

## Note on Cultural Universals and Variations of Gratitude from an East Asian Point of View

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The current paper is a brief selective review of cross-cultural studies on gratitude and related feelings, especially indebtedness. The concept of gratitude has been investigated under the universality hypotheses, which postulates the following: (a) gratitude is affected by its antecedent variables, including gains of the beneficiary, cost to the benefactor, and the altruistic motivation of the benefactor; (b) gratitude includes positive feeling, such as attachment and respect for the benefactor, and the wish to repay the benefactor; (c) gratitude leads to behaviors such as expressions of the gratitude directed at the benefactor, requitals, repayments, generalized repayments and prosocial behaviors directed at others in general; and (d) experience of gratitude is related to positive attributes, such as well-being. The review of studies on gratitude from cultural points of view suggested that further studies on the following topics should be conducted in the future: (a) influences of cultural values on gratitude behaviors, including cultural differences in the expression of gratitude; (b) cultural differences in conceptions of gratitude; and (c) cultural differences in the association and concurrency between gratitude and other feelings such as indebtedness.

**Keywords:** gratitude, indebtedness, culture, East Asia

The current article is a review of the concepts and research on gratitude and related feelings that has been conducted from a cross-cultural perspective. Psychologists in the world do not seem to share a certain definition of gratitude. Therefore, firstly, the concept of gratitude and the related feeling, indebtedness is broadly defined as, “a positive emotional reaction to the receipt of a benefit that is perceived to have resulted from the good intentions of another” (Tsang, 2006, p. 139). Furthermore, I adopt the following definition of indebtedness, “a state of obligation to repay another” (Greenberg & Westcott, 1983, p. 85). Gratitude has played an important role in major religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. For example, the words “gratitude to God” are found both in the Bible and in the Koran. In Buddhism, feelings of gratitude, or debt of gratitude are important concepts, because they indicate the understanding that all humans and other beings in the universe are interdependent entities, which is a central doctrine in Buddhism. These facts suggest that gratitude could be a universal feeling that is positively regarded in all cultures, whereas to the contrary, ingratitude is regarded as immoral in most societies.

In spite of the important role of gratitude in society, only a few psychologists investigate this concept until the end of the 20th century. At the beginning of the 21st century, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) suggested that psychologists should more closely investigate gratitude. They argued that gratitude is a moral affect, because it is a barometer to sense the changes of interpersonal relations, it motivates moral behaviors, and it functions as a social reinforcer of moral behaviors such as prosocial behaviors.

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Studies on gratitude have increased since the beginning of the 21st century. A substantial number of studies have been conducted concerning the nature and functions of gratitude, and moreover, two books that comprehensively described and discussed about studies and issues related to gratitude have been published (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Watkins, 2014). The branch of psychology known as positive psychology might bring about a win-win situation for gratitude studies, because gratitude is usually experienced with positive feelings, and believed to have a relation to positive attributes such as agreeableness, prosocial orientation, and well-being. Recent studies on gratitude have investigated the relationship between personality traits and gratitude, the relationship between gratitude and well-being, interventions for gratitude, the development of gratitude, and gender differences in gratitude. Such studies have supported the broad hypothesis that the tendency to experience gratitude has a positive relationship with an active commitment to society and well-being.

### **Hypothesized cultural universals of gratitude**

During this decade, many investigations have been conducted on gratitude in Western societies, and a few studies have also been undertaken in non-Western societies. These studies, conducted in Taiwan (Chen & Kee, 2008), Hong Kong (Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2014; Zhao, 2010), Japan (Kuranaga & Higuchi, 2011; Naito & Sakata, 2010), and Thailand (Naito, Wangwan, & Tani, 2005), have confirmed findings in Western societies, indicating that gratitude has a positive relation with prosocial behaviors, positive aspects of personality traits as well as with well-being. Moreover, Chan (2010) showed the effect of gratitude trainings on well-being in Hong Kong. Additionally, in relation to feelings related to gratitude, Greenberg and Westcott (1983) suggested the cultural universality of indebtedness, based on studies undertaken by social anthropologists in Philippine and Japan and indicated that people in many societies feel indebtedness after they receive favors from others.

Findings in non-Western and Western countries suggest that gratitude is a universal feeling in the broad sense, in which receiving something valuable causes feelings of appreciation in the mind of the beneficiary. More specifically, literature on gratitude (e.g., McCullough et al., 2001; Smith, 2010) suggests the following hypotheses concerning the universal nature of gratitude.

- (a) Gratitude is affected by its antecedent variables, such as gains of the beneficiary, cost to the benefactor, and the altruistic motivations of the benefactor.
- (b) Gratitude includes components such as positive feelings, attachment and respect for the benefactor, as well as a wish to repay the benefactor.
- (c) Gratitude causes the following acts: expression of thanks to the benefactor, requitals, repayment, generalized repayment, or prosocial behaviors to others in general.
- (d) Tendency to experience gratitude is related to positive attributes such as well-being.

