore experienced and expressed similarly across cultural groups? There is reason to think that this is not the case.

### **The Problem of Implicit Generalization**

Most research on gratitude in general, and on the development of gratitude in particular, have used samples from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies (WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Arnett, 2008; Nielsen, Haun, Kärtner, & Legare, 2017; Tomlinson & Swartz, 2003; Tudge & Freitas, 2012). Results from these studies have typically assumed an implicit generalization—scholars usually talk about “children” and “adolescents” without specifying the cultural groups from which the children are drawn, such as North American children drawn from a primarily middle-class and European American population (Arnett, 2008). It is also worth noting that it is common for scholars in some societies to treat results from studies conducted in the United States as relevant to their own country, despite the absence of research on the same topic conducted in their own context (Tudge & Freitas, 2012).

Attention has thus been drawn to the importance of considering cultural influences on human development. For example, a cross-cultural approach to understanding child development provides more variation than can be found in studies that sample from a single homogeneous group (e.g., middle-class European American children) or even from a diverse sample that is drawn from a single society. That is, only if cultural diversity is addressed is it possible to make sense of what is otherwise considered typical and atypical development. This has several implications both for studies implicitly assuming universality and for theories claiming universality (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007).

In addition, one of the greatest contributions of cross-cultural research is the opportunity to promote greater cultural sensitivity in academic knowledge. Approaching research from a culturally sensitive perspective likely encourages researchers to behave more ethically and responsibly. Such a perspective requires researchers to recognize the value in different

experiences and ways of living, which, in turn, may decrease the often implicit idea that dominant values are normative (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Orbuch & Fine, 2003).

These considerations are critical for the study of any developmental process, including how children develop gratitude. It is certainly not reasonable for anyone to assume that developmental pathways to gratitude found in the United States will be found elsewhere, as it is also questionable to think that non-WEIRD cultures will all present similar patterns of gratitude expression. The various articles included in this special issue will provide some evidence for the variability in expression of gratitude that exists in different parts of the world.

Conceptualizing gratitude as a moral virtue, Baumgarten-Tramer (1938) and other scholars using her approach (Freitas et al., 2011; Merçon-Vargas, Pieta, Freitas, & Tudge, 2016; Pieta, 2009; Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, et al., 2015; Wang, Wang, & Tudge, 2015) have demonstrated the existence of different types of gratitude, varying in degree of proximity to a virtue (as defined), across different ages. These types of gratitude indicate an increasing presence of some elements of gratitude as a moral virtue, such as recognition of a benefactor's intentionality, an autonomous wish to repay, and the consideration of others' needs or desires, in contrast to heteronomous reciprocity and/or simple politeness.

One of the advantages of addressing gratitude as a moral virtue is that it focuses on the relation between benefactor and beneficiary (it is, therefore, interpersonal), and not only on the beneficiary's feelings elicited by the received benefit. Furthermore, the perspective of gratitude as a moral virtue is valuable for the study of the development of gratitude across different cultures. The understanding of how gratitude develops may allow us to better comprehend how morality is developed, how characters are shaped, and in which ways cognitive and moral processes and values are implicated in development (La Taille, 2000, 2018).

### **How Does Gratitude Develop?**

It is not easy trying to disentangle the development of gratitude and other related factors, such as the development of cognitive abilities and environmental conditions that may foster gratitude (e.g., cultural values). From a cognitive developmental perspective, Piaget's (1932/1965, 1965/1995) notion of morality includes a gradual development from a heteronomous moral orientation (obedience and unilateral relations) to an autonomous moral sense (mutuality and cooperation). This development involves a decentration of the self, increasingly enabling individuals to coordinate different points of view and to engage in more reciprocal relationships.

Whereas heteronomous morality is objective and one of simple duty, autonomous morality is based on mutual respect and reciprocity. However, the development from heteronomous to autonomous morality is by no means straightforward. Thanks to cooperation among peers, young children may develop the sense of autonomous morality, but it coexists with the heteronomous morality learned in dealings with parents and other authority figures (Piaget, 1932/1965). Over time, one or other type of morality will come to predominate, and Piaget considered that human beings, to become fully developed, would become autonomously moral (Freitas, 2003). This developmental process may be considered as essential for the development of gratitude. In line

with that, Nelson and colleagues (2013) found that better understanding of emotions and of others' mental states at age 3 served as precursors to some understanding of gratitude at age 5.

