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UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

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© Author(s)
E-ISSN 2724-2943
ISSN 2723-973X

Psychology Hub (2022)
XXXIX, 3, 33-42

Article info

Submitted: 02 February 2022
Accepted: 15 June 2022
DOI: 10.13133/2724-2943/17922

The Definition and Similar Constructs of Gratitude: A Critical Review

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Abstract

Despite the interest shown in the concept of gratitude over the last decade, there is no agreement on its definition and underlying dimensions. This paper provides a critical review of the definitions of gratitude and other similar constructs. A total of 22 definitions for gratitude were identified. The identified definitions were analyzed against each other for their commonality and differences. After highlighting the lacunae, lack of consensus, and overlap among the available definitions of gratitude, this paper differentiates gratitude from other similar constructs.

Keywords: Gratitude, Definition, Indebtedness, Reciprocity norms, Obligation, and Gratitude's similar construct

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Introduction

Gratitude is not an uncommon emotion that can be easily neglected and deserves empirical and theoretical attention (Sommers & Kosmitzki, 1988). Among the consequences of gratitude we find personal and relational well-being (Nezlek, Newman, & Thrash, 2017; Jans-Beken et al., 2019). Research on gratitude has been done from the personal level to interpersonal (Leong et al., 2020), group (Tsang, 2020), and recently to the organizational level (Fehr, Fulmer, Awtrey, & Miller, 2017; Ford, Wang, Jin, & Eisenberger, 2018). The studies have been sprawling from the domain of psychology, social psychology (Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017), religion (Aghababaei, Błachnio, & Aminikhoo, 2018), medical (Otto, Szczesny, Soriano, Laurenceau, & Siegel, 2016), and business management (Fehr et al., 2017). The context and usage of the term gratitude differ in all this research domains. For example, experimental studies have tried to understand the gratitude from personal to social ('one to one') context. Religious literature tries to understand the metaphysical nature of gratitude. They have defined gratitude from a 'generalized context.' There are also sport (Chen, & Chang, 2017) and organizational literature (Cain, Cairo, Duffy, Meli, Rye, & Worthington Jr, 2019) where there is a 'specific' conception of gratitude (towards the coach or team leader). Moreover, several studies have also used some similar terms such as 'indebtedness' (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008), or 'reciprocity norms' (DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, Williams, & Dickens, 2010; Zhang, Chen, & Ni, 2020) while discussing the meaning of gratitude.

In response to the rising interest in gratitude, it is essential to gain a more in-depth examination of the term gratitude. In

this aspect, we aim to critically review the definition of gratitude and differentiate this construct from other similar constructs within the context of the selected gratitude literature. We have highlighted the commonalities, differences, and lacunae of the available definitions by doing this analysis.

Locating definitions

We chose the following criteria to find the gratitude definitions:

- a) The definitions should be from a broader discipline (psychology, personality, business studies, and sociology), and they also should have been cited by journals indexed in Scopus (Q3 and above) at least 100 times or more except some classical works like Smith (1976) and Simmel (1950).
- b) We adopted "purposive sampling," as well as "snowball" sampling to get the definitions. Our objective was to get the various definitions possible ("maximum variation sampling") from the literature. The keyword used was gratitude and gratefulness.

Analysing the definitions

We did content analysis and table the available definitions with the authors and years. From the table developed, we identified the themes. The emerging (common) themes from the definitions and the lack of divergence were discussed. To understand the term gratitude further, we have also differentiated gratitude from similar terms such as appreciation, reciprocity norms as such.

