



A new approach to measuring moral virtues: The Multi-Component Gratitude Measure



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ABSTRACT

Empirical explorations of moral virtues have increased dramatically recently. This paper introduces a new method of assessing moral virtue using gratitude as an example; a virtue that continues to be a topic of great interest in psychology, philosophy and education. We argue, and demonstrate empirically, that to comprehensively examine a moral virtue, it is necessary to explore its cognitive, affective, attitudinal (including motivational), and behavioural aspects. We have created the 'Multi-Component Gratitude Measure' (MCGM) comprised of four components, each designed to assess a distinct dimension of the virtue of gratitude: (a) conceptions (or understandings) of gratitude; (b) grateful emotions; (c) attitudes towards gratitude; and (d) gratitude-related behaviours. In contrast to existing measures, the MCGM aims to *comprehensively* examine the major components that constitute this complex moral construct. In two studies we illustrate the value of assessing these four components of gratitude and how individuals can differ in the number and 'type' of components they exemplify. Importantly, we demonstrate how well-being increases linearly with the number of components a person possesses, as measured by three distinct measures of well-being. We discuss individual differences in gratitude experience and what this means for personal flourishing as well as future measurement of moral constructs.

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1. Introduction

The measurement of moral virtues is notoriously difficult (Curren & Kotzee, 2014; Kristjánsson, 2015, chap. 3). There is much debate around the salient components of moral virtues and, more generally, of moral functioning, that would form the objects of measurement (Curzer, 2012). The present authors' viewpoint on measuring virtue focuses on the need to capture multiple components of moral functioning: cognitive; affective; conative/attitudinal; and behavioural. We suggest that cognitions influencing when and why a virtue is experienced constitute vital information that *can* and *should* be captured. Our approach brings together (philosophical) conceptual inquiry with (psychological) scale development.

The aims of this paper are threefold: to (1) highlight how conceptualisations of a construct feed into the measurement of the construct, in this case moral virtue; (2) demonstrate how measures of moral virtue should encompass multiple components – *cognitive*, *affective*, *conative/attitudinal* and *behavioural* – to comprehensively examine virtue; and (3) provide a new measure of gratitude.

The following section describes the various conceptualisations of gratitude debated in psychology and philosophy, underscoring the

diversity in understandings of this moral virtue. We hope that readers will recognise how the presence of differing conceptualisations could impact upon the experience of grateful emotions, attitudes towards gratitude and gratitude-related behaviours, and subsequently influence individuals' responses to existing gratitude scales.

After highlighting ways in which gratitude might be conceptualised, and the multiple components that need measuring to comprehensively examine this construct, we introduce the 'Multi-Component Gratitude Measure' (MCGM). Through a series of empirical tests of the MCGM we illustrate how conceptualisations of a construct contribute to its assessment, the relationship between cognitive, affective, attitudinal and behavioural components of gratitude and how these four components correlate with individuals' well-being. The multi-component approach and examination of conceptualisations of constructs could be adapted and utilised to examine other moral virtues (and even non-moral constructs). The remainder of this paper focuses on the particular moral virtue of gratitude, as a case in point.

1.1. Gratitude

Gratitude is no longer 'one of the neglected virtues in psychology' (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003, p. 431); it has received copious attention, in psychology and philosophy. Motivating this research focus are the benefits gratitude offers, both individually and socially. Early research suggested that increased levels of gratitude relates to increases in subjective well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), and

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more recent findings indicate that gratitude plays an important role in building and maintaining relationships (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & DeSteno, 2012), and promoting prosocial behaviours (Bartlett & De Steno, 2006). The positive effect of gratitude extends to sleep patterns (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009), academic attainment (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007), as well as protecting against depression, anxiety and materialism (Froh et al., 2007; Froh et al., 2011).

Gratitude is not a simple construct; researchers have argued, for instance, about the conceptual distinction between gratitude and appreciation and whether gratitude *must* involve a distinct benefactor (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009; Gulliford, Morgan, & Kristjánsson, 2013; Steindl-Rast, 2004).

In this paper, we argue that there is a need for a more comprehensive measure of gratitude that can adequately assess its multifaceted contours. We begin with an overview of what makes gratitude so complex, followed by a description of existing measures and their limitations. Subsequently, in three empirical studies, we present the MCGM alongside three existing gratitude scales. Responses to the MCGM items demonstrated adequate reliability and validity *in this sample* when compared with the existing measures. Further research is necessary to address the MCGM's reliability across different samples and test administrations (see Thompson, 2002). However, it should be noted that participants involved in the study were intentionally drawn to create a sample representative of the 'general population' (see Appendix 2).

We end with recommendations about the future application and examination of the MCGM.

