

Expression of Gratitude in Indian Children: A qualitative enquiry

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Abstract

The present study aimed to know the expression of gratitude in Indian children. Children in the age range of 7 – 10 years (10 from each age group) constituted the sample of the study. Semi structured personal interviews focusing on personal experiences of gratitude were used with children for data collection. The interview responses were put to thematic analysis. The analysis revealed four expression styles: verbal expression, expression through gifts/objects, affiliative expression and quintessential expression of gratitude. A gap in experience and expression of gratitude in children was also observed.

Keywords: gratitude, expression, experience

Psychology has traditionally focused on understanding and alleviating mental illness. However, past couple of decades has called for a shift from an illness model to a wellness model. In other words, an attempt has been made to understand that psychological wellness is not synonymous with absence of psychopathology. There has been a realization that mental health can be measured by presence of positive indicators of well-being and functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Gratitude is one of the character strengths in positive psychology that has received increased attention in both the scientific community (for review see Emmons & McCullough, 2004) and popular culture (e.g., Emmons & Hill, 2001; Hay, 1996; Lesowitz & Sammons, 2009). Gratitude is most simply defined as “being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen” (Park & Peterson, 2006, p. 894). While moral philosophers and religious thinkers have recognized gratitude as being beneficial to experiencing a happy and good life for centuries, scientific researchers have only recently begun to systematically study gratitude (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The progression from experiencing to expressing gratitude appears to require a series of steps. Fitzgerald (1998), for example, identified three steps: (a) a warm sense of appreciation for someone or something, (b) a sense of goodwill toward that person or thing, and (c) a disposition to act that flows from the sense of appreciation and goodwill. Emmons and Hill (2001) suggest that the process of gratitude begins with the awareness that individuals have a choice of taking whatever attitude they prefer in a given situation. The next step requires that the individual attain a certain level of self-reflection so the necessary internal work of being grateful can occur. Following this stage, gratitude often becomes a felt experience as result of a conscious attitude and intention to be grateful, which then, it is hoped, results in its expression through action (e.g., thanking others for their generosity). External circumstances corresponding to individual needs, wants, or preferences do not require expressions of gratitude. As noted by Emmons and Shelton (2002), “a grateful outlook does not require a life full of material comforts but rather an interior attitude of thankfulness regardless of life’s circumstances” (p. 465).

Although the conceptual framework for studying gratitude in children and adolescents is convincing, research in this area has largely been ignored (Bono & Froh, 2009). Thus far, gratitude has been studied with children and adolescents using mostly correlational and experimental methodology. For example, gratitude has been associated to greater global life satisfaction, satisfaction with family, satisfaction with school, optimism, and positive affect among middle school students (Froh et al., 2009). For the present study, however, gratitude has been looked at as an experience distributed over space and time.

Method

Participants

In the present study, 40 children from 7 yrs. (grade2), 8 yrs. (grade3), 9 yrs. (grade4) and 10 yrs. (grade5), with 10 from each age group comprised the sample. Purposive sampling was used to draw the sample from 5 public schools of Indrapuram, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. Twenty Eight (out of 40) children were living in a nuclear family set up. The rest 12 children had both the grandparents living with them. The participants were well versed with English and Hindi languages.

Procedure

In interviewing children, they were asked to recall if something really good has happened to them and because of whom; and to recall if they have ever felt like saying ‘thank you’ in the most ‘true sense’. The way these questions were posed differed from child to

child. This was largely based on the language used by the children during rapport formation and general conversation about their friends and daily life. Each interaction ranged from forty minutes to sixty five minutes. The interactions were tape recorded, with informed consent of the parents of the children, and were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. . After the first reading, transcriptions were again checked against the recordings, and changes were made if this was necessary. Furthermore, all interviews were transcribed following the first two days after the interview session so that it was easier to remember the context in which the statements were made, such as irony and particular body language.

Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analyses. It is a method used for identification and reporting of themes (patterns) within data. In the present study, the themes and subthemes generated were data driven and were identified at the semantic level. The themes identified were substantiated with children’s narratives.

Result

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview responses of children are presented in the table 1.

