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Benefits, Mechanisms, and New Directions for Teaching Gratitude to Children

Kristin Layous and Sonja Lyubomirsky
University of California, Riverside

Abstract. The present commentary considers the theoretical and applied implications of Froh, Bono, and colleagues' benefit-appraisals intervention to promote graditude among youth. First, we discuss the developmental competencies that children need to master before they can benefit from this intervention. The target curriculum was successful among 8- to 11-year-olds, but we predict that it would be less effective in children of younger ages. As children's theory of mind and capacity to understand emotions and take another's perspective develop, so too will their ability to feel and express heartfelt gratitude and, in turn, their capacity to benefit from gratitude inductions. Second, we discuss the broader implications of instilling a habit of gratitude in youth. Specifically, because gratitude is associated with greater well-being and stronger social relationships, we predict that fostering gratitude in youth could give rise to numerous positive long-term consequences. Third, additional questions remain about the curriculum itself, including the mechanisms underlying its success and its efficacy relative to simpler gratitude inductions. Lastly, we discuss the potential downsides of compelling children to express gratitude (e.g., whether it could backfire if children lack intrinsic motivation). Overall, we praise this work as an important step in increasing gratitude in children and stimulating thinking about the developmental processes associated with gratitude, as well as its long-term downstream consequences.

In Cicero's words, "gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." Toddlers are taught to say "thank you" as soon as they learn to speak, and this norm is further emphasized through cultural institutions such as religious practices and national thanksgiving holidays across the globe. Above and beyond societal expectations, however, the experience and expression of gratitude benefit the individual by enhancing well-being, physical health, and social relationships (e.g., Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Furthermore, gratitude may serve as a moral affect, helping people to recognize the good deeds of others and motivating them to reciprocate, thereby reinforcing the performance of the initial good deed (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Theory and empirical evidence also suggest that the grateful person not only reciprocates kind acts but pays them forward

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Kristin Layous, Department of Psychology, University of California, 900 University Avenue, Riverside, CA 92521; e-mail: kristin.layous@email.ucr.edu

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to third parties (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Thus, along with benefitting the mental and physical health of the individual who is expressing it, gratitude can contribute to more positive and prosocial interactions in families, schools, communities, and workplaces.

Given the simplicity of expressing gratitude, as well as its potential positive consequences for the individual and society, the development and tests of a benefit-appraisal intervention to promote gratitude in children by Froh et al. (2014) holds significant theoretical and applied implications. Across two studies, the authors found that their gratitude curriculum (versus an attention-matched control) boosted appraisals of benefits received (i.e., grateful thinking), felt gratitude, expression of gratitude (via more written thank-you notes), and positive affect in 8- to 11-year-old children. Their curriculum broke gratitude down into smaller pieces, focusing on helping students understand a benefactor's intention in helping, the costs incurred in helping, and the benefits bestowed on the receiver—all crucial components of a gratitude experience (McCullough et al., 2001). The two studies represent a critical forward step in understanding how and at what age gratitude-enhancing strategies can be taught to children. In addition, the studies stimulate interesting questions for future research about socioemotional development, the protective nature of gratitude, and the possible limits of these types of interventions.

When Can Gratitude Develop in Youth?

The benefit-appraisal intervention developed in the target article is notable for its success in teaching about social exchanges and eliciting increases in reported gratitude and positive affect in children. Past research has found that positive interventions might be less successful at younger ages, possibly because youth do not engage with or internalize the activities as much as older participants (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). This curriculum, however, shows that breaking up a concept like gratitude into digestible pieces might allow it to resonate with younger age groups.

The authors acknowledge that the ability to feel and express genuine gratitude may be contingent on the student's developmental readiness. They did not, however, discuss the competencies that children may need to develop before they can learn how to express gratitude more regularly and reap its benefits. This issue is ripe for future theory and research. One obvious developmental task involves establishing a theory of mind (Flavell, 2004; Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Wimmer & Perner, 1983). For example, a child cannot think through the intention of a benefactor without recognizing that the other person has thoughts distinct from his or her own. A theory of mind is usually established between 4 and 5 years of age (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001), so it may be possible to teach children as young as 4 years old about gratitude.

If having a theory of mind is a necessary prerequisite for gratitude in children, it is likely not sufficient. Children may also need some understanding of emotions to truly feel grateful. Indeed, individuals who understand the emotions and thoughts of others are better able to engage in moral reasoning and to sympathize with and help others (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). The benefit-appraisal gratitude intervention, too, required that students reflect on the emotions and thoughts of their benefactors—a task that may have been difficult or impossible for younger children. Although preschool children can identify basic emotions associated with facial expressions (e.g., happy, sad), an understanding of more complex emotions (e.g., gratitude, jealousy, pride) is not achieved until 7 years of age and increases through adolescence (Harris, Olthof, Terwogt, & Hardman, 1987).

