

## **The Meaning and Valence of Gratitude in Positive Psychology**

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*Gratitude: “The Quintessential Positive Psychology Trait”?*

Gratitude has undoubtedly been one of the “success stories” of positive psychology. It has been found to deliver successful outcomes in positive psychological interventions consistently and has been associated with a host of benefits, both individually and interpersonally. For instance, it has been found to play a role in increasing and maintaining subjective well-being, *increased* positive and *decreased* negative affect (Emmons & McCullough, 2003); satisfaction with life (Fagley, 2012; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009) and improved mental health (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011). From a more collective point of view, gratitude promotes pro-social behaviour and strengthens social bonds (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Bartlett & De Steno, 2006; Grant & Gino, 2010). It has demonstrated robust effects in positive psychological interventions in both clinical (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010a, 2010b) and educational contexts (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, & Linkins, 2009). In the light of these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that gratitude has been labelled “the quintessential positive psychology trait” (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009, p. 43). It abounds in benefits and makes a significant contribution to well-being and positive mood.

Without wishing to detract from the success of gratitude within positive psychology, there are good reasons to question whether gratitude is as straightforwardly positive as many have supposed. For one thing, it should not be taken for granted that researchers in this field share a unitary view of what gratitude is. Indeed, gratitude might better be construed as an umbrella concept that subsumes a number of “sub-concepts” which share family resemblances with each other (Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013).

We challenge gratitude’s virtually uncontested status as unqualifiedly “positive” in both conceptual discussion (Gulliford et al., 2013) and on the basis of empirical research (Morgan, Gulliford, & Kristjánsson, 2014). In the following sections, we describe different kinds of gratitude that might differ in terms of their valence, and we raise the possibility that people diverge in terms of conditions they place on when they believe gratitude to be appropriate. We shed light on whether lay people deem gratitude to be positive by sharing highlights from two empirical studies conducted by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues’ *Attitude for Gratitude* project.

Before discussing this research, we should consider what it means to describe gratitude—or hope, joy or awe—as “positive” traits, “positive” emotions or “positive” strengths of character. A common way in which “positive” is applied in positive psychology—and in emotion research generally (see Solomon & Stone, 2002)—rests on phenomenology: gratitude often *feels* good. Psychology has tended towards a hedonic view of well-being wherein “positive emotions” equate somewhat simplistically to “pleasant emotions”. On this basis, an emotion or trait can be described as “positive” simply because it *feels good* to experience it. There are some serious problems with this account, however. For instance compassion, understood as a fleeting emotion or a stable trait of character, *feels* painful but few would doubt its positive moral influence and motivating power. Conversely, people can feel pleasure at another person’s misfortune, which is hardly morally admirable.

Simply put, how we *feel* may be a misleading heuristic when it comes to appraising whether something is good (“positive”).

To circumscribe emotions or enduring character traits like gratitude and hope as “positive” fails to take account of the *contexts* in which they are experienced. There are occasions when hope might be deemed positive or “adaptive” and times when it is dismissed as pathological and illusory wishful thinking. The idea that emotions or enduring character traits can be carved up into discrete and enduring categories labelled “positive” and “negative” is misguided because a great deal depends on the circumstances. Psychologists often label anger a “negative” emotion, yet clearly there is a place for righteous indignation in challenging injustice. At all events, it is far from clear that *all* people find the experience of anger unpleasant. Indeed, Aristotle proposed anger was in part unpleasant but also partly pleasant (Aristotle, 2007, pp. 113–116 [1378a30-b4]).

Thus it would seem that the valence of an emotion or trait cannot be calibrated as either singularly positive or negative. Gratitude is more likely to be perceived as positive in circumstances where a valuable gift has been given thoughtfully and generously, for example, but it might take on a more negative resonance if we feel embarrassed by the gift and obligated to return the favour. Some psychologists have attempted to uphold the *exclusively positive* valence of gratitude by deeming gratitude and indebtedness distinct positive and negative emotional states respectively (Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006). However, as we indicate elsewhere (Morgan et al., 2014), correlations between gratitude and indebtedness (Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968; Watkins et al., 2006) tell against a clear distinction between the concepts. Whilst Watkins et al. (2006) “demonstrated that gratitude *can* be dissociated from indebtedness, they do not discuss the issue of whether gratitude typically *is* dissociated from indebtedness (by the layperson)” (Morgan et al., 2014, p. 11), an issue to which we will return.

Positive psychologists have gone so far as to locate so-called “positive emotions” in an overarching theory, the “broaden-and-build” theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). The essence of this theory, which itself draws on Isen’s research on the effect of positive and negative affect on cognition (Isen, 1990; Isen & Daubman, 1984; Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987; Isen & Means, 1983), is that “positive” (pleasant) emotions such as joy, interest, pride, inspiration and awe, *broaden* thought-action repertoires (attention, working memory, openness to information) which in turn *builds* enduring personal resources, such as increased resilience and enhanced learning strategies. Gratitude, having been deemed a *positive emotion*, has been subsumed into this theory (Fredrickson, 2004).