Tab. 1. Definitions of Gratitude

No.	Author	Definition
1	Klein (1957)	"that underlies the appreciation of goodness in others and in oneself". "Gratitude is rooted in the emotions and attitudes that arise in the earliest stage of infancy, when for the baby the mother is the one and only object".
2	Smith (1976)	"a passion or sentiment that motivates us to reward others for the good things they have done for us."
3	Simmel (1950)	"a cognitive-emotional reminder to people of their need to reciprocate."
4	Berocci & Millard (1963)	"The willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience."
5	Weiner (1985)	"an attribution-dependent state."
6	Clore, Ortony, & Foss (1987)	"a complex state that belongs to the category of affective-cognitive conditions in which both effect and cognition are predominant-meaning components of the term."
7	Lazarus & Lazarus (1994)	"one of the "empathic emotions" whose roots lie in the capacity to empathize with others."
8	Fitzgerald (1998)	"Gratitude include not only a warm sense of appreciation for something or somebody but also a sense of goodwill towards that thing or person and a resultant disposition to act positively because of appreciation and goodwill."
9	McCullough et al. (2001)	"a social emotion produced in social exchanges."
10	McCullough et al., (2002).	"a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's behavior in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains."
11	Emmons, & McCullough (2003).	"a state that requires one to endorse two facts: (a) that one has achieved a positive outcome, and (b) that this positive outcome came from an external source."
12	Emmons & McCullough (2004)	"a positive emotional reaction in response to the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone."
13	Tsang (2006a)	"a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another"
14	Tsang, (2006b)	"a positive emotion that can occur in a recipient when a benefactor intentionally gives a valued gift to them."
15	McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen (2008).	"a positive emotion that typically flows from the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person."
16	Lambert et al. (2009)	"includes being grateful for all sorts of gifts in life (rather than for benefits conferred by those cherished by others). gratitude is viewed more like a life orientation (way of life, personality type)"
17	Wood, Froh & Geraghty (2010)	"a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world."
18	Sansone & Sansone (2010)	"is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself; it is a general state of thankfulness and appreciation."
19	Emmons & Mishra (2011)	"Gratitude requires people to acknowledge that their good fortune is attributable to someone else and is most often directed towards another individual."
20	Chopik, Newton, Ryan, Kashdan, & Jarden (2019)	"as an adaptive evolutionary mechanism that is relevant to healthy psychological and interpersonal outcomes"
21	Solomon (1977), as quoted in Luccarelli (2019)	"Awareness of a gain for which someone else is responsible."

Review of the gratitude definitions

Gratitude is conceptualized differently by different scholars. A sample of definitions of gratitude is presented in the table below. The following table highlights the inconsistencies in the conceptualization of gratitude.

It can be observed that, when defining gratitude, the authors highlighted the following:

- a) Function of gratitude
- b) Nature of gratitude (emotion/trait)
- c) Cause of gratitude
- d) Effects of gratitude (consequences)
- e) Actors involved (helper required or not)

- f) Origin of gratitude (trait/state)
- g) There is no agreement among scholars about what gratitude is. A closer analysis of these definitions brought to light some interesting aspects.

Divergence in the elements highlighted

It is observed that different authors highlighted different aspects of gratitude, focusing on some aspects while ignoring others, which is the reason for non-convergence among authors. This analysis has been captured in Table 2 below:

Tab. 2. Comparison of Key Elements among the Definitions

No	Author	Definition		Key Elements			
		Definition	defined as	Emotion/ Trait	Cause	Function	Target
1	Klein (1957)	“underlies the appreciation of goodness in others and in oneself”. “Gratitude is rooted in the emotions and attitudes that arise in the earliest stage of infancy, when for the baby the mother is the one and only object”.	Emotion and attitude	Emotion	appreciation of goodness	build up the relation to the good objects	Good objects (for the infanc, its mother)
2	Smith (1976)	“a passion or sentiment that motivates us to reward others for the good things they have done for us.”	Passion or sentiment	Emotion	Good things received	To reward others	Who has done the right things
3	Simmel (1950)	“is also a cognitive-emotional reminder to people of their need to reciprocate.”	Cognitive-emotional reminder	Emotion but also cognitive	X	To reciprocate	Explicitly not mentioned
4	Bertocci & Millard (1963)	“The willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one’s experience.”	Willingness to recognize	Willingness is intention only. Since the ‘felt’ aspect is mentioned here, it is inferred that gratitude is an emotion.	Unearned increments of value	X	X
5	Weiner (1985)	an attribution-dependent state	Attribution-dependent state	State	X	X	X
6	Clore, Ortony, & Foss (1987)	“a complex state that belongs to the category of affective-cognitive conditions in which both affect and cognition are predominant-meaning components of the term.”	Affective-cognitive condition	Emotion	X	X	X
7	Lazarus & Lazarus (1994)	“One of the “empathic emotions” whose roots lie in the capacity to empathize with others.”	Capacity to empathize with others	Emotion	X	X	Others; not clear whether it is a beneficiary
8	Fitzgerald (1998)	“include not only a warm sense of appreciation for something or somebody but also a sense of goodwill towards that thing or person and a resultant disposition to act positively because of appreciation and goodwill.”	A warm sense of appreciation, sense of goodwill toward the thing or person, and a resultant disposition to act positively	Disposition-Trait	Appreciation and goodwill	X	Thing or person
9	McCullough et al., (2001).	“a social emotion produced in social exchanges.”	Social emotion	Emotion	X	X	X
10	McCullough et al. (2002)	“a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s behavior in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains.”	Generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion	Both trait (generalized tendency) and emotion (respond with grateful emotion)	To the roles of other people’s behavior in the positive experiences and outcomes	X	Other people’s behavior
11	Emmons & McCullough (2003).	“a state that requires one to endorse two facts: (a) that one has achieved a positive outcome, and (b) that this positive outcome came from an external source.”	A state that requires one to endorse	State	A positive outcome from an external source	X	An external source

No	Author	Definition		Key Elements			
		Definition	defined as	Emotion/ Trait	Cause	Function	Target
12	Emmons & McCullough (2004)	“a positive emotional reaction in response to the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone.”	Positive emotional reaction	Emotion	To the receipt of a gift or benefit from someone	X	Someone
13	Tsang (2006a).	“a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another”	Positive emotional reaction	Emotion	to the receipt of benefit resulting from good intentions	X	Another
14	Tsang (2006b)	“a positive emotion that can occur in a recipient when a benefactor intentionally gives a valued gift to them.”	Positive emotion	Emotion	A gift valued by the self	X	Helper
15	McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen (2008).	“a positive emotion that typically flows from the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person.”	Positive emotion	Emotion	From the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person	X	Another person
16	Lambert et al. (2009)	“includes being grateful for all sorts of gifts in life (rather than for benefits conferred by those cherished others); gratitude is viewed more like a life orientation.”	A life orientation (i.e., way of life)	Trait	For all sorts of gifts in life	X	All sorts of gifts in life
17	Wood, Froh, & Geraghty (2010)	“A life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world.”	A life orientation	Trait	Positive in the world	Orients towards the positive	Positive in the world
18	Sansone & Sansone (2010)	“is the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself; it is a general state of thankfulness and appreciation.”	Appreciation; state of thankfulness	State	Valuable and meaningful to oneself	X	Not specifically but implicitly mentioned (thankfulness for the blessing)
19	Emmons & Mishra (2011)	The tendency “to acknowledge that their good fortune is attributable to someone else and is most often directed towards another individual”	A tendency to acknowledge that their good fortune is attributable to someone else	State	Good fortune	Attribution	Towards another individual
20	Luccarelli (2019)	“an awareness of a gain for which someone else is responsible.”	Awareness of a gain	Momentary feeling/not mentioned as emotion.	Gain	X	Mentioned
21	Chopik et al. (2019)	“an adaptive evolutionary mechanism that is relevant to healthy psychological and interpersonal outcomes”	Adaptive evolutionary mechanism	Trait	X	Personal and social well-being	X

The table above highlights that some definitions include gratitude functions (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Emmons & Mishra, 2011), while others do not include these functions (McCullough et al., 2001; Tsang, 2006a). Some definitions require the personal presence of helpers for gratitude to be generated (Luccarelli, 2019), while others (Weiner, 1985; Clore, Ortony, & Foss, 1987) state that this is not a necessary condition. Some definitions mention antecedents and consequences (Smith, 1976; Emmons & Mishra, 2011), while others (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) ignore them. Similarly, some define gratitude as an emotion (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), some define it as cognition (Clore, Ortony, & Foss, 1987; Luccarelli, 2019), and some others define it as both cognition and emotion (Simmel, 1950).