Consideration of the intentions and emotions of a benefactor also requires that youth have a capacity for perspective taking. Indeed, among adults, gratitude is strongly associated with the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes (i.e., perspective taking) and to feel empathy (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Much research has

explored the relationship between empathy or perspective taking and prosocial behavior in youth (e.g., Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Eisenberg et al., 2002), but no research, to our knowledge, has investigated their association with gratitude. Because prosocial moral development (including the ability to empathize with others) continues to develop through high school (Eisenberg-Berg, 1979), we expect that the capacity to feel gratitude could also increase with age. At what age gratitude can develop in youth and whether the capacity for gratitude evolves throughout the lifespan are important questions for future research.

Furthermore, although children everywhere are repeatedly pressed to say "thank you," we suspect that the ability to understand emotions (a key component of emotional intelligence; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004) and the ability to take the benefactor's perspective are prerequisites to benefitting from the expression of gratitude. As just one piece of evidence, in a sample of 3- to 9-year-olds, only children aged 7 years or older showed an association between gratitude and happiness (Park & Peterson, 2006). In addition, we conducted a study in which 9- to 11-year-olds were prompted to perform acts of kindness (Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Although we observed an overall increase in positive affect, children who were high on perspective taking reaped the largest increases in well-being, likely because they were able to identify with the importance of the activity (Nelson, Layous, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Similarly, we posit that gratitude will only be related to positive outcomes to the extent that it is authentic, which may require perspective-taking abilities.

In sum, the benefit-appraisal intervention by Froh et al. (2014) provokes a number of speculations about the potential developmental processes surrounding gratitude and its downstream consequences. Future research would do well to explore these and related ideas to gain a broader understanding of gratitude in youth.

Long-Term Benefits of Early Gratitude Intervention

An appealing aspect of the benefit-appraisal intervention is that it was successful at instilling habits of gratitude at young ages, thereby potentially giving rise to multiple downstream positive consequences in children and adolescents. First, gratitude is associated with well-being (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2010) and even causes increases in well-being (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2014; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), and well-being in adolescents is negatively related to depression (Valois, Zullig, Huebner, & Drane, 2004), substance abuse (Zullig, Valois, Huebner, Oeltmann, & Drane, 2001), and externalizing behaviors (i.e., delinquent or aggressive behaviors; Suldo & Huebner, 2004). In addition, positive activities like expressing gratitude can both directly and indirectly (via increases in well-being) mitigate risk factors for psychopathology (e.g., rumination, loneliness), therefore decreasing the prevalence of mental disorders across the lifespan (Layous, Chancellor, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Thus, teaching habits of gratitude to youth could affect their mental health and positive behaviors for years to come.

Second, gratitude predicts prosocial behavior, positive relationships, and social integration (Algoe et al., 2008; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; McCullough et al., 2002)—all factors that contribute to happiness and life satisfaction. Thus, grateful thinking can increase well-being both directly and indirectly (i.e., through healthy relationships and community involvement). Finally, researchers have previously found that expressing gratitude can improve school satisfaction (Froh et al., 2008), and school satisfaction is related to both academic and social success (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Thus, gratitude could have far-reaching effects in multiple domains of students' lives, supporting Cicero's assertion that gratitude may be the parent of all other virtues.

Further Questions About Benefit-Appraisal Intervention

The results of the benefit-appraisal intervention by Froh et al. (2014) were clear—the experiments increased gratitude and positive affect in children. The exact mechanisms of these effects, however, are less clear. The intervention asked students to focus on three main concepts: intention of the benefactor, cost to the benefactor, and benefit to the beneficiary. In future studies, researchers could isolate each of these components to explore whether one is driving the results or whether the intervention is most powerful with them combined, achieving a synergistic effect.

Along similar lines, in past studies, researchers have asked students to write letters of gratitude or count blessings (i.e., directly express gratitude) rather than learn about the process of gratitude (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Froh et al., 2008). Future studies might explore whether the gratitude curriculum is more effective than simply prompting students to express gratitude. We suspect that dividing gratitude into smaller components might help youth engage with the topic to a greater extent than if they are simply prompted to list what they are grateful for. Moreover, particular ways to express gratitude (e.g., writing a letter to thank one's parent or teacher) may make people feel guilty or indebted in some situations or cultures (e.g., Kim, Sherman, Ko, & Taylor, 2006; Layous, Lee, Choi, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), so exploring individual differences in people and situations is also an important area for future research.

