

The Development of Children's Understanding of Gratitude in Two Cultures

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Gratitude is a positive emotion that arises from the perception that one has benefited through the kindness or good intentions of another (McCullough et al., 2001). It serves critical functions in establishing, sustaining, and enhancing cooperation within interpersonal relationships and the broader society (McCullough et al., 2008). However, cultural frameworks influence how gratitude is understood and expressed, and little is known about how these differences emerge during childhood, especially outside WEIRD populations. The present research examines gratitude development in children from two contrasting cultural contexts: the U.S. and India.

At least two key cultural differences between the U.S. and India are relevant to this work. First, Indians tend to view interpersonal relationships and responsibilities as obligations, whereas WEIRD cultures place greater emphasis on their voluntary nature and are thus more inclined to evaluate partners' motivations to decide whether to remain in the relationship (Barrett et al., 2016; Miller & Luthar, 1989). Consequently, the helper's motives may carry more weight for U.S. Americans than for Indians, leading to differential gratitude expectations for voluntary versus non-voluntary benefits in the U.S. more than in India. Second, Indian culture promotes respect for social hierarchy, and proper hierarchical relations are maintained through codified views of reciprocity (Trommsdorff et al., 2007). Thus, gratitude and reciprocity in Indian society are more likely between individuals of similar status than between those of unequal status, whereas status may not impact gratitude and reciprocity in the U.S.

To test these hypotheses, we recruited children aged 5-10 years from middle-class families from across the U.S. ($N = 270$; total planned $N = 300$) and Bengaluru, India ($N = 276$; total planned $N = 300$). In a 2x2 within-subjects design, participants viewed vignettes depicting a protagonist helping a child (see Figure 1). We manipulated the helper's motivation (voluntary/non-voluntary) and the helper's social status (adult/child). Children were asked whether the recipient would feel grateful toward the helper. The hypotheses and analyses were pre-registered on OSF.

Preliminary results align with our predictions. Children's gratitude expectations revealed a 3-way interaction between Motive x Age x Culture ($ps < .0001$; Figure 2). Specifically, with age, U.S. children were less likely to expect that the recipient would feel grateful for non-voluntary help ($ps < .0001$), but their gratitude expectations for voluntary help remained consistently high across ages. There was a similar pattern observed among Indian children, but it was significantly weaker than among U.S. children (as seen in the 3-way interaction). Thus, as predicted, with age, U.S. children's gratitude expectations showed greater sensitivity to helper motives than those of Indian children.

Children's gratitude expectations also revealed a 3-way interaction between Status x Age x Culture ($p = .01$; Figure 3). Specifically, U.S. children's gratitude judgments did not vary based on adult vs. peer helpers; rather, there was only a main effect of age ($p < .0001$) such that older children generally expected lower gratitude than younger children. However, for the Indian sample, we found the expected Status X Age interaction ($p = .014$). With age, Indian children expected the recipient to feel less grateful for receiving help from an adult than a peer. Thus, as predicted, with age, Indian (but not U.S.) children's gratitude expectations showed increasing sensitivity to helper status.

These findings indicate that cultural values shape children’s emerging understanding of gratitude. In particular, features that current psychological and philosophical accounts consider central to gratitude, such as the benefactor’s motives, may not be universally central to gratitude. At the same time, features that are not included in current accounts, such as the relative status of helper and recipient, may need to be considered. More generally, gratitude – and likely other social and moral emotions – must be reexamined through a culturally informed lens.

Figure 1
Vignette (Boy Version) for the Child-Voluntary Condition

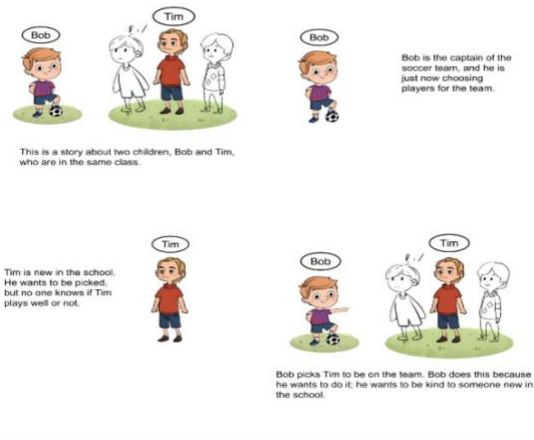
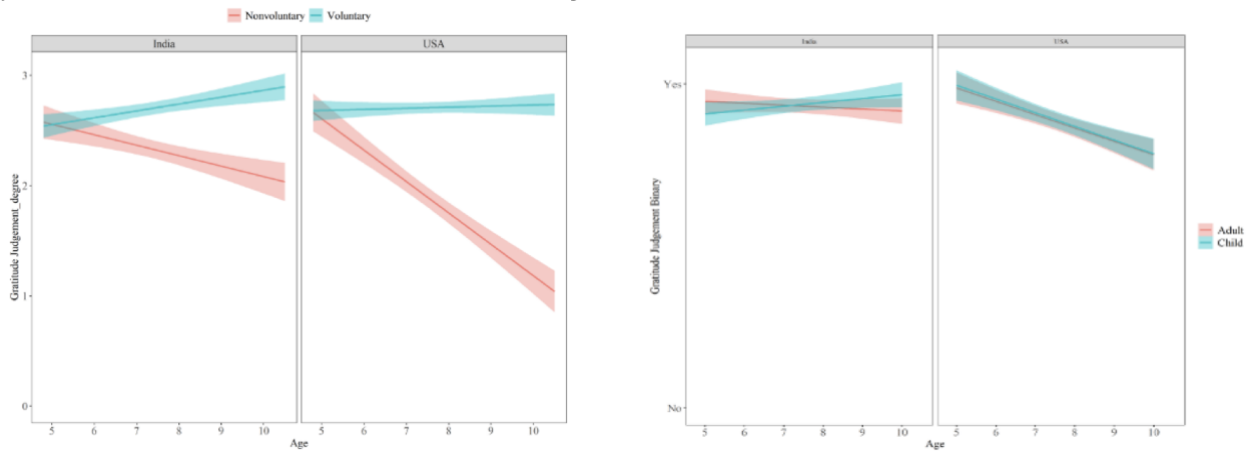


Figure 2
Indian and U.S. Children’s Gratitude Judgments for Voluntary and Nonvoluntary Help (left panel) and for Adult and Child Help (right panel) Across Ages



Note: The shaded areas represent 95% CIs.