Table 4. The Themes and codes extracted from interviews with children

Expression of Gratitude	<p>a) Verbal expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Saying ‘thanks’/ ‘thank you’</i> • <i>Praising the benefactor one to one</i> <i>“I told her she is very good”</i> • <i>Praising the benefactor publicly</i> <i>“I announced in the assembly how he helped me out”</i> <p>b) Expression through objects/gifts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Giving gifts as per one’s own perspective</i> <i>“I gave her my favourite doll”</i> <i>“I gave him my pen”</i> • <i>Giving gifts as per the benefactor’s perspective</i> <i>“I’ll gift him with something that he’ll be requiring”</i> <p>c) Affiliative expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Being friends</i> <i>“yes, I said thank you to him and also said that he is very helpful... and then I became friends with him”</i> <p>d) Quintessential expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To be/do the ideal or desirable</i> <i>“They have put in so many efforts for me so I also want to put as many efforts so that they don’t feel buying guitar was a waste”</i> <p>e) Gap in experience and expression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Experiencing gratitude but not able to express it</i> <i>“I was also feeling like thanking him but I thought it might look awkward”</i>
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The narratives generated with children provided an insight into the various ways gratitude was expressed. Four different types of gratitude expressions were observed in the data: verbal expression, expression through objects/gifts, affiliative expression, and quintessential expression. Gap between experience and expression of gratitude was also observed in children's narratives.

Verbal expression of gratitude. Children's narratives included many such incidents wherein they expressed their gratitude simply by saying 'thank you'. Verbal expression reflects spoken/oral ways of expressing gratitude. It was also observed that in some cases children used verbal expression when they felt profound gratitude but did not know how to express what they feel. Children were found to be using verbal expression in three ways:

- a) Saying thanks/ thank you to the benefactor
- b) Praising the benefactor one to one
- c) Praising the benefactor publicly

Following narratives illustrate the use of verbal expression of gratitude.

Kanan (7.5 yrs): "...when I was not well and got viral fever I didn't go to school for 1 week. After that when I joined back on Monday I got to know that Maths UT is going to happen for the very same unit that I missed during that 1 week. I asked everybody in the class to share their notes with me but nobody helped me except Nisha... I felt very good that Nisha has helped me so much. I thanked her... actually I was confused what to say but I was actually feeling like saying thank you so I said."

Praising the benefactor on a one to one basis and also publicly were also observed as ways of expressing gratitude.

Anant (8.5 yrs): "I told him that he is very good and that had he not been there I would have got lost"

Aarav (10 yrs): "I praised deepanshu in the assembly...I told everybody how helpful she is ...then everybody clapped for him...all the teachers and students..."

Expression of gratitude through objects/gifts. It was observed in some cases that children repaid the favour/ benefit provided to them by the benefactor. Expression through objects/gifts includes tangible ways of reciprocating the favour. It includes reciprocating in two ways:

- a) Giving gifts as per one's own perspective, i.e. gift that is valuable for the beneficiary
- b) Giving gifts as per the benefactor's perspective, i.e. gift that is valuable for the benefactor

The excerpts illustrating concrete expression of gratitude are presented below.

Aarav (8 yrs): "I had forgotten to take my lunch to school on last Tuesday. In the recess period I was feeling very hungry. I did not even have money to buy something from canteen. Then my Deepanshu shared his lunch with me. I said thank you to him...his lunch was very tasty.

I: what was there in his lunch?

T: red sauce pasta... yummy it was

I: how did you feel then? What did you do?

T: I thanked him and said I'll also get pasta for you tomorrow but he decline”

In the above incident the participant attempted to return the favour (‘pasta’) by offering ‘pasta’ (his own favourite) to the benefactor. The participant thought of expressing the gratitude by offering what he received from the benefactor, in a concrete way, without taking into account what the benefactor would want. Some of the other examples the expression through objects/gifts as per the beneficiary’s view point that emerged in the data are “*I would give him a present...anything my favourite*”, “*I would give her a purse*”, “*I would give him my remote car*”.

Following narrative is an example of expressing gratitude in a tangible way by giving something that is valuable for the benefactor.