While this may please some psychologists researching gratitude, it reduces the contribution emotions make to human life to a simple polarity of positive or negative. This obscures the unique contributions *particular* emotions make in the complex circumstances of human interactions. It makes gratitude “good” (positive) on the basis of an instrumentalist agenda. Gratitude (like awe, joy, love, hope and pride) is then seen as good *because* it broadens thought-action repertoires to build enduring positive resources, rather than because they are *intrinsically* related to a life well-lived. The “broaden-and-build” theory, established on the basis of classifying emotions by valence, therefore further compounds the problems of labelling emotions as positive or negative.

This diversion demonstrates that the label “*positive*” can mean different things. For the most part, “positive” is taken to mean pleasant, though it can also mean healthy or adaptive, conducive to happiness or flourishing, or favourable to well-being (however that is construed). For a thorough review see Solomon (2001, pp. 162–177). The main problem with this binary classification is that it fails to take account of the circumstances in which an emotion, or enduring trait, is expressed. Simply put: is gratitude *always* good? We shed light

on this question from a number of empirical angles. Before doing so, however, it is important to review the concept of gratitude itself.

### *The Meaning of Gratitude: Key Conceptual Contours*

Spurred by a rising tide of interest in virtue ethics in general, a number of key philosophical papers about gratitude have emerged over the last forty years. Berger (1975), Simmons (1979), McConnell (1993), Roberts (2004, 2012), Nisters (2012) and Carr (2013) offered conceptual analyses of gratitude. Others have examined *specific* conceptual issues raised in the literature, such as whether gratitude must involve a *benefactor* (McAleer, 2012), whether it involves an *intentionally rendered benefit* (Fitzgerald, 1998) and whether it is *necessarily supererogatory* (Card, 1988; Roberts, 2004; Wellman, 1999). A further debate, central to this paper, is whether gratitude is *unambiguously positive* in nature (Gulliford, 2016; Morgan et al., 2014; Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015).

Our review of philosophical and psychological literature on gratitude revealed that these conceptual controversies were far from being resolved, and that much psychological research on gratitude proceeded *without* taking these important conceptual issues on board (Gulliford et al., 2013). There have been very few attempts to assess how conceptual differences in understanding gratitude might impact on reported gratitude, and whether these factors serve to modify its reported valence.

In the vignette study which follows we present findings from a questionnaire in which we operationalised gratitude as an interpersonal construct involving a benefit, a beneficiary and a benefactor. Elsewhere we have characterised this as a ‘triadic’ conception of gratitude (Gulliford et al., 2013). In contrast, gratitude may also be construed in ‘dyadic’ terms (involving only a beneficiary and a benefit but with no specific benefactor implicated). Examples of this kind of gratitude include an appreciation of nature, or being grateful for

things one has in one's life *without* reference to these benefits being provided by an agent. For the purposes of this chapter, we limit our discussion to findings related to the former 'triadic' conception of gratitude, though we note the existence of both types of gratitude in our conceptual paper (Gulliford et al., 2013).

To probe laypeople's conceptual understanding of gratitude, we created a vignette questionnaire in which some of the conceptual controversies noted above were systematically manipulated. This enabled us to see whether the factors identified by philosophers and psychologists impacted on the gratitude participants reported. Psychologists Tesser et al. (1968) and Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph (2008) examined the role of cost, value and (perceived) benefactor intention, though they have not attempted to examine as many of the conceptual contours as we identified in our review.

Each scenario began with a baseline question which was subsequently manipulated to examine different conceptual controversies. For instance, in one vignette the baseline condition was as follows:

“A colleague nominates you for an award at work. If you win, you will receive recognition of your hard work and a voucher.” (Baseline Condition)

Participants then responded to three questions: whether they *would be* grateful if that scenario were to arise (measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree); *how* grateful they would be (with degree registered on a scale of 0 “Not at all grateful” to 100 “Most grateful you could feel”) and whether they *should be* grateful (also measured on a 5-point Likert scale). The same three questions (counterbalancing the order of *are grateful* and *should be grateful*) were asked in each manipulation from the baseline. Examples of manipulations are shown below:

“A colleague nominates you for an award at work. If you win, you will receive recognition of your hard work and a voucher. The colleague has nominated you because she wants you to repay the favour by helping her with her own workload.”

(Ulterior Motive Condition)

“A colleague nominates you for an award at work. If you win, you will receive recognition of your hard work and a voucher. The colleague had to spend a long time filling in the nomination form outside of work.” (Cost (to the Benefactor) Condition)

“A colleague nominates you for an award at work. If you win, you will receive recognition of your hard work and a voucher. You feel thankful that your colleague nominated you but you also feel uncomfortable now that you are indebted to her.”

(Mixed Emotion Condition)

We created a gratitude scenario surrounding the idea of being nominated for an award in order to examine conceptual controversies we had identified in our literature review: cost/risk to benefactor; ulterior and malicious motives (to examine whether gratitude necessarily involves an intentionally rendered benefit); intended benefits that miscarried/were unrealised; value of the benefit; and mixed emotions. The latter condition addressed the present question of whether gratitude was evaluated in unambiguously positive terms. By systematically manipulating the scenarios, we were able to distinguish what factors impacted on participants' reported gratitude.

