

## **The Difference between Gratitude and Indebtedness**

**Shueh-Chin Ting**

Department of Education  
National University of Tainan  
Taiwan

### **Abstract**

*Previous research has yet to explore in detail what kind of emotions, gratitude or indebtedness, the beneficiary feels after receiving help. The differences between the two emotions need to be clarified. Based on literature reviews and our arguments, the present research indicated that gratitude and indebtedness are indeed two different concepts. Though both gratitude and indebtedness are emotions generated from helping others, the beneficiary's gratitude feelings can be easily produced when the benefactor has no purposes, has low expectations of returns, is selfless, sincere, and voluntary. Conversely, indebtedness may be produced. This kind of indebtedness influenced by external factors (benefactor factor) we termed external indebtedness. Those with gratitude tend to feel more positive emotions. On the contrary, those with external indebtedness tend to feel more negative emotions. Furthermore, we also found the other kind of indebtedness we termed internal indebtedness. Internal indebtedness occurs when the beneficiary wants to return the favor but is unable to return it. So, internal indebtedness may follow gratitude.*

**Keywords:** internal indebtedness, external indebtedness, gratitude, indebtedness

### **Research Background**

At present, kindness is lacking in society. There is too much scheming amongst people and not enough mutual care. Individual dissatisfaction and disunity within organizations are becoming one of society's latent problems. We believe that it is necessary to deliberate and solve this important social issue. Through reviewing academic papers on gratitude, the present study found that gratitude can benefit us in a multifaceted way (to individuals, others, and organizations). First, gratitude can produce positive outcomes for individuals, such as feelings of well-being (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009). Second, gratitude can help others; for example, it promotes altruistic behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006a). Third, gratitude can aid organizations by stimulating long-term performance benefits (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, & Kardes, 2009). Thus, gratitude is a concept worth advocating for in our society. If we can use it effectively in society and management system, it can help make contributions to social harmony and organizational performance.

### **Research Motives**

To date, many parts of gratitude are still unclear, including its concept and especially the differences between gratitude and similar emotions. The present study focuses on gratitude and indebtedness to clarify the differences between the two concepts. We aim to shed light on the two concepts of gratitude and indebtedness because there are ambiguities in the outcomes of past studies. Many researchers view indebtedness and gratitude as the same concept, largely affected by Mauss's (2002, first mentioned in 1925) study. Mauss believed that the cohesion of the community depends on reciprocity, so he viewed expressing gratitude as a simple exchange of interests whose object is to obtain social equilibrium. In the past, psychologists seem to agree with this view. For example, Greenberg (1980) perceived gratitude and indebtedness as synonyms. Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver (1968) viewed gratitude and indebtedness as compound variables because they believed the two are significantly correlated. However, some studies postulated that gratitude and indebtedness are different states. For example, Tsang (2006b) found that when helping others, whether the person receiving help feels grateful or indebted depends on the intentions of the helper. Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) indicated that gratitude is a positive emotion while indebtedness is a negative emotion. Based on the clues provided by previous research (Algoe et al., 2010; Tsang, 2006b), we believe it is necessary to further clarify whether the two concepts of gratitude and indebtedness are distinguishable.

Aside from the above mentioned research motives, the present study seeks to ask another question: when are feelings of gratitude and indebtedness produced? Tsang (2006b) found that the intentions of the helper affect the gratitude or indebtedness felt by the beneficiary, indicating that these feelings are produced instantly after the benefactor does the favor. However, different kinds of research have shown that when the beneficiary is thankful but cannot return the favor, a sense of guilt sets in (Cohen, 2006; Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005; Soscia, 2007). Although indebtedness and guilt are not exactly the same, since the beneficiary feels guilty (more serious than indebtedness) when the favor cannot be returned, the beneficiary should also feel indebted, indicating that gratitude and indebtedness occurs in sequential order (gratitude occurs first, then indebtedness). In other words, indebtedness does not occur at the moment the benefactor gives help. This is contrary to Tsang's argument that gratitude or indebtedness occurs at the immediate moment after the helper does the favor. Based on the discussion above, another motive of this study is to elucidate whether the beneficiary feels grateful or indebted when the help is received, or if gratitude and indebtedness occur in sequential order. Is the indebtedness felt by the beneficiary at the moment the benefactor gives a favor (e.g., due to the benefactor's high expectations of the favor being returned) the same as the indebtedness felt when the beneficiary wants to return the favor but is unable to return it?

