

# 1 Developing Gratitude

## An Introduction\*

---

*Jonathan R. H. Tudge and Lia B. L. Freitas*

Cicero (54 BC/2009) held that gratitude “is not only the greatest, but is also the parent of all the other virtues” (p. 80). For centuries philosophers (Hume, 1739–40/2007; Mather, 1732; Smith, 1759/2000) and writers (e.g., Dickens [1860–1861/1996], *Great Expectations*, and Shakespeare [1605/2005], *King Lear*) have seemed to agree with Cicero, at least considering gratitude as a virtue and treating ingratitude as a moral failing. Moreover, human beings are not alone in responding positively to those who have provided them with help (de Waal, 2006, 2010). Nonetheless, gratitude is clearly not something that is innate (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), and therefore, its development is worthy of study.

The prevailing view is that psychologists have only recently shown any interest in the topic (Elosúa, 2015; Emmons, 2004; McConnell, 2016) and have done so only thanks to the growing field of positive psychology. This is not in fact the case; interest in gratitude as a developing phenomenon is far from recent, with early work on the topic being conducted by Baumgarten-Tramer (1938). Moreover, Piaget ([1954] 1981, [1965] 1995) suggested that gratitude appears during childhood and is an important aspect of moral development. Study of the “positive” aspects of human development has long been the provenance of developmental and moral psychology (see, for example, La Taille, Chapter 2, this volume). Nonetheless, it is true to say that even though gratitude has been studied much more by psychologists this century than at any earlier time, its development has not been a major focus of attention. Instead, perhaps under the influence of positive psychology, gratitude has been treated overwhelmingly as a positive emotion resulting from a wide array

\* This chapter, as well as those by Mendonça and Palhares, Kiang et al., Payir et al., and O’Brien et al. (Chapters 5, 6, 8, and 9), could not have been written without the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation (grant #43510, PI Jonathan Tudge, Co-PIs Lia Freitas and Lisa Kiang). We are truly grateful both to the Foundation and to the parents and children who participated in the research conducted as part of the Development of Gratitude Research Project.

2 *Jonathan R. H. Tudge and Lia B. L. Freitas*

of occurrences, ranging from being given a nice gift, to seeing some beautiful art, to appreciating all that one has. Feeling this positive emotion is certainly to be welcomed; however, it is difficult to see why such an emotion should be termed the parent of all virtues. Equally, it is by no means easy to think that failing to feel a positive emotion can qualify as ingratitude or that a person who does not feel it in the face of a gift or art or good health could reasonably be accused of having a moral failing.

We therefore think that a volume on the development of gratitude is timely, and we have asked scholars from a variety of perspectives, disciplines, and parts of the world to contribute. The title of the book was deliberately chosen to be a little ambiguous; the word *developing* can be used in this context both as an adjective and as a gerund. Using it as an adjective, we are interested in how gratitude is understood and expressed during childhood and adolescence, as well as some possible effects of those understandings. Thus, Morgan and Gulliford (Chapter 4) show that adolescents are better able than children to judge benefactors' motives. Mendonça and Palhares (Chapter 5) and Payir et al. (Chapter 6) suggest that older youth are more likely than their younger peers to express the type of gratitude that seems most likely to build or strengthen connections between people and to feel that there is a moral obligation to try to repay, if at all possible, their benefactors with something that may benefit the latter. In this sense of *developing* we are also interested in some of the possible sequelae of gratitude; for example, in terms of increased well-being or a diminished value placed on materialism (see Bausert and colleagues, Chapter 7, and Kiang et al., Chapter 8).

Using the word as a gerund, however, we are interested in what it is that the social world (parents, teachers, etc.) does to try to develop feelings and expressions of gratitude in children and adolescents. Parents want their children to learn to be grateful for the good things they get and to the people who provide them, sometimes trying to model grateful behavior, sometimes talking with their children about how and why to show gratitude, sometimes putting their children into settings in which they are more able to express their gratitude (see, for example, O'Brien et al., Chapter 9, Hussong and her colleagues, Chapter 10, and Ramsey, Gentzler, and Vizio, Chapter 11). Teachers, too, can play a large part in this endeavor to develop gratitude in youth, both in the course of their everyday interactions (Howells, Chapter 12) and by encouraging their students to read the type of literature that exemplifies some of the complexity involved in being grateful (Carr and Harrison, Chapter 13).