Namrata (9 yrs): “last time’s holiday homework required a lot use of internet and taking print outs. I don’t know how to use internet as I don’t have it at home. Then my colony friend did all my internet work and got me prints as well on her own. I felt very good at that time...and even now.. I thanked her and said I’ll get you anything that you want... then my friend said she’ll tell me when the need be... I’ll get her something if I would feel it is required”

Affiliative expression of gratitude. Affiliative expression is the tendency to affiliate with the benefactor to express one’s gratitude. This is done by offering one’s friendship or being friends with the benefactor. For instance, one of the participants aged 9 years shared “*yes, I said thank you to him and also said that he is very helpful... and then I became friends with him*”.

Quintessential expression of gratitude. The literal meaning of quintessential is ideal or essential. This type of expression includes the tendency to repay the favour/benefit by doing/intending to do (or be) the ideal to justify the benefit received. Quintessential expression of gratitude was observed only in the older children, in the age group of 9.5 to 10 years.

Pehal (10 yrs.): “I recently won an inter school guitar playing competition... there were senior students also but I won the competition. I felt very good having won and glad that my parents agreed to buy me a guitar and also arranged for guitar coaching for me. I feel thankful to my mumma that she convinced papa to get me a guitar. I had thanked them when they gifted me guitar but not after the competition.... Just like that I didn’t say... because I always want to win every competition.... They have put in so many efforts for me so I also want to put as many efforts so that they don’t feel buying guitar was a waste”

In the above narrative, Pehal wanted to always perform well to express gratitude to her parents. Verbal expression of gratitude, saying thank you, was also made after receiving the gift. Another participant exhibited quintessential expression of gratitude in response to receiving a tablet from her parents. She described the incident as

“... I felt really good when mummy papa bought me a tab... I was aksing for it since a long time.. all my friends had tabs and they used to play games on their tabs... initially mummy papa didn’t agree because they believed getting a tab will hamper my studies..... but then they themselves bought it for me... I hugged them And said thank you... and now I will work hard to stand first in the class.... No, they haven’t asked me for it but I said that now I will work very hard and show it to you”

In both the incidents of expressing gratitude the participants took into account what could probably be desirable from the benefactor's point of view and also intended personal growth to be able to justify receiving the gift.

Gap in Experience and Expression. In some of the narratives a gap in experience of gratitude and its expression were observed. Some of the children reported having experienced gratitude for somebody but not expressing it. No specific reasons were provided by children for the same.

Mayank (M) (9 yrs.): "when I was in class 3, we all went to mount abu for vacations. One day when we were out our car broke down. The tyre was to be changed. I was very young and Mummy also didn't know how to do it, so pap alone was doing it..but he was also finding it very difficult. Papa got really tired. Then some uncle who was passing by in his car, stopped and helped my papa change the tyre... and then we all went for outing.

Researcher (R): did you all know the uncle already?

M: No we didn't know him. He was some stranger. But the best thing was that he helped us. I'm very very thankful to him.

R: Did you say something to him?

M: No I didn't say anything. Papa told him thanks but I didn't. I was also feeling like thanking him but I thought it might look awkward. I am so young. I was feeling shy. But in my heart I had thanked him several times"

In the above narrative there was a gap in the participant's experience of gratitude and its expression. The participant could not express his gratitude to the benefactor because of the hesitation. Similar experience was shared by a 10 year old participant.

Peehu (10 yrs.): "no I am not able to say thank you to mummy papa... because I'll have to say thanks for a number of things then... ideally I should be thanking them but I don't know feel a little weird.. I feel shy.. probably they must be knowing that I want to thank them but not able to say that"

Hesitation and shyness were found as two reasons that stopped children from expressing the gratitude that they actually experienced. There were some other participants who could not give any justification for not being able to express the gratitude they experienced.