### ***The Connotations of Gratitude***

The Oxford dictionary defines gratitude as the characteristics or state of being thankful by the party receiving kindness, appreciation of the good intentions of the benefactor, and intention to return the favor (Emmons, 2004, 2007). Based on this definition, there are two types of gratitude: trait gratitude and state gratitude. Trait gratitude is a characteristic innate within an individual while state gratitude is a reaction to an event. Gratitude derives from the Latin words *gratia* and *gratus*, which mean "benefit" and "pleasing", respectively. Words derived from these Latin roots signify geniality, generosity, gift, the beauty of giving and receiving, and without expectations of the favor being returned (Emmons, 2007). We elaborate on the meaning of gratitude from two standpoints: trait and state in the following passages.

#### **1. Trait Point-of-View**

Gratitude can be regarded as a personal trait; grateful individuals are more likely to emote feelings of gratitude (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). McCullough et al. were concerned primarily with gratitude as an affective trait that they call the grateful disposition or disposition toward gratitude. They defined the grateful disposition as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains. Based on the description in this definition, gratitude is a disposition to react with feelings of gratefulness.

From a philosophical and theological standpoint, gratitude is a virtue. Virtue, in essence, is a good habit, signifying that gratitude is a personal trait worthy of encouraging. Gratitude is a trait necessary to maintain well-being and to prosper for human-being. Gratitude manifests as a permanent gratefulness that continues to exist across time and space (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). In *Character Strengths and Virtues* written by Peterson and Seligman (2004), gratitude is regarded as a psychological trait and one of the 24 qualities that falls under the 6 broad virtues.

McCullough et al. (2002) believed gratitude is related to personality traits and social factors and proposed the viewpoint of the grateful disposition as an affective trait. Affective trait is the tendency of one with a low threshold to an emotion to experience more easily. When responding to the same event, compared to individuals with low gratitude trait, individuals with high gratitude trait will have more of a tendency to experience kindness from others more frequently and more intensely and to express thankfulness. McCullough et al. defined trait gratitude as the tendency of one to perceive others' benevolence and respond to others' charity with gratitude when experiencing positive experiences and outcome. Therefore, gratitude is regarded as a personality trait that is correlated with positive behavior such as helping others and acts of kindness. Referring to Rosenberg's (1998) emotional and psychological characteristics theory, McCullough et al. defined gratitude as an emotional trait and divided it into four facets: intensity, frequency, span, and density. These four facets are not independent of each other; rather, they co-occur. A dispositionally grateful person has a higher tendency to be a grateful person and therefore displays these four facets more intensely.

Since gratitude is a personality trait, it varies among individuals, i.e., different individuals experience different intensity, frequency, span, and density of gratitude. Gratitude is a steady emotional trait; individuals with trait gratitude respond with positive interpersonal emotions with an admiring, respectful, trusting, and serious attitude along with warmth, amicableness, and joy.

According to Maslow, self-actualized people tend to display the ability to appreciate everything by seeing the world through an innocent and novel point-of-view. In view of a wonderful life, they are in a state of awe, joy, wonder, or even in a spellbound or ecstatic state. Those who are grateful possess a sense of wonderment, thankfulness, and appreciation at life. These are the core characteristics of self-actualized individuals in Maslow's study. The points discussed above are all viewpoints of the trait theory.

## **2. State Point-of-View**

Gratitude can be regarded as a state and an emotion. When gratitude is conceptualized as an emotion, gratitude derives from benefits received from others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). McCullough, Kimeldorf, and Cohen (2008) more distinctively defined gratitude as a positive emotion that stems from others' willing, voluntary actions and reaping the benefits of the cost paid by others.