### What Is Gratitude?

Having parsed the meaning of the word *developing*, it is worth considering what we mean by its partner in our title, *gratitude*. At first blush, that might seem an easier task; gratitude has attracted considerable interest since the turn of the 21st century. There are plenty of websites extolling the virtues of keeping a gratitude journal, of encouraging children to enumerate the things for which they feel grateful, of “counting one’s blessings,” and so on. The academic community, similarly, has taken increasing interest in the topic, with many studies suggesting that gratitude tends to correlate positively with various measures of well-being and that short-term interventions can increase levels of gratitude (for discussions of this research, see, for example, Froh & Bono, 2014; Watkins, 2014).

In both popular and academic parlance, however, the word “gratitude” seems to be used in a variety of ways. A young child is asked to say “thank you” for a gift that she has just received, and she duly obliges. A teen really appreciates the fact that his running shoes are more expensive and flashier looking than those of any of his friends, and says that he is grateful that he does not have to wear cheap-looking shoes. Two young adults see the full moon reflected in a lake and, overcome by the beauty of the night, say that they are truly grateful for the privilege of seeing such a sight. A student is given, by a relative she rarely sees, funds to allow her to attend the college of her dreams, and she promises to study as hard as she possibly can as a way of repaying her benefactor. A man, seeing a friend (someone who had recently greatly helped him) with a flat tire, immediately stops driving to help him change the tire. An elderly woman, living alone, is really thankful that she is still in good health. Are these different feelings, emotions, responses, and behaviors all examples of gratitude? At least some authors would say that they are: “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). If one looks at the ways in which parents and children, at least those who are rather well educated and living in the United States, use the word, it certainly encompasses a very wide range of things (see Hussong et al., Chapter 10, and Ramsey et al., Chapter 11).

Our view is that gratitude needs to be carefully defined to avoid its being used to mean a variety of concepts that, although similar in some ways, are different enough to create conceptual confusion. In this, we agree with Roberts (2004), who wrote that “if we are going to have a science of something, we had better have a pretty clear idea what that

thing is and be careful not to confuse it with other things that are a little bit like it” (p. 65). Gulliford, Morgan, and Kristjánsson (2013) also commented on the lack of conceptual clarity among scholars, particularly in psychology, who write about gratitude. Similarly Fagley (2016) noted that too often those who write about gratitude may be confusing it with a broader construct – that of appreciation.

The problem, in fact, may not be so much one of definition. Many scholars, from both philosophy and psychology, accept the same basic definition, one that consists of three parts (see, for example, Fagley, 2016; Gulliford et al., 2013; Kristjánsson, 2013; Roberts, 2004; Tudge, Freitas, & O’Brien, 2015). First, there should be a benefactor, one who freely and intentionally provides, or attempts to provide, some benefit to a beneficiary. Second, the beneficiary has to recognize and feel good about the benefactor’s good intentions (but also notice when those intentions are not so good; when designed, for example, to humiliate rather than to help) and realize whether the benefit was provided freely rather than under duress (see also Morgan and Gulliford, Chapter 4). Third (although some definitions do not include this), the beneficiary has to freely wish to repay the benefactor, if possible and when appropriate, with something deemed to be of value to the benefactor.

As other scholars (e.g., Carr and Harrison, Chapter 13; Manela, 2015) have noted, this is a “prepositional” approach to gratitude – gratitude *to* a benefactor. But even if there is general agreement on the definition, there are issues with the ways in which the concept has been operationalized in psychological research. Many of the items in the scales most widely used to assess “gratitude” have no relevance to this definition, given that they do not feature an intentional benefactor, let alone the desire to repay a good deed or gift. Instead, they seem far better suited to what has been termed (Carr and Harrison, Chapter 13; Manela, 2015) the “propositional” sense of gratitude (i.e., gratitude *for* the good things that happen to us). It is very difficult to disentangle this propositional sense of gratitude from other concepts, and in particular from various aspects of appreciation (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Fagley, 2016; Gulliford et al., 2013; Tudge, Freitas, & O’Brien, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

This conceptual confusion is reflected, for example, in the two main scales that have been used to assess gratitude, but which seem to have more to do with appreciation rather than gratitude as we have defined it. The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6), developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002), appears to be the most widely used of these

