



Parents' understanding of gratitude in children: A thematic analysis



Amy G. Halberstadt^{a,*}, Hillary A. Langley^b, Andrea M. Hussong^b, William A. Rothenberg^b, Jennifer L. Coffman^b, Irina Mokra^b, Philip R. Costanzo^c

^a North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, United States

^b University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, United States

^c Duke University, Durham, NC, United States

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ABSTRACT

Current definitions of gratitude are based primarily on research with adults about their own experiences of gratitude, yet what children are grateful for, and how they understand, experience, and express gratitude may be very different. To better understand the forms that gratitude may take in children, we asked 20 parents in six focus groups to talk about their views of gratitude in young children. Parents had at least one child who was 6–9 years old. Sessions were conducted in the children's schools and lasted for one hour. Transcripts were examined using inductive analysis and three types of saturation were achieved. Parents described children as grateful for both tangible and intangible gifts, and identified multiple cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of gratitude in their children. Gratitude was understood to be a momentary experience, a more enduring feeling, and a way of being, suggesting a more continuous perspective regarding the duration of gratitude. Parents identified four cognitive and emotional barriers that are effectively opposites of gratitude. Parents also recognized that gratitude develops in children over time. Implications for understanding gratitude from a developmental perspective, as well as suggestions for future research in the development of children's gratitude are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Gratitude in adults seems to have widespread benefits, including greater life satisfaction, lower levels of stress, better health outcomes including sleep quality and quantity, lower psychopathology, and healthier social functioning (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). The emerging picture of gratitude as a protective factor in adults seems to have captured the attention of parents seeking to raise healthy children. However, research devoted to gratitude in children is sparse, and no extant work examines how gratitude is defined for children, or how gratitude might emerge and develop over time. As a starting point to studying the development of gratitude in children, we explored parents' understanding of gratitude in their children.

In the burgeoning work with adults, gratitude has been defined as an emotional state or mood (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), life orientation (Wood et al., 2010), or a character, virtue, or personality trait (Froh et al., 2008).

McCullough et al. (2002) define the grateful disposition as “a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotions to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains” (p.112). Others recognize grateful emotions as involving appreciation, thankfulness, and joy (Froh et al., 2011; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which derive from attributions that “one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person” (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008, p. 281). These definitions indicate that dispositional gratitude in adults is comprised of both emotional (i.e., appreciation, thankfulness and joy) and cognitive (i.e., attributions regarding the actions of the benefactor) aspects. Although the study of gratitude in children lags significantly behind that of adults, gratitude is more often operationalized as behaviors than as emotions or cognitions in research with children (Gleason and Weintraub, 1976).

Early work on gratitude with young children suggested verbal forms (i.e., saying thank you), concrete forms (i.e., giving gifts of thanks to the benefactor), and connective forms (i.e., giving gifts of thanks to the benefactor which build relationship; Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938). Using this framework, age-related decreases in proposing concrete gift exchanges and increases in proposing more connective types of gratitude were demonstrated with children 7–14-years old (Freitas, Pieta, & Tudge, 2011; Tudge, Freitas, Wang,

* Corresponding author at: Dept. of Psychology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-7650, United States.

E-mail address: Amy.Halberstadt@ncsu.edu (A.G. Halberstadt).

Mokrova, & O'Brien, 2015). Most of the other early work, however, focused solely on verbal forms of gratitude (i.e., saying thank you explicitly) following receipts of rewards, Halloween candy, or gifts (Becker and Smenner, 1986; Gleason & Weintraub, 1976; Greif & Gleason, 1980). Such measures are problematic because they clearly confound social compliance (i.e., manners) and the experience of genuine gratitude (i.e., heartfelt appreciation).

In more recent work, researchers have downwardly extended measures of dispositional gratitude initially developed for use with adults (e.g., GQ-6, GAC, GRAT) to assess dispositional gratitude in teens and children as young as age 10. Researchers have also begun creating and assessing interventions designed to increase gratitude in children and adolescents (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Froh et al., 2011, 2014). These initial efforts to study children's gratitude are a significant step forward. However, caution is warranted in generalizing psychological models and theories about gratitude in adults to understand gratitude in children. Importantly, early precursors, experiences, and expressions of gratitude may differ in children as compared to the mature forms of gratitude that we see in adults (Layous and Lyubomirsky, 2014). Attempting to capture this emergent process, one longitudinal study of young children suggests a developmental progression toward gratitude in which emotion knowledge and theory of mind may be precursors or even aspects of understanding gratitude in young children (Nelson et al., 2013). Clearly, developmental theorists are just beginning to articulate a complex, emergent view of gratitude, although this work is still in progress and the empirical base for it is often characterized by impoverished approaches when operationalizing gratitude in children.