A sample of 260 adults completed the questionnaire. 76.2% were female; ages ranged from 18–65 years (mean age 27.7 years); and 81.9% identified as White British. The same scenario was also completed by a sample of adolescents from a secondary school in Cheshire, UK. In this sample, 57.6% were female, with ages ranging from 11–17 years (mean age = 13.5 years). 94.2% were White British.

In line with theoretical arguments, our data from the combined adult and adolescent samples (N = 418) demonstrated how increased cost on behalf of the benefactor led to an increase in the amount of gratitude experienced; in comparison to the baseline condition the degree of gratitude significantly increased when benefactors were described as expending greater effort in bestowing the benefit (Mean Baseline degree = 68, Mean Cost degree = 77,  $p < .001$ ). Interestingly, however, we found that gratitude does not depend conceptually on an *intentionally rendered* benefit; malicious and ulterior motives significantly reduced reported gratitude but did not disqualify it; 31.7% of respondents would feel grateful regardless of whether a benefactor had an ulterior motive of nominating them for an award with the motive of being helped with their workload, and 13.3% would nonetheless be grateful for nomination that was calculated to embarrass them. This clearly refutes the position that gratitude is *necessarily* seen to involve benevolent intentions. It should of course be borne in mind that benefactor intention may not always be transparent in lived experience. However, our findings show that people do not automatically rule out gratitude even when ulterior or malicious motives have been clearly portrayed.

With regard specifically to the *valence* of gratitude, participants endorsed the view that mixed emotions (i.e. feeling grateful but also feeling indebted) impacts on experience of gratitude. The presence of such emotions yielded significant reported decrements in gratitude from baseline on all three measures (ARE, SHOULD and DEGREE) in the combined sample (see Table 1). The table also illustrates mean differences across the measures in the adult and adolescent samples.



	Mean ARE Scores (1–5)		Mean SHOULD Scores (1–5)		Mean DEGREE Scores (0–100)		“Not entirely pleasant” Mean Agreement Scores (1–5)
	Baseline Condition	Mixed Feelings	Baseline Condition	Mixed Feelings	Baseline Condition	Mixed Feelings	Mixed Feelings
Adolescent response	4.01	3.54	4.24	3.74	64.04	56.27	2.88
Adult response	4.22	3.85	4.43	4.21	70.06	64.28	3.13
Average response (all data)	4.14	3.73	4.35	4.03	67.76	61.40	3.02

*Table 1. The mean ARE, SHOULD and DEGREE responses across the Baseline and “Mixed Feelings” conditions for both adults and adolescents. Note that the final column shows the mean responses to an additional question posed; “Gratitude is **not** an entirely pleasant emotion”. Participants registered their agreement with this statement from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.*

As can be seen in Table 1, we asked participants an additional question regarding the positive valence of gratitude. Participants registered their agreement to the following statement:

“Gratitude is **not** an entirely pleasant emotion”. The average response across all participants (on a Likert scale from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) was 3.02, sitting on the neutral, midpoint mark. To further elucidate this issue, we asked participants to explain their answer to this question by means of the following prompt: ‘Please explain your answer to the last question about gratitude not being entirely pleasant here’. This question offered rich qualitative data which was subsequently coded thematically by two independent researchers. The two raters coded 60% of the adult data and 100% of the adolescent data and agreed on twenty-five thematic codes (see Figure 1, for the ten most referenced themes). The dataset

was subsequently recoded based on these twenty-five codes. The level of agreement in the two researchers' coding was tested using Cohen's Kappa (a test of inter-rater reliability) and findings revealed a 75% overlap between the two sets of codes.

When exploring the codes that both researchers agreed on, ten themes were particularly prevalent. As can be seen in Figure 1 over 40% of adults and almost 30% of adolescents described feelings of indebtedness and obligation. Several of these respondents described how you can feel both grateful and indebted at the same time:

*“You are grateful for the nomination but now you're indebted you feel beholden to the colleague. Therefore gratitude is bittersweet”. (Adult respondent)*

*“Gratitude is pleasant at the time but does hold a sense of owing or debt”. (Adult)*

*“Gratitude is a pleasant emotion because there are numerous parts that feel good [...] however, when someone does something good for you, you feel a slight sense of owing them back—indebted, and like you have put them out of their way- like their action that you are grateful for has cost them something”. (Adult)*

*“I feel that feeling grateful also makes you feel like you owe them something back and you could feel embarrassed”. (Adolescent)*

*“It is a pleasant emotion as you know that the person is trying to help you; however, it also leaves you indebted to them”. (Adolescent)*

*“It is nice to have someone say thank you, but the person who feels gratitude is in debt to the other person”. (Adolescent)*

As mentioned earlier, Watkins et al. (2006) argued for the dissociation of gratitude and indebtedness on the basis that they are related to different action tendencies. They found that gratitude tends to be associated with broad prosocial thought/action tendencies, and appears to inhibit antisocial tendencies, whereas action tendencies associated with indebtedness and obligation are more narrow and mixed (p. 234). Our data here, however, suggest that laypeople often associate the two constructs; it is hard to argue that indebtedness does not co-occur alongside gratitude at least some of the time. Differentiating them at the conceptual level is certainly possible, but it seems illogical to ignore that gratitude can be linked to negative feelings, especially as our own findings suggest that the co-occurrence of gratitude and indebtedness leads to a decrease in the degree of gratitude experienced (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