Compared to a philosophical and theological point of view, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) explored from a psychological standpoint and regarded gratitude as a kind of moral affect and illustrated the concept of gratitude as a type of emotion related to individuals' cognition and behavior in the field of ethics. Such is the viewpoint of state theory or outcome theory. Gratitude is a product of cognition and is also a state of emotion, which includes behaviors caused by gratitude.

Gratitude is a type of emotion; it is a feeling produced to thank others for their kindness after evaluating the cost expended by the helper, the value of the help to oneself, and the helper's level of altruism. However, the helper (a person) is not the only source for eliciting feelings of gratitude. For example, an experiment conducted by Emmons and McCullough in 2003 found that subjects showed gratefulness for "waking up in the morning", "life", "living in the moment", and "feeling lucky upon seeing other people's misfortunes". A specific benefactor was not indicated in these examples, illustrating the fact that the scope of gratitude expands beyond appreciation felt between individuals after a favor is received (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

## ***Benefits of Gratitude***

### **1. Prosocial behavior**

Prosocial behavior is a voluntary action from oneself that benefits other people or the community. Prosocial behavior occurs frequently in life. Sometimes we selflessly help strangers we pass by in the street. Sometimes we help others because of their expectations or for the exchange of interests. These are all examples of the connotation of prosocial behavior.

It has been well-documented in the literature that prosocial behavior and gratitude are positively correlated (Michie, 2009). Helping behavior elicited by gratitude does not necessarily have to be only directed at the benefactor, but can also be transferred to others. In other words, actions meant to return the favor can also be directed from the benefactor to a third party (McCullough et al., 2008). In addition, the favor generated by gratitude may be of higher in value than the benefactor's original favor. Because the favor generated by gratitude can produce a return of higher value, gratitude is different from other positive affects. Furthermore, regarding the object of the assistance, a grateful person may provide help to a stranger on the basis of feeling grateful (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Altruistic behavior can be elicited after a grateful person accepts help, even if such actions requires time or expends cost (Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & Desteno, 2012). Such prosocial behavior prevails even when dealing with strangers.

### **2. Other Advantages of Gratitude**

In the past, gratitude has not been a topic that was frequently discussed in western psychology—emphasis has been placed only in the past ten years. Gratitude can elicit positive outcomes; studies have proved gratitude has both a strong and particular correlation with many aspects of the well-being of the body and mind so much so that gratitude can be applied to clinical treatment (Wood et al., 2010). A grateful person is able to have health and subjective well-being (Emmons & Shelton, 2002), social support from others, and thus promote the harmonious development of society as a whole.

Other studies have indicated that those with a higher disposition to gratitude differ from those with a lower disposition to gratitude in psychological domains such as emotions, well-being, prosocial behavior, spirituality, and religion. Those with a higher disposition to gratitude report feeling more positive emotions and being more satisfied with life. They report feeling less negative emotions such as anxiety, jealousy, and insecurity. They are more inclined to prosocial behavior and are able to empathize, forgive, help, and support others (McCullough et al., 2002). On the subject of the relationship between feelings of gratitude and ethics, Haidt (2001) believes ethical behavior can induce feelings of gratefulness. Since gratitude is a reaction to other people's ethical behavior, feelings of gratitude can also act as a marker to gauge whether an action is ethical. In addition, gratitude can inspire further ethical behavior.

Fredrickson (2004), who established the Broaden-and-Build Theory, regards gratitude as a positive emotion. Positive emotions contain the following four characteristics: (1) positive emotions broaden people's attention and thinking; (2) positive emotions undo lingering negative emotions; (3) positive emotions stimulate diverse flexibility in the behavior displayed; (4) positive emotions build personal resources; (5) positive emotions can trigger an upward spiral into greater well-being in the future (Fredrickson, 2006). To date, relevant studies have confirmed that the aforementioned characteristics are found in positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, love, pride, and elevation (Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001; Haidt, 2001).