To support a developmental approach to studying gratitude, we turned to what is most often the primary socialization context for emotion, namely the family. Because parents play a key role in the emergence and development of children's emotional experience (Dix, 1991; Dunsmore & Halberstadt, 1997; Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), it is useful to learn more about how parents define and understand gratitude. First, from a descriptive point of view, parents serve as socialization experts, providing many examples of when and how children seem to express gratitude. Second, parents' understanding of what gratitude is and when they expect to see it is important in terms of directing their socialization behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 1998; Fredrickson, 1998; Parke and McDowell, 1998). Third, in addition to implications for parents' socialization behaviors, parents' perceptions about the value of emotions and how and when to scaffold children's emotional experiences seem to play a unique role in shaping children's emotion-related schemas and emotion regulatory strategies (Castro, Halberstadt, Lozada, & Craig, 2015; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Halberstadt, Thompson, Parker, & Dunsmore, 2008; McGillicuddy-DeLisi and Sigel, 1995; Stelzer & Halberstadt, 2011; Wong, Diener, & Isabella, 2008). Thus, learning more about parents' understanding about what gratitude is (and what the opposites of gratitude might be), as well as how parents perceive gratitude manifested in young children, is an important first step in the study of gratitude and how it develops across the lifespan.

1.1. The current study

In the current paper, we report results from a series of focus groups that were conducted with parents whose children were in first to third grades. Focus groups allow for in-depth, qualitative insights into a group's collective experience, while also inviting every participant to share their own thoughts and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). We met with the parents to learn about how they define gratitude in their children, what they view as the opposite

of gratitude, and how gratitude may develop in their children over time.

Our focus groups included parents with children enrolled in private schools. We chose to focus on this privileged population because these parents may struggle with cultivating gratitude in children for whom "having things" may be taken for granted. For this reason, parents of privileged children may need to think about the cultivation of gratitude in their children as a deliberate value or parenting choice and, thus, may be able to offer insights on children's development of gratitude based on the deliberations that led to their choices. Although other groups have unique, well-formed perspectives to offer, this group may be one of many that can provide distinctive information.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Parents were recruited from three private schools in the southeast region of the US via flyers distributed in first, second, and third grade classrooms. We chose this age group because this is a time in development when we may expect to see more complex emotional processes emerge, particularly those that involve self-reflection and empathy (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; Saarni, 1999). Other eligibility requirements were parental fluency in English and having a child between six and nine years old. Most parents were female (17 mothers and 3 fathers; M age = 41.33 years, SD = 4.32 years), married or living with their partner (17 married and 3 separated/divorced), and highly educated (in addition to a four-year college degree, 18 had a graduate degree). Parents had a median of two children in their households (range 1–4 children), with a mean age of 6.95 years (range 2–14 years). Parents self-identified as Non-Hispanic White (n = 18) or Latino (n = 2). Many reported a religious affiliation (8 Protestant, 4 Catholic, 2 Jewish, and 6 none). The six focus groups (designated as G1–G6) included two to five parents, with a total of 20 parents.

2.2. Procedure

The focus groups were conducted by the same moderator, a licensed clinical psychologist with substantial experience in focus group moderation. At the beginning of each session, the moderator explained that the purpose of the study was to learn about how parents think about gratitude, what children do to show gratitude, and what parents do to encourage gratitude in their children, stressing the exploratory nature of the conversation. Focus group structure and moderation followed guidelines by Krueger and Casey (2009). Open-ended questions and probes included: "as a parent, how do you define gratitude? What is gratitude similar to and what is it different from? How do you know it when you see it, particularly in your children? What do you see as the opposite of gratitude? How is gratitude similar to or different from other feelings? Do you see gratitude and entitlement as related to one another? If so, how? What do you think parents look for to know that children are feeling grateful? Is there a difference between being polite and grateful? If so, what would that difference be?" The moderator also supported group reflection about ideas emerging from the discussion, including parents' thoughts about how children's gratitude changes over time. Each focus group was video recorded and lasted 45–60 min. Parents were compensated \$45 for their time.

2.3. Analysis

Sessions were transcribed verbatim by a paid transcription service. A research assistant then checked each transcript for accuracy and replaced all identifying information with pseudonyms. These

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