Other negative emotions described in this data set include guilt and awkwardness, embarrassment or being uncomfortable:

*“Sometimes it can be felt with guilt, or pressure as there is an expectation to return the favour—thus souring the nice feeling of someone doing something for you”. (Adult respondent)*

*“Gratitude is a pleasant emotion but is often paired with uncomfortable feelings such as guilt”. (Adult)*

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<sup>1</sup> Participants had previously responded to the ‘mixed emotion’ item (See p. 6) which explicitly referenced ‘indebtedness’. While this could have influenced people’s responses, it should be noted that not *all* respondents referenced indebtedness in response to the open-ended question. Given the co-occurrence of gratitude and indebtedness generally, it is not surprising that participants returned to this issue in the qualitative question. It seems as though participants could easily relate to the mixed-emotion scenario.

*“It can be embarrassing to feel in someone's debt or to feel their praise.*

*Sometimes praise is uncomfortable—attention on you etc.” (Adult)*

*“Can be awkward to deal with for either/both parties”. (Adult)*

*“I agree because in many situations, you are made to feel uncomfortable about it as you feel that you have to repay them”.*

*(Adolescent)*

*“Because when you are grateful you also feel guilty because you always feel like you will owe them something in return”. (Adolescent)*

*“Because you feel like you owe something back and if it is for the wrong reason it can make you feel very uncomfortable or on edge”.*

*(Adolescent)*

As illustrated in Figure 1, the percentage of respondents referring to these themes is larger in the adult population than the adolescent (Awkward/Embarrassed/Uncomfortable: 18% adult, 11% adolescent; Guilt: 12% adult, 4% adolescent). Relatedly, adolescents were more likely than adults to base their reasoning around the intentions of the benefactor and specifically refer to the existence of non-benevolent motives. This may suggest a different perception of gratitude across the lifespan, or at least an emphasis or concentration on different elements of gratitude experience; further research would shed more light on this issue.

Whilst the percentage of respondents referring to the intentions of the benefactor and highlighting awareness of non-benevolent motives could be higher than is recorded here (i.e., 15% and 18% of adolescent respondents, respectively), it is important to recognise such themes appear in the dataset. We have argued extensively elsewhere (Morgan et al., 2015) that gratitude should not simply be promoted as feeling grateful for everything that is

bestowed upon you; rather, gratitude should be calibrated depending on the situation, and the beneficiary should keep in mind important factors such as benefactor intention, cost to the benefactor, and value of the benefit (see also Wood et al., 2008). In other words, we take a broadly Aristotelian view of gratitude (even though gratitude itself may not have been viewed as a virtue by Aristotle), namely that gratitude, for the flourishing life, should be expressed towards the right person, for the right reasons and at the right time (see Morgan & Gulliford, 2015).

Interestingly, a proportion of the respondents described how evaluating gratitude experience in line with considerations of intention, cost and value could lead to situations where gratitude is due, but had to be forced or compelled:

*“I think sometimes there's a false gratitude; when you feel like you should be grateful, so pretend to yourself that you are”. (Adult respondent)*

*“Sometimes you may feel an emotion that you don't want to feel, you may feel grateful for something or to someone even though you don't want to”. (Adult)*

*“I guess you could feel like you have to be grateful even though it's something that you didn't necessarily want”. (Adult)*

*“Sometimes you feel like you should be grateful in the situation that you are in, but sometimes don't feel like you can be”. (Adult)*

*“Because sometimes you might not want to be grateful in the situation but have to be”. (Adolescent)*

It could be argued that forced (or insincere) gratitude such as this is not really gratitude at all. Taking the broadly Aristotelian view that virtues are characterised by a certain “set” of attention, appropriate accompanying emotion, desire, behaviour and style of expression, a case of insincere gratitude might encompass only a behavioural element (a forced thank you) and certainly would not be constituted by all the elements described. It is interesting to note, however, that almost all the above quotations reference a lack of apposite emotion or desire.

It is also important to point out that some respondents demonstrated a clear conception of gratitude as an entirely positive emotion. Some of these respondents rebuffed the idea that indebtedness or obligation would be experienced, whilst others described gratitude as being separate from negative emotions. Watkins et al. (2006) would clearly be pleased with this subset of respondents who offer support to their claim that gratitude can be dissociated from indebtedness:

*“Gratitude is wholly pleasant, we should thank as much and often as possible. I don't agree that one would feel “indebted” to another for doing a good or nice thing, that is completely down to differences in character and personality”. (Adult respondent)*

*“Can't see why it isn't pleasant. There's a difference between gratitude and indebtedness”. (Adult)*

*“Because I think you only feel gratitude when you are thankful for something and if the emotion wasn't pleasant then you aren't being thankful”. (Adolescent respondent)*