In addition, the authors state that social cognitive appraisals of beneficial social exchanges (i.e., grateful thinking) mediated the relationship between the intervention and increases in felt gratitude and positive affect. However, no mediational analyses were conducted to test this hypothesis, and all the outcome variables were collected at the same time, thus not meeting the temporal-sequence requirement of mediation. Although the authors have sound theoretical reasoning for proposing this mediational sequence, alternative explanations are plausible. Perhaps the intervention boosted positive affect, and this led to increases in both benefit appraisals and gratitude. Thus, future research could continue to explore the mediational pathways by which the benefit-appraisal curriculum increases well-being.

Lastly, future studies would do well to include additional self-reported and objective outcome measures. For example, the authors mention that gratitude increases satisfaction with school, which—in turn—could boost students' grades. Similarly, given the authors' suggestion of possible effects of gratitude on peer social relationships, sociometric ratings of classmates could show whether the gratitude intervention changes relationships or impressions among peers. For example, our laboratory found that students who engaged in an acts-of-kindness intervention were subsequently nominated by more peers as students who they "would like to be in school activities with," a measure of peer acceptance (Layous et al., 2012). In sum, investigating the downstream consequences of increasing gratitude in children could help illuminate the broad impact of gratitude in youth.

Downsides of Forced Gratitude

Although the gratitude curriculum appeared to be highly successful in increasing gratitude, positive affect, and recognition of social exchanges, researchers should also consider the potential downsides of forcing children to engage in gratitude activities. Many people have childhood memories of being pushed by parents to sit down after the holidays to write those dreaded thank-you notes. This tradition is more akin to a chore than a true expression of thankfulness. Indeed, much research suggests that doing activities out of obligation can undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, incorporating gratitude into a school curriculum necessarily situates it in the same category as other academic tasks some children want to avoid, such as spelling tests and learning fractions. Accordingly, over time, children might only express gratitude to fulfill this academic obliga-

tion and avoid reprimand and not because they have internalized the importance of recognizing the benefits bestowed by others.

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation can still be fostered even within the confines of externally regulated behavior (e.g., obligatory expressions of gratitude) if the activity fosters the psychological needs of competence (i.e., feeling skilled at a task), connectedness (i.e., feeling connected to others), and autonomy (i.e., feeling in control of one's choices; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The gratitude curriculum might help children feel like gratitude aficionados, knowing when and how to express their gratitude and appreciation. In addition, once gratitude is expressed and the target of the gratitude responds in a favorable manner, the student may feel more connected to that person and may feel happier, thus reinforcing the initial expression of gratitude.

Within the benefit-appraisal curriculum, instructors could focus on the choices surrounding when, to whom, and how to express gratitude, therefore underscoring the beneficiary's autonomy (cf. Nelson et al., 2013). So, even if learning about and expressing gratitude are initially mandated, students may enjoy the process and, over time, become intrinsically motivated to feel and express gratitude, whether it is assigned as homework or not. Indeed, many children still enjoy reading and arithmetic even though it is a major part of their early compulsory academic experience. Future research could explore the degree to which the gratitude curriculum fosters psychological-need satisfaction, as well as the degree to which this psychological-need satisfaction promotes intrinsic motivation to express gratitude.

Conclusion

In sum, the benefit-appraisal intervention sheds light on how and at what age gratitude can be taught to children, stimulates questions about the developmental processes associated with gratitude, and ushers new research on the potential role of gratitude as a protective factor among youth. Given the association of gratitude with myriad positive outcomes (e.g., well-being, physical health, positive relationships), research on the development of gratitude in youth and its long-term outcomes should be a priority for the future. Nearly every child in the West has been scolded for not saying "thank you" or pressed into writing obligatory thank-you notes. Teaching children how gratitude works—that is, the process by which one recognizes that benefactors choose to help, add value, and suffer costs—might help them to internalize the importance of gratitude, setting them up with a habit and attitude that will deliver hedonic and tangible returns for years to come.

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Kristin Layous, BA (University of California, Santa Barbara), MA (The Ohio State University), is a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Riverside. Her research interests include understanding how to sustainably increase happiness through the practice of simple positive activities, as well as the differential outcomes of discrete positive emotions.

Sonja Lyubomirsky, AB (Harvard University), PhD (Stanford University), is Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of *The How of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness*. She investigates why some people are happier than others, the benefits of happiness, and how to sustainably increase happiness.

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