Discussion

The salient themes that emerged in the analyses of expression of gratitude were related to the different ways of expressing gratitude. Expressions of gratitude were classified as 'verbal expression', 'expression through objects/gifts', 'affiliative expression and quintessential expression'. Verbal expression of gratitude is expressing gratitude through oral/spoken ways. In a phenomenal study done by Baumgarten-Tramer (1938), it was found that verbal expression of gratitude was used most by the children. In another study it was found that across the ages 7-14 years, verbal gratitude was the most consistent and most frequent way of expressing gratitude (Freitas, Pieta & Tudge, 2011). These two research studies have defined verbal expression of gratitude as saying simply 'thank you'. However in the present study verbal expressions include all that was expressed orally to convey one's gratitude. Verbal expression of gratitude seems to be related to children's learning at school and home. In a study done by La Taille (1998) it was observed that children in the age group

of 6- 12 years believe it is important to say thank you because it is polite and they have been taught this. Verbal expression of gratitude was found to be used by most of the participants. But unlike conceptualization of verbal expression of gratitude in the existing literature, in the present study verbal expression includes not only mechanical process of thank you but only involves meaningful appreciation of the benefactor.

Expressing gratitude through objects/gifts also emerged as a style of expression of gratitude. It included repayment of the favour/benefit by giving some object or gift. The gift can be provided to the benefactor keeping in mind one's own perspective or the benefactor's perspective. In the study done by Baumgarten-Tramer (1938) the term 'concrete expression' was used to indicate repayment with something tangible that is valuable for oneself. It has been found in research studies that frequency of concrete gratitude would diminish with increasing age and the possibility of taking another person's perspective and thus reciprocating accordingly would increase (Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; Frietas et al., 2011).

Affiliative expression of gratitude involves the tendency of the beneficiary to affiliate with the benefactor to express his/her gratitude. It was found that beneficiaries responded to the benefactor's gesture by being friends with the benefactor. This form of expression does not focus on the tangible objects to repay the benefit. Rather it is dominated by a relational component. Maintaining relationship with the benefactor in order to express gratitude characterizes this form of expression. Quintessential expression of gratitude, which is repaying by achieving the ideal/desirable, was also observed in some of the participants. This is the most sophisticated form of gratitude expression. This involves the ability to perceive what is ideal or desirable from the benefactor's point of view that would justify the favour/benefit extended by them. It is repayment by attaining that desired state. For instance, performing well to prove the person deserved help and support. Not much has been reported in the literature about this form of expression. In the study done by Baumgarten-Tramer (1938), it was reported that children in the age group of 13-15 years showed this type of expression and it was named as finalistic gratitude. Frequency of using finalistic gratitude was not mentioned by her, though. In another study done by Frietas et al. (2011) it was found only 2 (out of 430) responses showed finalistic gratitude. The two responses exhibiting finalistic gratitude were from participants aged 13 years.

Gap in experience and expression was reported in the present study. Shyness and hesitation were observed as two reasons for children not expressing their gratitude despite experiencing it. In a survey done by Janice Kaplan (2012) it was found that there is a gratitude gap in American adults. The meaning of gratitude gap in the survey was realizing the value of gratitude but still not expressing it. No differentiation between experience of gratitude and expression of gratitude was made.

Conclusion

Verbal expression, expression through gifts/ objects, affiliative expression and quintessential expression emerged as the strategies of gratitude expression in the present study. Children's episodes of gratitude were analyzed thematically for the expression of gratitude. Gap in the experience of gratitude and expression of gratitude was also observed in children's narratives.

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Bioprofile

Shivani Vij: Shivani Vij is an assistant professor (Psychology) in University of Delhi. She is a Gold Medalist in Master of Education (M.Ed.) and Master of Arts (Psychology). She is also a Doctoral Research fellow of department of Psychology, University of Delhi. Her PhD thesis is submitted for final examination. Her areas of research/specialization are education, developmental psychology, emotions and qualitative methods.

Prof. Nandita Babu:

Prof. Nandita Babu is the Head of the Psychology Department, University of Delhi. She has been teaching courses at the Masters and PhD level for the last 31 years. The use of varied pedagogy is based on an evaluation of the course content and student appraisal. The pedagogy conglomerates lecture, group discussions, project assignments, observations in natural settings. The prime intention is to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Major Research Areas:

1. Cognitive and language development
2. Socio-emotional Development
3. Socio-cultural context and human development
4. Application of cognitive and social developmental research in education.
5. Intervention research for enhancing positive growth in children and youth.
6. Development of atypical children