1.1.1.1. Differing conceptualisations of gratitude

We have already mentioned some of the controversies that surround the structure of gratitude. Other complexities involve intentions; must a benefit be *intentionally* rendered, or is it possible to be grateful for a benefit that came about by accident? Attribution theorist Fritz Heider (1958) took it for granted that people feel grateful when they recognise themselves to be the recipients of an intentional act of kindness. Relatedly, Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver (1968) established that gratitude is determined by appraising benefits to be not only intentional but also altruistic (not driven by ulterior motives). They identified two further 'determinants' of gratitude; the benefit must be perceived by the recipient as *valuable* and *costly* to the benefactor. Wood, Joseph, & Maltby (2008) supported this position, finding that >80% of the variance in how much people thought they would experience gratitude in a situation was explained by perceptions of cost, value and altruistic intention.

In practice, benefactor intention operates not as a necessary *condition* of gratitude, but rather as an intensity variable which, if present, increases reported gratitude (see Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjánsson, 2013, p. 303). As such, gratitude might well be felt in circumstances where the benefactor's intentions were not uncomplicatedly benign. We found that while malicious and ulterior motives significantly undermined reported gratitude, they did not disqualify it (Gulliford & Morgan, 2016a).

Value of the benefit has been identified as a further determinant of gratitude (Tesser et al., 1968; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). However, most of us can readily identify with the experience of being the recipient of an unwanted (i.e. subjectively non-valuable) gift and being 'grateful for the thought' when an intended benefit fails to materialise. It seems reasonable to suggest that for some people the *actual value* of a tangible benefit is key to their experience of gratitude, while for others the *intention* might be more salient.

One final conceptual issue is whether gratitude is an inherently positively valenced concept or whether it encompasses negative elements. It has been dubbed 'the quintessential positive psychological trait' (Wood et al., 2009, p. 43). Gratitude's association with increased subjective well-being and positive affect (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003;

Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008), make the characterisation of gratitude as positive unsurprising.

We maintain, however, that the picture is far more complex and that gratitude is better characterised as a *mixed* emotion rather than an unambiguously positive one (Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Gulliford & Morgan, 2016b). In a prototype analysis of gratitude in the UK, we found that, alongside positive features, gratitude was also associated with features participants rated as negative, such as obligation, indebtedness, guilt and embarrassment (Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjánsson, 2014). Though some have attempted to dissociate gratitude from indebtedness (e.g., Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006), the distinction does not appear to be as clear-cut, at least to the layperson (Morgan et al., 2015).

This overview illustrates that there are multiple ways in which gratitude can be understood and experienced. This creates complications for its measurement; how do we validly assess gratitude when it is so notably diverse in its conception?

Three measures of gratitude are commonly implemented in research to date. The GQ6, created by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002), is a 6-item scale which assesses intensity, frequency, span and density of gratitude. The Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT, Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003) consists of three subscales; (1) Sense of Abundance; (2) Simple Appreciation; and (3) Appreciation of Others.² Finally, the Appreciation scale, developed by Adler and Fagley (2005), assesses eight subscales: 'Have Focus'; 'Awe'; 'Ritual'; 'Present moment'; 'Self/Social comparison'; 'Gratitude'; 'Loss/Adversity'; and 'Interpersonal'.³

The majority of items in existing gratitude measures aim to assess grateful *emotions* only. Most notable is the GQ6, where all 6 items arguably assess feelings of gratitude. The emphasis on emotion is evident in the definition of gratitude offered: 'a tendency to recognise and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence' (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 112). Whilst *feelings* of gratitude are clearly a crucial part of gratitude, understood as a complex trait of character, emotion is not the only dimension involved. A second component of gratitude is behaviour: for instance, expressions of thanks or recognition of others' beneficence. Yet this element of grateful experience is missing from the GQ6 and barely features in the GRAT. Items in the Appreciation scale do address grateful/appreciative behaviours. However, items that assess behaviours are sometimes answered using a frequency scale and on other occasions answered using the Likert attitude scale which makes the overall evaluation of behaviours confusing and hard to reconcile.

Furthermore, and as highlighted by Lambert et al. (2009), these measures appear to reveal a mismatch between the authors' proposed definitions and their subsequent operationalisations of gratitude. Take, for example, the GRAT; Watkins et al. (2003) appear to define gratitude in 'benefit-triggered' terms, referring to Guralnik's (1971, p. 327) definition of gratitude as 'a feeling of thankful appreciation for favours received' (see Lambert et al., 2009). However, the GRAT also includes items which assess a more 'generalised' conception of gratitude, such as 'Oftentimes I have been overwhelmed by the beauty of nature'. The GQ6 similarly mixes up generalised and benefit-triggered definitions and operationalisations.

Adler and Fagley (2005) conceptualise gratitude as a subordinate facet of appreciation and limit gratitude to instances where a third person is inferred, for example, 'I notice the sacrifices that my friends make for me', 'I acknowledge when people have gone out of their way for me'. Interestingly, however, whilst Adler and Fagley (2005)

² The GRAT-short form containing 16 items (Thomas & Watkins, 2003) is utilised in the empirical studies presented in this paper.

³ Item analysis (with correlations over 0.50) produced a short form of the Appreciation scale containing 18 items and displaying strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). We utilised the short form of the Appreciation scale alongside the 'Gratitude' subscale in the studies presented here.

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