The cultural universality of above hypotheses regarding the nature of gratitude need to be examined by further empirical investigations. Nevertheless, considering aspects such as ways of expressing gratitude provides evidence of cultural variations. Indeed, several anecdotes and natural observations regarding cultural conflicts related to gratitude, as well as cross-cultural studies on gratitude suggest cultural differences in certain aspects of this concept.

## **Possible cultural variations in gratitude**

### ***Reports on conflicts due to cultural differences Conflict reports***

Cultural differences in gratitude may cause conflicts during interactions between people from different cultures. Such conflicts related to gratitude might result in serious distrust among people, because in many societies, the feeling of gratitude is regarded as a universal and indispensable part of human nature. Therefore, people might feel a “lack of humanity or a sense of immorality” when outsiders do not express gratitude in a familiar way. Possible cross cultural problems that might be caused by the expression of gratitude have been reported in books related to foreign affairs, as well as in guidebooks for foreign workers and travelers. Some authors have described conflicts by recounting instances of people who were perplexed by gratitude related behaviors of others, as illustrated by the following instances.

The first example was described in a guidebook for visitors to Thailand by Holmes and Tangtongtavy (1995), in which they illustrated possible conflicts concerning gratitude that foreigners might experience in Thailand. They explained with an example that Thai women might express less gratitude compared to Western women when they receive gifts, because according to Buddhist standards in Thailand, extreme desire for material things should be moderated. Therefore, the subdued expression of gratitude for material gifts reflected this restraint.

The second example concerns cultural difference in preferred timing of repayment for favors received from others. In the Japanese society, repayments are generally given shortly after receiving favors, where such behavior is considered to represent sincerity. However, these repayments sometimes disappoint people from other Asian countries. Murayama (1995) reported a discussion with one of his Chinese students about giving gifts and receiving reciprocal gifts in Japan. The Chinese student had brought gifts from China to his Japanese friends. Soon after giving these gifts, he received reciprocal gifts from Japanese people, which embarrassed him, because he considered that getting reciprocal gifts soon after giving gifts made the exchange look like a business exchange. These instances illustrate how culturally shared beliefs and values affect the expression of gratitude and repayment to benefactors.

There could be many intervening variables in the process between receiving favors from other and corresponding reciprocal behaviors, such as repayment, and prosocial behaviors. These intervening variables or components include evaluations of consequence to beneficiaries, interpretations of benefactors’ intent, causal inferences about benefactor’s actions and consequences, and cultural beliefs and values that enhance or reduce gratitude. These components may have cultural variations and could cause cultural differences in subsequent behaviors. For example cultural difference in causal attributions might produce different expressions of gratitude. One person might feel gratitude to God because God gave the peaceful days, whereas another might feel gratitude to the persons around them because they supported the peaceful days. Therefore, most of conflicts regarding gratitude might be understood by the precise analysis of the processes that are related to gratitude and cultural variables.

### ***Overview of cross-cultural studies on gratitude and indebtedness***

To date, only a few cross-cultural studies on gratitude have been conducted in the field of psychology. However, certain studies among them have focused commonly on the comparison or the relationship between gratitude and indebtedness. The rest of this paper will highlight studies on this relationship and other related emotions.

Some research has suggested the significance of indebtedness in Japanese society (Naito et al., 2010). Naito et al. (2005) compared positive feelings (gratitude) and indebtedness when receiving favors from others between university students from Thailand and Japan by using hypothetical scenarios. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance controlling for perceived desirability of helping, obligation to help, cost to benefactors, and gains of receivers suggested that Japanese students felt less gratitude and more indebtedness than Thai students. Moreover, Hitokoto, Niiya, and Tanaka-Matsumi (2008) conducted a cross-cultural study on indebtedness between university students from Japan and the US and reported that indebtedness had a stronger relationship with the cost to the benefactors among Japanese students than among US students. These two findings taken together suggest that Japanese students have a higher tendency to feel indebtedness, which is related to the cost of benefactors, after receiving favors than people in other societies.

Concurrency of gratitude and indebtedness in Korea is suggested by an intervention study by Lee, Choi, and Lyubomirsky (2013). Intervention studies on gratitude have confirmed the effects of experiencing gratitude on positive attributes, such as the prosocial tendency (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Lee et al. compared the effects of activities inspiring gratitude on well-being between students from South Korea and the US. They found that the well-being of Korean students were less affected by gratitude inspiring activities than in US students, whereas Korean students were similarly affected as US students by activities of kindness. The authors explained the abridged effects of gratitude in Korean students as resulting from their tendency to feel mixed emotions, such as mixed feelings of indebtedness and gratitude, which in combination might not result in positive feelings. It is also interesting to note that Aikawa, Yada, and Yoshino (2013) failed to show a significant effect of gratitude on well-being in Japan.