*“I believe gratitude is a pleasant feeling. The feeling of gratitude comes when someone does something for you, so I believe it can only bring positive feelings”. (Adolescent)*

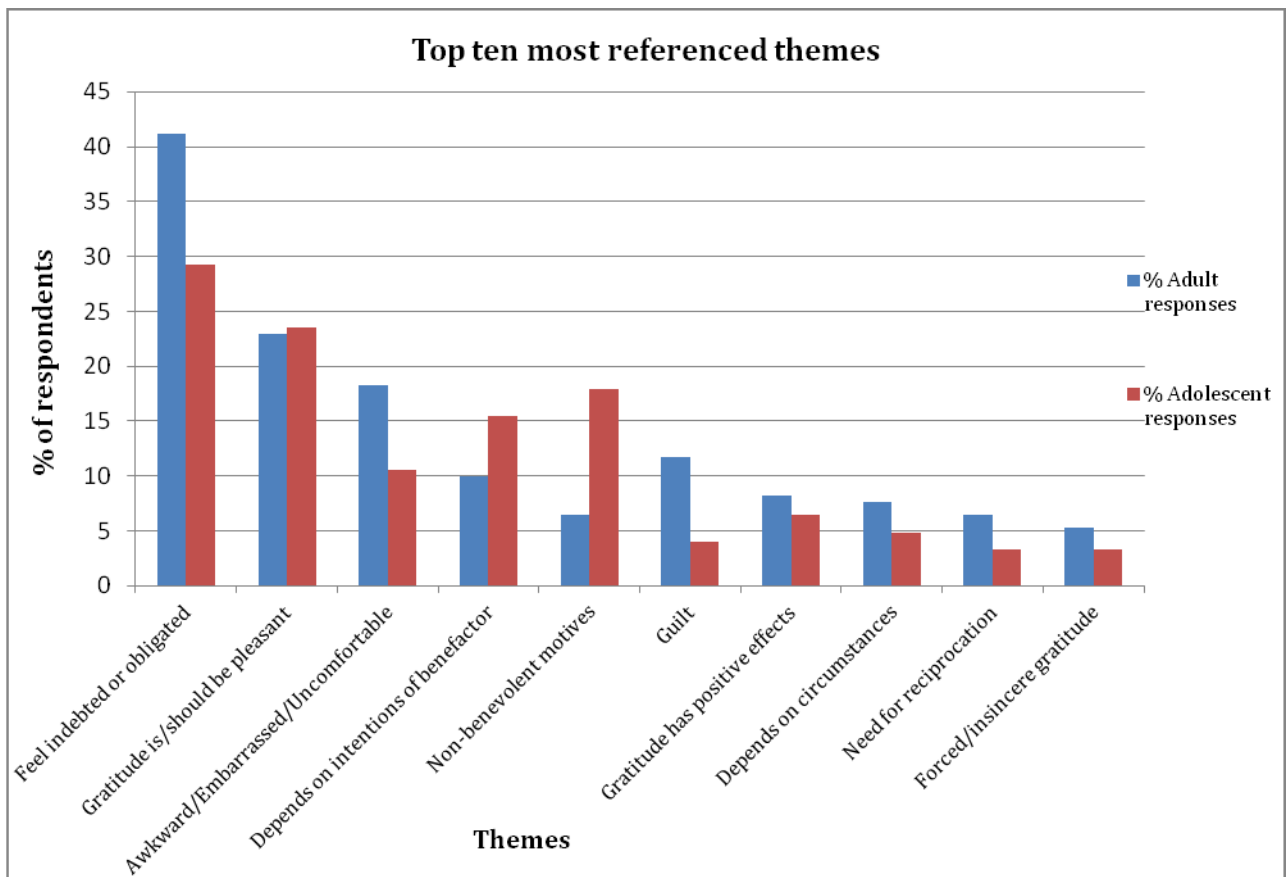


Figure 1. The ten most referenced themes that came out when examining the qualitative explanations of whether gratitude is, or is not, entirely pleasant.

What should be clear from the qualitative examples above is that there are multiple ways in which gratitude can be conceived. Our theoretical and empirical research has revealed that there are clear individual differences in people’s concepts of gratitude and that, to date, measures of gratitude have failed to differentiate between these conceptual understandings, presuming rather that participants share the same conception as the researchers themselves.

Our research suggests that some people take a more “permissive” view of gratitude, where gratitude can be experienced when ulterior or malicious motives are involved, while others hold a more “restrictive” view, reporting that they would not be grateful in such

circumstances. Importantly, the *kind* of concept people have (permissive or restrictive) has an effect on the *amount* of gratitude people report.

Using a novel measurement strategy, the Multi-Component Gratitude Measure (MCGM; Morgan, Gulliford, & Kristjánsson, 2016) gauges respondents' conceptual understandings of gratitude alongside measuring grateful emotions, attitudes towards gratitude, and grateful behaviours. By including a conceptual component to our measure, we were able to highlight how conceptualisations of a construct constitute essential information and that this information can feed into measurement of the construct; in this case we focused on gratitude but the same approach could be extended to other constructs.