The proposed definition of Sansone and Sansone (2010) transcends the involved members (benefactor and beneficiary) and broadens it further to be aware of life's blessings.

This analysis is better captured in the table below:

Tab. 3. Analysis of the Definitions

No.	Author	Emotion	Trait	Cause	Function	Target
1	Klein (1957)	✓		✓	✓	✓
2	Smith (1976)	✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Simmel (1950)	✓			✓	
4	Bertocci & Millard (1963)	✓		✓		
5	Weiner (1985)	✓				
6	Clore, Ortony, & Foss (1987)	✓				
7	Lazarus & Lazarus (1994)	✓				✓
8	Fitzgerald (1998)		✓	✓		✓
9	McCullough et al., (2001).	✓				
10	McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang (2002).	✓		✓		✓
11	Emmons & McCullough (2003).	✓		✓		✓

12	Emmons & McCullough, (2004)	✓	✓	✓
13	Tsang, (2006a).	✓	✓	✓
14	McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen (2006); Tsang (2006b)	✓	✓	✓
15	McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen (2008).	✓	✓	✓
16	Lambert et al. (2009)		✓	✓
17	Wood, Froh, & Geraghty (2010)		✓	✓
18	Sansone & Sansone (2010)		✓	✓
19	Emmons & Mishra (2011)	✓		✓
20	Chopik et al. (2019)		✓	✓
21	Luccarelli (2019)	✓	✓	✓

Gratitude Vs. similar other constructs

The inconsistencies among the definitions used, especially when the definitions are extended to antecedents and consequences, create a situation wherein a concept can be confused with another similar concept. There could be overlap among the concepts. Hence, it becomes vital to understand other related concepts to develop a better understanding of gratitude. Hence this section captures how gratitude is different from similar concepts such as appreciation, reciprocity norms, indebtedness, obligation, and positive mood.

Gratitude and appreciation

When we come across a good painting, we appreciate its author for his or her talent. When we see a person helping a blind person cross the road, we appreciate that act. Appreciation can be for good work or help given/done to anyone and not necessarily towards oneself. In contrast, the beneficiary's feeling of gratitude is for the helper only.

Appreciation can also happen in the context of the 'process of gratitude.' When help is received, we appreciate the effort of the person and also feel grateful to them. Appreciation is for others' actions. When somebody does more than what is expected, we appreciate their effort or act. For example, in the work of Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008), the big sisters (existing members) in the sorority welcome new members (little sisters) by giving them gifts. The little sisters might have appreciated the big sisters' efforts to give gifts, accompanied by feelings of gratitude for the welcome.

Thus, it can be concluded that gratitude is a subordinate feature of appreciation. Gratitude is generated when a benefit is recognized and is accompanied by a sense of thankfulness (Adler & Fagley, 2005). In contrast, there is no such feeling (the 'emotional' part is missing) in appreciation. Gratitude is felt for the addressed 'need' (of the beneficiary). When needs are not met (the benefactor is not successful in helping) and yet the efforts exhibited by others is more than what one expected, we (only) appreciate them (but do not feel grateful). On the other hand, gratitude is felt when we feel we got what we need or more than we deserved/expected.

So, gratitude is experienced only when our needs are met with the help of others. In the above example, while both the little sisters and the teachers/staff appreciate the gesture, only little sisters experience gratitude and not the others.

The following illustrates the difference between Gratitude and Appreciation:

- 1) Gratitude: Feeling/emotions experienced when a person thinks as follows: "I *got more* (or equal to) than what I deserved (based on expectation)."
- 2) Appreciation: Feeling/emotions experienced when a person thinks as follows: "Others *did (tried to help or helped)* more than I expected from them."

Expectations in both cases are social and are always attributed. "Social" means that expectations are formed while interacting with others, especially during the early socialization stage. "Attributed" means that they are subjective in the actor's mind and hence not strictly comparable across people.