<sup>1</sup> The title of the 2014 book by Philip Watkins (*Gratitude and the Good Life: Toward a Psychology of Appreciation*) encapsulates the position that the two are essentially the same.

scales and includes items such as “I have so much in life to be thankful for” and “If I had to list everything I felt thankful for, it would be a very long list.” One of the items refers specifically to other people: “I am thankful to a wide variety of people.” However, neither this item nor any of the others involves any feeling of needing to repay in some way the people who were helpful. Similarly, neither of the other two widely used scales – the Gratitude, Resentment, Appreciation Test, short form (GRAT: Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003) and the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC: McCullough et al., 2002) – include items involving the idea of wishing to repay benefactors; indeed, only four of the items in these last two scales (forming the Appreciation for Others subscale of the GRAT) relate to human benefactors.

Of course, one does not have to receive a benefit from a human benefactor to experience a positive emotion. You can heartily enjoy a good meal (without necessarily thinking about the person who prepared it), feel a sense of awe at moonlight reflecting from a snowy mountain peak (without any acknowledgment of the people who designed and constructed the transportation system that you used to get there), or enjoy the “high” after having been able to run five miles (without once thinking about any health professionals who have helped ensure that you are healthy enough to do that). But it is not clear to us why such an emotional response should be termed “gratitude.” Fagley (2016; Adler & Fagley, 2005) argues persuasively that appreciation is a far broader construct than that of gratitude, and we agree. If you are not appreciative of the meal, of the view, or of your good health, others might say that you are unappreciative, but they are unlikely to call you “ungrateful.”

What are the implications for taking seriously this three-part definition of gratitude? One is that it is something unlikely to be fully developed in adolescents, let alone children, if, as McConnell (Chapter 3) wrote, gratitude should only be expected from “full-fledged moral agents.” Gratitude, moreover, requires a level of sophisticated thinking that is unlikely to be found in children. To be grateful one has to recognize not only that others have different ways of seeing the world (and so, at a minimum, need to have a theory of mind) but also that people may behave in a similar way for a variety of reasons, and to be able to understand their intentions (see, for example, Morgan and Gulliford, Chapter 4). In terms of gratitude, it matters whether the benefit was provided freely (if the person were forced to provide it, gratitude is hardly due and might, in some circumstances, be more appropriate to the person providing the force). Similarly, what might appear to be a benefit that is being offered may in fact be viewed by the apparent benefactor as a means to

humiliate or threaten the supposed beneficiary, in which case the latter has no reason to feel, or express, gratitude.

Further, the definition requires that one not only feels good about the benefactor's actions but also that one wishes to repay the benefactor, if at all possible, with something of interest to him or her. This requires not only an understanding of others' perspectives but also a desire, even a sense of moral obligation, to do something for the person who provided the benefit (see Mendonça & Palhares, Chapter 5). After all, if one has received significant benefit from a person and one has the opportunity to help that person later and ignores that opportunity for no important reason, one might well be thought of as ungrateful, no matter how happy one felt on receiving that benefit. In other words, the positive emotion felt on receiving some benefit may be a necessary, but clearly not a sufficient, indicator of gratitude.

If an individual generally responds in a way consistent with this definition, it would seem reasonable to call him or her a grateful person, someone who exhibits the virtue of gratitude – that is, someone who typically feels, thinks, and behaves gratefully. But how does this virtue arise? This question, of course, takes us back to the developmental issues raised earlier, the issues that are the focus of this book. What we need to do is trace the “humbler beginnings” (Tudge, Freitas, & O'Brien, 2015, p. 286) of gratitude back to early childhood.

### **Implications for How to Study Gratitude in Children**

Presumably, the most appropriate approach would be one in which children of different ages were provided something that was of real value to them (whether help or something more tangible), see how they immediately responded after receiving the benefit, and subsequently set up a situation in which the benefactors needed some help or other benefit that was, in principle at least, possible for the beneficiaries (the children) to provide. It would then be possible to discover whether the beneficiaries responded to their benefactors both immediately after the benefit and later when the benefactor needed something (see Hussong, 2016, for an example of such a study). Even if children did in fact respond with what might appear to be genuine gratitude, it would be necessary for the researcher to assess the thinking behind this reciprocation; if it were done to avoid punishment, for example, or simply to follow an order, this action would not constitute gratitude as it is defined.