Our findings from testing the MCGM demonstrate how appraisals of conceptions, emotions, attitudes and behaviours pertaining to gratitude are all necessary in order to comprehensively measure gratitude. Moreover, we illustrate that each component contributes towards well-being, as measured by three separate well-being scales: Satisfaction with Life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Subjective Happiness (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and Positive Affect (as gauged by the PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). That is, on all three well-being scales, individuals who have suitably permissive views on when gratitude is experienced (a “high conception score”) alongside high scores on the emotion, attitude and behaviour components of the MCGM experience the highest levels of well-being. The relationship between the number of components that individuals are “high” on and well-being proceeds in an almost perfect linear pattern whereby being “high” on three components is associated with significantly less well-being than four components; two components reduces well-being further; and one or no components is associated with the lowest levels of well-being.

Overall these findings illustrate how introducing a conceptual component can offer a clear profile of participants' experience and understanding of gratitude and that this, in turn,



should be borne in mind in assessments of gratitude. Importantly, there is a clear relationship between conceptual understandings of gratitude and individuals' grateful emotions, attitudes and behaviours; our results demonstrate how a more permissive understanding of gratitude (as indicated by higher conceptual ARE and DEGREE scores, see Table 1) give way to higher scores on the other three components of the MCGM as well as higher scores on existing gratitude measures: the GQ6 (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002); GRAT (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, T., & Kolts, 2003); and the Appreciation Scale (Adler & Fagley, 2005).

#### *Positive and Negative Features of Gratitude: A Prototype Analysis*

The characterisation of gratitude as unequivocally positive was also challenged by a prototype study of gratitude in the UK (Morgan et al., 2014). While prototype analysis does not offer a *thorough* conceptual analysis—it does not distinguish between features that are intrinsic to a concept and features that are often merely *associated* with that concept—it does enable researchers to categorise features that laypeople identify as central or peripheral to a given concept and can serve as an illuminating point of departure in assessing whether that concept is thought of in largely positive terms.

In the first stage of a prototype analysis participants generate features of the concept of interest, which they rate in terms of valence. This elucidates whether a given concept is perceived to be generally positive, negative, neutral or mixed. The method has been used to examine concepts such as emotion (Fehr & Russell, 1984), love (Fehr & Russell, 1991), forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), modesty (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kumashiro, 2008) and nostalgia (Hepper, Ritchie, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012).

In the first of three studies, 108 student participants from the University of Birmingham, UK, listed features and characteristics of gratitude (feelings, actions,

consequences and determinants) which they rated for valence on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive. This yielded 63 key features of gratitude with a mean valence of 4.29 (SD = 0.70).<sup>2</sup> While this figure suggests gratitude is generally perceived as positive (given that a score of 3 would be the theoretically neutral midpoint), a number of features of gratitude identified by the sample were assigned a negative valence, such as “guilt” (which yielded a mean valence of 1.71) and “embarrassment/awkwardness” (2.11). Interestingly, these features were *not* named in a previous prototype analysis of gratitude in the USA, which produced fewer negative features overall than in UK (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009). Furthermore, in the UK, the features of “obligation” and “indebtedness” which were collapsed into a single category yielded a valence score on the negative side (2.26), whereas these features were accorded a neutral valence (of 3) in the US study.

In a second study, 97 students from the University of Birmingham rated the centrality of the 63 features named by their colleagues in Study 1. The Likert rating scale ranged from 1 = not at all central, to 8 = extremely central. Features that emerged as more central in Study 2 tended to be rated more positively in valence in Study 1. However, the correlation between centrality and positive valence was not as strong in the UK as in the earlier US study, lending further weight to the suggestion that there may be cross-cultural differences in the perceived valence of gratitude.<sup>3</sup> It should be borne in mind that both the British and American studies

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<sup>2</sup> Altogether 896 features were generated (M = 7.7 features per participant). These were coded into 201 features by two independent coders. The degree of overlap between the coders was very good (Cohen’s Kappa = .87). Features that were named only once or twice (N = 138) were discarded, leaving 63 key features.

<sup>3</sup> In the UK study  $r = .59$ ,  $p < .001$ , where in the US study  $r = .84$ ,  $p < .001$ . More recently, we have replicated this prototype analysis in Australia where the prevalence of negative

used small student samples in order to make controlled comparisons. Further studies, extending the method to different populations would be necessary to see whether these findings can be generalised to non-student populations. It would also be interesting to see this kind of work repeated in progressively more distant cultures (e.g. non-English speaking, non-Western) to explore these differences further.

It is interesting to note that the negatively-valenced features of “obligation”, “indebtedness”, “guilt”, “embarrassment” and “awkwardness” that emerged in our UK prototype analysis also figured prominently in the themes from the qualitative question that probed participants’ responses to their Likert assessment of whether gratitude is an entirely pleasant emotion (see Figure 1, above). Indebtedness or obligation was the top category for both adults and adolescents, while feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, awkwardness and guilt also featured in both adult and adolescent descriptions.