The difference between gratitude and appreciation is captured in the table below.

Tab. 4. Difference between Gratitude and Appreciation

For whom the beneficiary feels?	Higher than expected	
	Benefit	Effort
	Self	Gratitude
Other		Appreciation

Just because there are differences between gratitude and appreciation, it does not mean that there are no overlaps between the two concepts. There are feelings of appreciation when gratitude is experienced as well. If others' efforts or performance exceeded our expectations and are also higher than what one thought one deserved, the person will feel both appreciation and gratitude. However, in cases where a person feels both appreciation and gratitude, as gratitude is a more robust (higher-order) emotion, gratitude may overwhelm feelings of appreciation, making the person feel only gratitude.

Suppose others' efforts or performance exceeded one's expectations of them but are lower than what one thought they deserved or lower than the benefits one was expecting (or one thought they deserved). In that case, only appreciation will be felt, and "gratitude" will not be felt. When one feels that one got more than one expected (deserved), one feels gratitude independent of the person's efforts. We may not appreciate the person, but we will be grateful. Moreover, appreciation can be done by a neutral third party who witnesses a voluntary helping behavior, but that third party may not feel grateful for the helper. However, a grateful feeling emerges between the helper and beneficiary directed towards the helper.

Gratitude and reciprocity norms

The reciprocity norm is the personal awareness of one's obligation to pay back (McConnell, 1993). The gratitude here is beyond the exchange of a gift. It is subjective, personal, and relational, whereas reciprocity is purely perfunctory and impersonal. In some experimental studies, it was proven that gratitude has its pro-social consequences beyond the reciprocity

norms (DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, Williams, & Dickens, 2010). The differences between gratitude and reciprocity norms are captured in the table below.

Tab. 5. Difference between Gratitude and Reciprocity

		<i>A propensity to help others and receive help because</i>	
		Someone helped him (but it may not be more than what he expected)	Because he was lucky to receive extraordinary benefit
<i>Nature of return/feelings</i>	Specific (limited to the benefactor)	Reciprocity	
	Generic (towards everyone)		Gratitude

Both gratitude and reciprocity norms can lead to pro-social behaviors. However, gratitude has a higher propensity to create pro-social behavior as a specific relationship does not influence it. On the other hand, there is a possibility that pro-social behavior will be more generic (not directed towards anyone) yet the target of the gratitude feeling may be specific towards the helper and might take more time to get formed in case of reciprocity norms. Under the gratitude condition, participants exhibit socially inclusive behaviors (prefer to help the benefactor even at the cost of loss of money, facilitating pro-social behaviors even at the cost of losing monetary benefits (Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & Desteno, 2012). This is not so in the case of reciprocity norms.

Gratitude and indebtedness

Indebtedness is “a state of obligation to repay another.” This tendency comes from the reciprocity norms that we need to repay the other as we feel obliged to reciprocate the help they received. Gratitude is beyond the “tit-for-tat” mentality. The benefit received because of gratitude can never be equaled by another act, as the original act was unintentional. However, indebtedness can be equaled (Greenberg, 1980).

Indebtedness is a negative feeling or an unpleasant and aversive psychological state. People do not want to feel indebtedness (Bernabé-Valero, Moret-Tatay, & Navarro-Sancho, 2018; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Studies indicate that people prefer gratitude (Gallup, 1998), as gratitude is a pleasant and positive emotion. It is related to (but not equivalent to) positive emotions, like happiness.

Indebtedness and gratitude primarily differ in the motivational aspect (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Indebtedness has avoidance motivation, whereas gratitude has pro-social motivations (Gray, Emmons, & Morrison, 2001; Emmons, Froh, & Rose, 2019). Indebtedness is felt when the extrinsic motivation is to pay back. Individuals are grateful when the motive to help is a benevolent motive and not an ulterior motive (Visserman, Righetti, Impett, Keltner, & Van Lange, 2018; Weinstein, DeHaan & Ryan, 2010).