There are, however, less expensive and time-consuming methods that could be used, and we have used several such methods. For example, children are asked to respond to vignettes in which the protagonist gains

some significant benefit from a benefactor who subsequently needs help him- or herself (see Castro et al., 2011; Rava & Freitas, 2013; Mendonça and Palhares, Chapter 5). As is also true of Hussong's (2016) study, the children still need to be questioned about their reasons for saying that the protagonist should help the benefactor. The vignettes are set up in such a way that it is clear both that the protagonist needed some benefit that the benefactor freely provided and that the protagonist has the opportunity, should he or she so choose, to provide some benefit to the original benefactor.

A second approach we have used, one that does not rely on all study participants responding to the same story about a protagonist's needs and opportunity to repay, is one in which children are simply asked about what it is that they themselves wish for and what they would do, should they have the opportunity, for the person who granted them that wish (see, for example, Freitas, Pieta, & Tudge, 2011; Payir et al., Chapter 6). One advantage of these two questions is that the second assesses gratitude immediately after the first has children think about the fulfillment of their "greatest wish." However, to judge how closely this open-ended response met the requirements of the definition of gratitude would also need follow-up questions to understand the thinking behind any expressed desire to positively reciprocate following the granting of the wish.

A third approach we have used is simply to have children respond to items on a scale. Unlike the scale items of the GQ-6, GRAT, and GAC mentioned earlier, these items require study participants to respond to questions about how grateful they feel toward individuals who have benefited them in particular ways (see O'Brien et al., Chapter 9). For example, a question such as "Do people help you get the things you want?" is followed by "Do you feel thankful to the people who help you get those things?" Participants respond on a 5-point scale from "never" to "always" (Gratitude Assessment Questionnaire, Freitas & Tudge, 2010). This approach, unlike that used by other scales, specifically links the expression of gratitude for help given to the assessment of the extent to which this type of help is often provided.

One problem with each of these last three approaches, of course, is that they do not provide any information on behavioral responses – one can feel grateful, or even say that one would respond in a certain way, without ever actually behaving in a grateful way. However, each of these ways of collecting data about gratitude is an improvement on the more widely used scales, at least from the point of view that they link expressions of gratitude to particular individuals who have provided a benefit, as opposed to the more free-floating expressions of gratitude (or

appreciation) *for* seeing beautiful sunsets or *for* feeling thankful for one's life – emotional states that have nothing to do with a sense of moral obligation to repay for benefits freely provided by an intentional other.

There are other approaches to studying gratitude to others for perceived benefits that they provided. The best known, and closest to fitting within our conception of the term, is the gratitude intervention that involves individuals writing letters expressing gratitude to those who have helped them in some significant way (Froh et al., 2014; Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; see also Bausert et al., Chapter 7).

### **Gratitude, Developing**

It is difficult to argue that humans are born grateful (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), although human beings seem inherently social and cooperative. Even nonhuman primates have been seen to behave in ways suggestive of humbler forms of gratitude in certain circumstances (de Waal, 2006, 2010; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), and by the age of 2, children show themselves willing to help others when it is clear what can be done to help (Carlo, 2014; Killen & Smetana, 2015; Narvaez, 2015; Thompson, 2015). Prosocial tendencies, in fact, appear to grow stronger during the preschool years, at least when parents are more likely to be supportive and encouraging of their children's autonomy than when their child-rearing practices typically involve control and requiring obedience (Carlo, 2014). As La Taille (Chapter 2) notes, the trust that young children feel for their parents may play an important role in their developing a moral sense.

Even very young children can be taught to say “thank you” following receipt of a gift (Visser, 2009), although learning the norms of politeness should hardly be considered compelling evidence of the expression of gratitude (Freitas et al., 2011; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010). There is evidence, however, that at least by the age of 5, those children who have shown some development of a theory of mind are capable, in principle at least, of understanding some of the key components involved in being grateful – not only feeling happy for the benefit received but also tying that positive feeling to the benefactor and recognizing that the benefactor acted intentionally. Nelson et al. (2013) found that 4-year-olds' knowledge of mental states mediated the relation between understanding emotions at age 3 and understanding aspects of gratitude at age 5.