It should be noted that the significant role of indebtedness in East Asian societies has been referred in comparative studies of East Asian Buddhism. When Buddhism was conveyed from India to China, Chinese Buddhists developed and systematized conceptions of debt of gratitude by assimilating and accommodating Indian Buddhism to the Chinese culture of the day (Nakamura, 1979). Nagatomi (1989), based on an analysis of Buddhist literature suggested that while the idea of “repaying” had little theoretical significance in the ancient Buddhist traditions of India, the concept of *pao*, meaning “to return,” “to repay,” “to retaliate,” and “to respond,” among others was considered the basis of social relations in China. Consequently, Buddhism was accommodated to emphasize indebtedness along with gratitude in China, and this idea was conveyed with Confucianism, which has been an influential religion and emphasizes moral norms of interpersonal relations, to other East Asian societies such as Korea and Japan. The idea has been further developed in their societies.

Numerous studies on verbal expressions related to gratitude have been conducted in the field of linguistic pragmatics (e.g., Coulmas, 1981; Cui, 2012; Hinkel, 1994; Yoosefvand & Rasekh, 2014). These studies suggest that there are cultural differences in spoken expressions of gratitude. Among the studies, Coulmas (1981) compared expressions of gratitude in Japan and Europe and suggested that in Japan, receiving favors from others result in worry about the trouble that was caused to the benefactor, rather than thoughts about the

gains of the beneficiaries. In Japan, feelings of thankfulness are verbally expressed using either of two expressions: Arigatou (thank you), or sumimasen (I am sorry). Sumimasen is an expression that is also used when apologizing and it might be defined as the feeling of gratitude for a person's help, combined with the sorrow and sometimes guilt for having created a problem for them, which is also mingled with feelings of indebtedness. It is plausible that in many situations Japanese people simultaneously feel thankful, in addition to the above described feelings expressed by the word "sumimasen."

In general, studies on gratitude mentioned above have focused on East Asian societies and compared them with other Asian, or Western societies. However, other studies have compared gratitude within Western societies. Morgan, Gulliford, and Kristjánsson (2014) analyzed the concept of gratitude among students in the UK and compared their results with students from the US (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009) using prototype analysis that enables identifying peripheral and central concepts to the target concept of gratitude. They reported that gratitude was more closely linked to negative concepts such as indebtedness and guilt among UK students than among US students. In addition, UK students had a tendency to focus on habitual processes of gratitude more often than US students.

### **Suggestions for further studies on gratitude and culture**

Most investigations cited in this paper are limited to studies that have been conducted in Asian societies and a few studies conducted in Western countries. These cross-cultural studies suggest that the relationship between gratitude and indebtedness could be one possible dimension of cross-cultural comparison in future investigations.

#### *(a) Cultural differences in the concept of gratitude*

Morgan et al. (2014) suggested the possibility that concepts regarding gratitude held by people might vary with their culture. It is plausible that both central and peripheral concepts of gratitude in East Asian societies are different from other Asian societies, because Confucian ethics and Buddhism prevalent in East Asian cultures place indebtedness close to gratitude.

#### *(b) Cultural differences in concurrency of gratitude and other feelings such as indebtedness*

If gratitude is dissociated or distinguished from indebtedness in terms of functions and correlates (e.g., Watkins, Seheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006), there are other empirical questions: What degree would these feelings concur in social situations? and how would people cope with these positive and negative feelings? There could be cultural differences in

these points.

(c) *Cultural differences in relationships between gratitude, well-being and related concepts*

If it were assumed that indebtedness is strongly associated with gratitude and that indebtedness is commonly experienced in East Asian societies, how would indebtedness and negative feelings, such as feelings expressed by the word *sumimasen* function in East Asian societies? Would these negative feelings turn gratitude into a negative feeling? Or, do they have an adaptive social function as socially accepted emotions in the cultural settings?

Washizu and Naito (in press) based on a study conducted with female Japanese university students regarding the effect of indebtedness on social orientation and psychological well-being have suggested that interpersonal orientation is a significant positive mediator between indebtedness and psychological well-being. Namely, indebtedness have a positive effect on psychological well-being through interpersonal orientation). Therefore, indebtedness might have a positive effect on social orientation in societies where relationships of inevitable mutual dependency are emphasized as a cultural value.

This short article overviewed the studies on gratitude and related feelings from cultural point of view. Gratitude contains many psychological components or processes that can be affected by cultural factors and could bring cultural differences in gratitude. The current paper focused on the aspect of relation between gratitude and indebtedness.

Further studies on the other aspects will contribute to understanding of communalities and cultural differences of gratitude.

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