They also differ in the way the received help is viewed. Grateful feeling concern for relational value (motivations and the perceived values of the received favor), whereas indebtedness

concerns the restoration of equity (Oishi, Koo, Lim, & Suh, 2019; Peng, Nelissen, & Zeelenberg, 2018). The grateful feeling is accompanied by an intrinsic motivation to be pro-social for the received benefits. Indebtedness is accompanied by extrinsic motivation.

Tab. 6. Difference between Gratitude and Indebtedness

		<i>Want to help because of:</i>	
		Someone helped him when no one was willing to help (but he sought help)	Because he was lucky to receive extraordinary benefit
<i>Nature of emotions</i>	Negative and specific	Indebtedness	
	Positive and generic		Gratitude

Gratitude and obligation

An obligation is a negative feeling. People feel uncomfortable (like indebtedness) with an obligation (compelled to reciprocate). Gratitude is a positive feeling (willingly reciprocate). It is like the feeling of indebtedness. Here too, it is the nature of motivation that distinguishes gratitude or obligation (Fitzgerald, 1998; Carr, 2013).

Gratitude and positive mood

Gratitude is a positive emotion. It has a specific cause. On the other hand, the positive mood does not have any specific cause and is generic. The target of gratitude is towards others, human or non-human (Luccarelli, 2019), whereas positive mood is not. A positive mood increases the pro-social response to a situation, but it has a limitation. People with a positive mood may not go for a helping behavior that costs them. Nevertheless, under a grateful condition, people extend their pro-sociality even though it costs them (Tsang, 2006; Jans-Beken et al., 2020).

Discussion

This paper aims to identify and analyze the published definitions of gratitude and the similar constructs of gratitude.

Creating a single definition – the issue

The table 2 and 3 indicate no common thread or a common element that runs across all the definitions. Therefore, it is difficult to converge on one definition of gratitude. Instead of converging to a single definition based on common elements, the possible strategy to bring different scholars together is to create an exhaustive set of elements used by all the scholars. It can be done in such a manner that none of the elements highlighted in any of the definitions are missed. However, this approach can create redundancy. There is a possibility that some of the elements that should not be a part of the definition

would get included. While the redundancy could be useful for better communication across domains, it makes the resultant definition inaccurate and may overlap with similar concepts. The overlap would potentially impact the discriminant validity of the concept at the time of operationalization. It can lead to a problem of concept stretching (Osigweh, 1989).

Is it possible to reduce redundancy? While exploring the elements, it was found that the definition of gratitude also included its antecedents and consequences. For example, many definitions mention the benefits of gratitude. The inclusion of antecedents and consequences creates unnecessary redundancy even though they help the reader understand the concept better and play an essential role in communication. Hence it is proposed that “antecedents” and “consequences” should not be considered part of the definition. They should, therefore, be excluded from the definition of gratitude.

Contradiction in terms of the actors involved

The definitions also throw up another contradiction for the actors involved in the experience of gratitude. Some authors (Luccarelli, 2019) assume the presence of a helper (as a person) and beneficiary, while other authors (Bertocci & Millard, 1963) assume the presence of only the beneficiary, with the helper missing from the definition. According to the first set of authors, gratitude is experienced towards another person. According to the authors' second set, gratitude is not experienced towards another person; however, it can be experienced towards an inanimate thing or God. Combining these two, it can be argued that the beneficiary attributes gratitude. The beneficiary might attribute gratitude to a person or situation (Charzyńska, 2020). The implication is that gratitude is experienced to the expectation of benefit in a situation. It is not an expectation from another (helper) but an expectation based on the perception of “what the experiencer deserves.” It is a common observation to notice people being grateful to God, which suggests that a human helper's presence is not necessary. It indicates that gratitude is expressed only compared to an expectation, as a comparison is always involved while experiencing gratitude. The comparison is based on the “expectation that a person had formed of a situation, based on various factors, including past.”

Hence, the experience of gratitude relates more to the “expectation the beneficiary had from a situation.” Since any situation occurs in a particular space, with time and to individuals, the experience of gratitude will differ based on the situation. Likewise, the expectation of the beneficiary will also differ based on the situation.

Gratitude – cognition, emotion, or affect?