Freitas and her colleagues (Castro et al., 2011; Rava & Freitas, 2013), studying children aged from 5 to 12 years in southern Brazil, used vignettes telling a story about a benefactor who provided significant help

to a child (the beneficiary) and who subsequently needed help. Most of the children recognized that the beneficiary felt good about being helped and about the benefactor's actions, but did not value the benefactor him- or herself. Moreover, when children felt that the beneficiary should help the benefactor, they differed in their explanations why. Most of the 5- to 6-year-olds focused on the consequences to the benefactor; returning a favor to avoid a negative judgment was the most common explanation given by children aged 7 and older; returning a favor as an autonomous moral obligation appeared solely among some of the 11- to 12-year-olds (see Mendonça and Palhares, Chapter 5, for similar work conducted in the United States).

Further evidence of the fact that gratitude is developing during childhood and adolescence was provided by the author of the first empirical study conducted on the development of gratitude, Baumgarten-Tramer (1938). Her approach was to try to assess whether and how children might express their gratitude to a benefactor who had provided them something of significance. She therefore initially asked the thousand Swiss 7- to 15-year-old participants in her study to write their greatest wish and then to write what they would do for the person who granted that wish. She found that the large majority of children responded to the second question with three main types of responses, responses that she labeled verbal, concrete, and connective gratitude. She provided limited statistical evidence (only some percentages) to support her findings and stated that there was no great change with age in the expression of verbal gratitude – that is, saying “thank you” or “I would be very grateful” to the benefactor. She noted that many of her participants felt that they should provide some benefit to their benefactor, but found a clear decline with age in concrete gratitude (that is, providing some benefit likely to be of interest to the child but not necessarily to the benefactor) and a clear increase with age in connective gratitude (taking into account the benefactor's wishes or needs when considering how best to repay). Two recent replications of her study, one in Brazil (Freitas et al., 2011) and one in the United States (Tudge, Freitas, Mokrova, Wang, & O'Brien, 2015), provided similar results (more recent results from a wider variety of countries are reported by Payir et al., Chapter 6).

There is at least some evidence, therefore, for the development of both the prosocial precursors of gratitude and a type of gratitude itself. Connective gratitude, after all, involves at least some of the key components of gratitude as we have defined it. Like concrete gratitude, it encompasses the idea that some significant help or gift should be repaid, but only connective gratitude includes the view that the repayment should be something of help or interest to the benefactor. Of course, it is not

10 *Jonathan R. H. Tudge and Lia B. L. Freitas*

enough to simply say that one would respond in one or other way to show that one is a grateful individual – actions speak louder than words! But at least expressing connective gratitude is a necessary, albeit far from sufficient, marker of gratitude as we have defined it.

### **Developing Gratitude**

The question then arises as to what it is that others do to encourage the development of gratitude. As noted earlier, children's prosocial behavior may be rooted in our species, but its development can be encouraged or discouraged by how children are parented and thus, by extension, in the course of their relationships with the social world in general – with siblings, friends, teachers, books and the media, and, in sum, the culture of which they are a part.

Elsewhere (Tudge, Freitas, & O'Brien, 2015), we have argued that given our definition of gratitude it is worth considering it a virtue. Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists such as Annas (2011) view a virtue as a persisting and reliable disposition to feel, think, and act in a virtuous way. If individuals, after having received significant help or other benefit, typically feel grateful, think about how they might repay a freely chosen debt of gratitude, and act in such a way as to benefit their former benefactors, they surely are extolling the virtue of gratitude. Simply feeling a positive emotion is clearly not enough – only feeling happy (or even feeling virtuous) without behaving accordingly if the opportunity presents itself would not qualify someone as having the virtue of gratitude.

For Annas (2011) and other neo-Aristotelians, the path to becoming virtuous is not an easy one; it involves time, experience, and encouragement from those who already know something about virtuous behavior. In other words, children are not born virtuous, but may become virtuous by learning what it means to behave virtuously and then acting accordingly. From a developmental perspective, children start learning to be grateful via the everyday activities and interactions in which they participate with family, friends, and other important social partners. Depending on the culture in which they are raised, children may be encouraged from an early age to say “thank you” for a present or help. What undoubtedly starts as learning the relevant social norms of politeness may develop, with help and encouragement, into the idea that it is nice to help those who have helped us or to give a birthday gift to those who have given us a gift. In some families, children may be prompted to thank benefactors for the nice gift; in other families, children might be encouraged to think about the kindness of the person providing the gift (for