As noted, prototype analyses do not distinguish between features that are intrinsic to a concept and features that are often merely *associated* with that concept. However, the overlap between the negatively-valenced features named in the prototype analysis and the themes that emerged in the open-ended question supports the view that these elements are regarded by many UK respondents as inherently characteristic of gratitude. This being so, positive psychological interventions that promote gratitude, particularly in educational settings, should not take gratitude to be an unalloyed positive concept and should explore complexities attending the question of when gratitude might *not* be deemed positive. With this in mind, we turn to existing positive interventions involving gratitude and raise the question of whether these might better be combined with the educational task of promoting “virtue literacy”: an

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features is closer to that found in the UK population than the US; the equivalent correlation between centrality and valence was .62 ( $p < .001$ ).

understanding of *what* gratitude is, *why* it might be a desirable quality to cultivate and *when* it is appropriate.

### *Gratitude in Positive Interventions: Gratitude and Virtue Literacy*

As previously noted, gratitude has been a positive psychological success story. Interventions incorporating gratitude have demonstrated reliable and desirable (read “positive”) effects. Seligman et al. (2005) reported that the “Gratitude Visit” is one of the most robust interventions used in positive education. In this exercise, individuals express appreciation by writing a thank-you letter to someone whom they have never properly thanked. They make arrangements to visit this person and surprise them by reading out and delivering the letter in person.

While the purpose of writing a thank-you letter is usually to make the *recipient feel appreciated*, Seligman et al. (2005) reported that reading out such a letter on a “gratitude visit” gives a boost of happiness to the person who is *saying* thank you, which endures for up to a month. They reported that people in a gratitude visit condition were significantly happier and less depressed after a month than were individuals in a control condition (people who wrote about their early memories in the week of the intervention). Although the effect of the intervention washed out over subsequent weeks (differences between the groups on both depression and happiness were no longer significant at three-month and six-month follow-up), the fact that one such letter had an effect on both positive and negative affect that lasts even that long is striking, and has boosted gratitude’s status as a “positive” character strength.

Another method puts into practice the age-old wisdom of “counting one’s blessings”. Emmons & McCullough (2003) were first to show that keeping a gratitude diary for just two weeks significantly improves subjective well-being. They also found that journal-keepers enjoyed better sleep, experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness and exercised more

than controls. Furthermore, participants with neuromuscular diseases reported less pain in the experimental (journal-keeping) group than in control groups.<sup>4</sup> These findings have been replicated in clinical samples (Geraghty et al., 2010a, 2010b). Keeping a gratitude journal for two weeks significantly reduced worrying in clinically diagnosed depressed people as much as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), while the second study showed that journal-keeping for a fortnight significantly reduced body dissatisfaction in people with a diagnosis of an eating disorder. Such studies provide further evidence of gratitude’s “positive” valence on the reading of “positive” as healthy, adaptive or conducive to well-being (see above).

A third type of intervention involves “gratitude reframing”. Essentially, the method aims at encouraging people to *think more gratefully* by moderating appraisals of benefit exchanges. Froh et al. (2014) reported that children aged 8–11 years can be taught to modify social-cognitive appraisals to strengthen “grateful thinking”, resulting in increased well-being, positive affect and gratitude. Behaviourally, they also found children in the experimental condition wrote 80% more thank-you cards to their parent-teacher association than controls.

While encouraging children to reflect on the personal *value* of a benefit, the benefactor’s *intentions* and the *cost* to render the benefit (factors we operationalised in the vignette questionnaire) may increase gratitude and “tune individuals into seeing the best in

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<sup>4</sup> There were three groups in Study 1: A gratitude condition, a group writing about daily hassles and a third group who wrote about life events (to obtain a neutral control condition). In Study 2 there were three groups: a gratitude group, a second group writing about daily hassles and a downward social comparison group. In Study 3 there was a gratitude group and a control group which completed self-report questionnaires without any other accompanying activity. Study 2 (in which the causal relationship with SWB was found) could be criticised for having an inadequate, non-neutral control group.

other people” (Froh & Bono, 2014, p. 194), we are concerned that this method, if applied uncritically, could bias people towards *only* seeing the good in others. Consequently, we suggest any interventions of this sort take place against the backdrop of educating children on the nature of gratitude and when it might—or might not—be appropriate (Carr, Morgan, & Gulliford, 2015; Morgan et al., 2015).

Again, without wishing to detract from the much-vaunted success of gratitude interventions in positive psychology and in positive educational settings, there needs to be space for such interventions to be “virtue-educational”; to teach participants to reflect on the nature of gratitude and consider when it is appropriate. There is a potential “shadow side” of gratitude. We need to alert young people to the possibility that not all occasions where gratitude might seem warranted at first blush stand up to greater scrutiny.

In line with our beliefs that gratitude should be explored in relation to contextual information and that researchers should not assume what laypeople perceive gratitude to be, we created a teaching resource that offered the opportunity for reflection on the construct. This primary school resource (for students aged 8–11 years) consisted of four gratitude stories; each story introduced various scenarios in which gratitude may, or may not, be experienced depending on the individuals’ conception of gratitude.