One more inconsistency among the definitions relates to whether gratitude is cognition, emotion, or affect. It has been observed that some authors describe gratitude as cognition (Simmel, 1950) while others describe gratitude as emotion or affect (Fitzgerald, 1998), and some others as both affect and cognition (Clare, Ortony, & Foss, 1987).

This paper opines that gratitude is an emotion. It has also been conceptualized as affect by some scholars, especially

when gratitude is off the trait type (rather than state type, when it is an emotion) or when it becomes collective (O'Brien, Mendonça, & Price, 2018). McCullough et al. (2001) define gratitude as affect with moral consequences for the societies hinting towards the collective consequences of gratitude. However, gratitude is not simply a pure cognition. Cognition can be an antecedent (as well, therefore) to gratitude because it is involved in assessing what the beneficiary receives beyond the unexpected, and emotion is the appreciation felt when the assessment of “unexpected benefit” has been made.

Based on the above analysis, it is proposed that the definition of gratitude should have the following components:

- a) Emotions
- b) Unexpected benefits perceived.
- c) It is situational though there is a possibility of trait gratitude.

Discussion on gratitude and similar constructs

Literature has differentiated gratitude from other similar constructs through experimental studies. Still, the term is used interchangeably. Some of the terms like gratitude are appreciation, reciprocity norms, and indebtedness.

Gratitude and appreciation are different in their emergence, accompanied by emotion and target. Appreciation is part of the gratitude process, without accompanying the emotion ‘empathy.’ As the grateful beneficiary empathizes with the helper's effort, a grateful feeling arises. Thus, it can be concluded that gratitude is a subordinate feature of appreciation, and it is felt only by the beneficiary. In comparison, the ‘appreciation’ can be from any source. Sometimes, appreciation is also for the talent exhibited where the thankfulness feeling is not at all present.

While gratitude, reciprocity norms, and obligation happen in the dyadic, transactional context, gratitude is a positive and likable emotion. In grateful exchanges, there is a willingness to give back more than what we received. The tendency to payback or help is not only towards the helpers but also for others. Gratitude is more interchangeably used with the term ‘reciprocity norm.’ It can be observed in the gifting culture in all societies. Reciprocity norm and obligation also governs the social exchange like gratitude does. The reciprocity norm and obligation differ from gratitude in their motivation. The former has extrinsic motivation (to repay the received benefit) because of the involved ‘norm,’ whereas the gratitude has intrinsic motivation (to repay because of their discretion). The other significant difference is the social exchange's involved emotion: reciprocity norm and obligation are mere a transaction, not accompanied by the ‘feeling of thankfulness.’

Conclusion

The paper examines the literature definition of gratitude and distinguishes the term gratitude from other similar constructs. One of the earliest references of gratitude is the ‘moral memory of mankind’ by Adam Smith (1976). Since then, gratitude is defined and studied in various domains and contexts. On analyzing the definitions of popular studies, we found the

following themes to emerge - the function of gratitude, nature of gratitude (emotion/trait), cause of gratitude, effects of gratitude (consequences), actors involved (helper required or not), and origin of gratitude (trait/state). Based on the analysis, we propose that “antecedents” and “consequences” should not be expressed in the definitions. Moreover, it would help define gratitude from only three aspects—feeling/emotion, an unexpected benefit, and the situational aspect.

The paper also compared gratitude with similar other constructs and investigated the various theories of gratitude in detail. Our examination and analysis of gratitude to their similar terms showed that the similar terms differ from gratitude in their antecedents, consequences, target, and the accompanying emotion. A pro-social act based on a benevolent motivation is the cause and consequences of gratitude, as elucidated by the moral affect theory of gratitude. With the grateful emotion, people reciprocate the help to anyone, not necessarily to the helper. Those similar constructs lack this intrinsic motivation in the social exchanges and the motivation to help the third party.

Author Contributions: Authors’ contributions: All authors contributed to the study conception and design.

Conflict of interest: We declare that we have no conflict of interests. The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Funding: We have not received any funding for this study.

Ethical Approval: NA

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