Gratitude, thus, involves cognitively complex abilities and degrees of moral understanding that develop throughout childhood and adolescence (Do Vale, 2012; Freitas, O'Brien, Nelson, & Marcovitch, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013). Time, experience, and encouragement are needed for gratitude to fully develop, with less complex forms of gratitude being present during this process of development (Baumgarten & Tramer, 1938; Freitas et al., 2011; Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015).

Baumgarten-Tramer's (1938) study in Switzerland was the first study addressing different types of gratitude across the ages of 7 to 15. She asked children and adolescents, "What is your greatest wish?" and "What would you do for the person who granted you this wish?" She then derived different types of gratitude expression from the participants' responses: (a) verbal gratitude, (b) concrete gratitude, reflected in the wish to reciprocate with things important to oneself rather than to the benefactor (which was more typical among younger children), and (c) a more sophisticated type of gratitude (connective) that showed an ability to take the benefactor's wishes or needs into account (which was more typical among adolescents). A fourth type of gratitude, finalistic (e.g., being an excellent student in return for a scholarship to a good university), was rarely found and only among 14- and 15-year-olds.

This approach is useful to understand the development of gratitude because a desired benefit that is meaningful to the participants is set with the first question ("what is your greatest wish?"). Moreover, the second question allows researchers to assess different ways in which children say they would reciprocate their hypothetical benefactor without imposing any type of answer. With that, it is possible to infer whether children express reciprocation autonomously (taking the benefactor's needs or wishes into account, such as "I would do anything she needed"), or indicating a simple need of reciprocity (not considering the other's perspective, such as "I would give him a cookie"), or still only verbally (such as "I would say 'thank you'").

We can think of the less complex forms of gratitude (concrete and verbal) as possibly a self-centered way of reciprocation, indicating no evidence of considering what might be desired by or useful to the benefactor. Verbal gratitude may involve an understanding of intentionality and/or an appreciation of the benefactor's wishes and needs (but without the explicit desire to reciprocate), or could simply involve politeness. Saying "thank you" is something often encouraged by parents even in very young children (Freitas et al., 2011; Visser, 2009). Reciprocity can exist without morality, but morality does not exist without reciprocity; thus, a sense of reciprocity would be necessary for, but not equivalent to, gratitude (Bonnie & de Waal, 2004). This approach is different from seeing gratitude as a positive emotion, given that the aim is not to assess the child's feeling when the benefit is (hypothetically) received, but what she or he would do in response to gaining such a benefit.

Some scholars have addressed the development of gratitude in other countries using Baumgarten-Tramer's (1938) approach. These studies suggested that even though age-related changes had similar trends for children in different countries (i.e., Freitas et al., 2011; Merçon-Vargas et al., 2016; Pieta, 2009; Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015), some

important cultural differences in gratitude expression seem to exist. Consequently, more studies should focus on clarifying the developmental and cultural aspects of gratitude.

### **Does Gratitude Differ Across Cultural Contexts?**

Although gratitude as a virtue may be found and valued in most—if not all—cultures, the extent to which it is valued, considered appropriate to express, and the ways in which it is expressed may differ according to societies' cultural values (Prinz, 2009; Tiberius, 2004; Tudge, Freitas, & O'Brien, 2015). Overall, gratitude has been examined with limited attention paid to the influence of context (cultural or not), although some studies have shown how different cultures encourage behaviors that may have moral significance, such as helping behaviors (Levine, Norenzayan, & Philbrick, 2001) and politeness (Farashaiyan & Hua, 2012; Naito, Wangwan, & Tani, 2005).

One of the most common frameworks to study cultural differences involves the use of a unidimensional scale bounded by individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 1980/2001; Triandis, 1989, 1993, 2001). However, several scholars have suggested moving beyond this simplistic view (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007; Keller, 2007; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Strauss, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). For instance, these authors have shown that both within the United States and other societies there can be found a good deal of support for both individualistic and collectivistic values, suggesting that more attention be paid to within-culture variation (particularly related to socioeconomic but also ethnic, regional, political, or religious factors).

Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007) orthogonal view of cultural differences may be more helpful to understand in which ways cultural values influence the expression of gratitude as a moral virtue across cultural groups. Kağıtçıbaşı suggested that individualism comprises both an agentic component (autonomy) and a lack of strong ties to others outside the immediate family (separateness). She also argued that the concept of collectivism confounds strong ties with the group (relatedness) and being subject to elders' rules (heteronomy).

Based on that, Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) proposed two different dimensions of cultural variation: agency (autonomy–heteronomy) and interpersonal distance (related–separate). According to her, parents in countries like the United States and those in Western Europe would mostly value autonomy-separateness. Traditional cultural groups in the “Majority World” (developing societies, where the majority of the world's children live) would mostly value heteronomy-relatedness, and urbanized and educated groups in Majority World societies would mostly value autonomy-relatedness. From this theoretical perspective, then, values such as autonomy and relatedness are not opposites and can coexist.

Although Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) proposed these as prototypical values for societies, her perspective allows for more cultural variation, given that it considers two cultural dimensions that, in varying degrees, shape the self in particular ways. This can be seen, for example, in socioeconomic-related variations in values in Brazil (e.g., Seidl-de-Moura, Carvalho, & Vieira, 2013; Seidl-de-Moura et al., 2008; Seidl-de-Moura, Mendes, et al., 2013; Tudge, Martins, et al., 2018; Vieira et al., 2010) and ethnic groups in the United States (e.g., Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; Suizzo, 2007). In general, Kağıtçıbaşı suggested that her approach can be used to illustrate the fact that

there are different types of selves in relation to agency and interpersonal distance, which will then affect different aspects of psychological functioning, including morality.

Thus, the cultural values (or combination of values) proposed by Kağıtçıbaşı (2007) may serve as a cultural framework to understand gratitude as a virtue. It is possible that contexts that encourage children to think and act in a more self-directed way (autonomously), as well as stimulate them to think and act considering the social group (relatedness), will then foster children and adolescents who express gratitude considering others' points of view and wish to reciprocate autonomously, whenever possible (and not because they were told to).

There is some indirect support for the position that children in countries considered to vary in the agency and interpersonal-distance cultural dimensions express different types of gratitude. For instance, Wang and colleagues (2015) found that children aged 7 to 14 in the United States were 4.2 times less likely to express connective gratitude than were same-aged Chinese children. Different ways in which the expression of gratitude changes across age-groups were also found in these societies—whereas older North American children (aged 11 to 14) were more likely to express verbal gratitude and less likely to express concrete gratitude than were their younger counterparts (aged 7 to 10), in the Chinese sample verbal gratitude decreased with age and concrete gratitude stayed relatively stable (but at lower rates than in the United States).

In the following articles in this special issue, we will address the extent to which children in societies that are assumed to differ on Kağıtçıbaşı's (2007) cultural dimensions do, indeed, express gratitude differently or similarly from each other. Thus, using Kağıtçıbaşı's theory as a basis for the hypotheses, we expect that societies more likely to value autonomy-relatedness will have a greater proportion of children expressing connective gratitude (considering the benefactor's perspective). In contrast, children in societies deemed more likely to value autonomy-separateness will have a greater proportion of children expressing concrete gratitude. It is also important to note that even societies considered to be more likely to value autonomy-relatedness may differ in their expression of gratitude, as these are not fixed and homogeneous categories, but may vary in degrees. It is important, therefore, to move beyond lumping groups into two broad groups represented by contrasting poles. We, therefore, consider it crucial to include diverse societies from varied parts of the world to explore cultural variations in children's expression of gratitude.

This special issue includes a total of 10 papers, with the following paper (Tudge, Freitas, O'Brien, & Mokrova, 2018) addressing the methods of collecting the data and the basic analytic strategies employed. Using the methodology described in this second article, the seven subsequent articles will address children's expression of gratitude in Brazil, Guatemala, the United States, China, South Korea, Russia, and Turkey. The authors of each article will acknowledge the particularities of each context and provide culturally appropriate information about each society. The final article in this issue will summarize the results discussed in previous articles, addressing cross-cultural similarities and differences, and discussing the meaning of the findings to the study of the development of gratitude.

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