For example, the story we called “St Oscar’s Oscars” followed a similar storyline to the above-mentioned questionnaire where colleagues were nominated for an award at work; in this case, students nominated their peers for the St Oscar’s Oscars where the award winner would receive family vouchers for the cinema. During this story the reader encountered situations where students bestow a great deal of effort when nominating their peer (by spending a long time on the “special certificate of nomination”); ulterior motives where one student nominates another in order to copy their spelling test; and themes of indebtedness with the characters feeling obliged to repay students whose nomination they had received. At

various junctures in the stories the participants were asked to stop to reflect on what they had read and answer questions about how they thought the characters would feel in that situation. The questions included open-ended and closed form responses such as Yes/No choices or Likert scale items to gauge the degree of gratitude experienced.

When exploring the results from “St Oscar’s Oscars”, we discovered that 29% of the 62 respondents reported that the character who had received a nomination under the guise of an ulterior motive (to copy his spelling test) would still be grateful for the nomination. Importantly, in this case, we explored the qualitative data surrounding this question to gauge whether students were explicitly aware of the presence of an ulterior motive; 70% of respondents understood that an ulterior motive was at play. In those cases where the ulterior motive was clearly recognised, only 7% of students indicated that they would be grateful for the nomination.

The theme of indebtedness and obligation (as mentioned above) allowed us to examine whether mixed emotions (positive and negative) would impact on gratitude experience. In this example, Ethan feels obliged to nominate his classmate, Jordan, for an award because Jordan has nominated him. However, Ethan really wants to nominate somebody else, namely Dominic. After reading this section of the story, 63% of participants believed that Ethan should nominate Dominic; however, 21% suggested he now nominate Jordan instead. Additionally, students were asked “Do you think Ethan is grateful for the nomination he received from Jordan?”; 60% of respondents said “Yes” in response to this question, but 37% said “No” (3% even amended the response options to say “Yes and No”). An open-ended question asked them to explain this decision. These qualitative data highlighted themes that were also apparent in the adult and adolescent data, such as notions of awkwardness/being uncomfortable (12.9%); guilt (3.23%); mixed feelings (3.23%); being worried (6.45%); and feeling confused or unsure (40.32%):

*“He will feel guilty to the person he didn’t vote for”.*

*“Ethan is feeling awkward. He doesn’t know who to choose”.*

*“Worried in case if he votes for Dominic and Jordan is annoyed”.*

*“He is in a very awkward position so he is probably feeling confused and stressed”.*

Findings from the stories lend further support to the view that gratitude is perceived to be of mixed valence, even for young people. All our empirical studies (the prototype analysis, vignette questionnaire, and gratitude stories) show that far from being an entirely positive concept, gratitude possesses elements that are experienced and rated negatively by laypeople. Furthermore, the meaning and associated valence of gratitude should not be taken for granted since multiple elements contribute to an individual’s understanding of gratitude (Gulliford & Morgan, 2016), resulting in an overall conception of gratitude that we have described as either “permissive” or “restrictive” (Morgan et al., 2016). In the former case gratitude can be experienced even when ulterior or malicious motives are implicated, while the latter designation describes a more “restrictive” view, where people report they would *not* be grateful in such circumstances. The *kind* of concept people have (permissive or restrictive) calibrates the *amount* of gratitude individuals report and highlights that the perceived valence of gratitude varies from person to person, related to their appraisals of factors that influence their understanding of gratitude.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Positive psychologists have largely taken the meaning and (positive) valence of gratitude for granted. Current interventions have tended to overlook the conceptual complexities surrounding gratitude, not least the question of whether it is an unambiguously positive



concept. Across a range of studies, we have shown that the UK public construes gratitude as a complex concept of *mixed* valence.

Our prototype analysis of gratitude showed that members of the UK public named obligation, indebtedness, embarrassment, awkwardness and guilt as features of gratitude, to which they assigned a *negative* valence. The vignette questionnaire corroborated these findings; in an open-ended question probing participants' responses to the question of whether gratitude is an entirely pleasant emotion, adults and adolescents spontaneously described feelings of indebtedness, obligation, awkwardness, embarrassment, and guilt. This represents a striking degree of overlap with the prototype analysis and reflects themes we also found in children's responses to the gratitude stories, where young people clearly wrestled with mixed emotions with regard to gratitude.

While the vignette study presents findings from an interpersonal scenario (being nominated for an award by a work colleague), we are mindful that this 'triadic' model (benefactor, benefit and beneficiary) represents *one* understanding of gratitude. Further empirical research could fruitfully be conducted to shed light on factors that influence other species of gratitude.

Complexities surrounding the concept of gratitude have been largely ignored in current gratitude interventions involving both adults and young people—a shortcoming we believe should be rectified. To this end, we suggest the widespread advocacy of gratitude in positive psychology be interpreted against findings which show that gratitude is *not* unambiguously positive. Alongside this recommendation, we believe that gratitude interventions should incorporate the educational task of promoting "virtue literacy" regarding gratitude as a potential virtue; an understanding of *what* gratitude is, *why* it might be a desirable quality to cultivate and *when* it is appropriate (Carr et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2015) Finally and importantly, our research reveals that there are different species of gratitude that differ in

terms of their valence, and that people diverge in terms of the conditions they place on when they believe gratitude to be appropriate and indeed whether it is deemed positive.

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