McCullough et al. (2001) believe gratitude plays three roles in human interaction. The first role is the moral barometer function. Namely, feeling grateful signifies that other people have done something of benefit to us. The second role is the moral motive function—gratitude galvanizes us to help other people, including our benefactor and even others who have nothing to do with us. The third is the moral reinforcer. Expressing gratitude of the beneficiary produces benefactor's feedback, prompting the benefactor to help others even more. The above mentioned are the three moral functions of gratitude.

McCullough et al. (2002) indicated that people with a higher disposition towards gratitude not only tend to experience feelings of gratitude, but they also tend to specifically attribute positive outcomes. Their study outcomes found that those with a higher disposition towards gratitude feel positive emotions and are more optimistic, lively, and satisfied with their life. They also feel less depressed, anxious, and stressed. In addition, they place less importance on material pursuits and can share the things they own with others.

Trait gratitude is considered to be a positive individual trait. When individuals with high gratitude trait evaluate a favor they have received in their life circumstances, they rate the value of the favor, the cost expended by the benefactor, and the sincerity of the benefactor higher, leading to a higher state gratitude. They also experience gratitude more intensely, more frequently, a broader span, and more objects of gratitude (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Linley, 2008). People who are more grateful are more willing to invest time and resources to establish relationships with others. Even if there is little or no return, they are still willing to do so. Investing time and resources are conducive to establishing trust, which in turn can maintain long-term relationships (Bartlett, & Desteno, 2006).

A longitudinal study involving college freshmen surveyed students' trait gratitude used the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) at the beginning of the semester before interpersonal relationships have been established to survey trait gratitude. At the end of the semester, the questionnaire was used to apprehend how well students with different trait gratitude have adapted. The study found that students with a high level of trait gratitude felt a stronger sense of belonging to society, had lower stress levels and lower levels of depression. Furthermore, gratitude's influence was greater than that of the Big Five Personality traits, demonstrating that gratitude plays a unique role in a healthy mind and body and social life (Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph, 2008).

### ***The Connotations of Indebtedness***

In the past, few studies have been conducted on indebtedness, but a few studies have provided basic concepts. Indebtedness and gratitude are both psychological reactions to accepting a favor from others (Mathews & Green, 2010). Individuals do not necessarily respond with gratefulness when accepting favors but sometimes respond with indebtedness (Tsang, 2006b). Greenberg (1980) defined indebtedness as a state of being obligated to repay another. This obligation originates from the norm of reciprocity. The norm of reciprocity indicates that (1) people should help those who have helped them and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them in the past.

The theory of indebtedness states that it is the duty of the beneficiary to repay the benefactor after the receipt of a benefit. So as long as one feels obliged to return the favor by the benefactor, feelings of indebtedness are elicited. This favor does not necessarily have to be altruistic. Individuals agree with reciprocal actions to avoid being thought as a socially insensitive person by others. Indebtedness reflects equality in social exchange (Mathews & Green, 2010). Nevertheless, are gratitude and indebtedness psychological reactions that occur independently from each other after accepting help from others? Or does gratitude also evoke feelings of indebtedness? Are the feelings of indebtedness prompted by gratitude the same as the indebtedness based on feeling obligated to return the favor? These questions have yet to be clarified.

### ***The Differences between Gratitude and Indebtedness***

Few past studies have distinguished between the concepts of gratitude and indebtedness. Recently, only Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts (2006), Tsang (2006b), and Algoe et al. (2010) have indicated that the differences between gratitude and indebtedness exist. It is clear that evidence on whether differences between gratitude and indebtedness exist is still lacking.

Watkins et al. (2006) found that when benefactors raised their expectation of repayment of the favor, the beneficiary felt more indebted while feeling less grateful. The beneficiary's ways of thinking and action tendencies were also not the same. Subjects in the study encountered changes in a hint (expectation of repayment), but this led to different changes in gratitude and indebtedness. If gratitude and indebtedness are the same concept, then the outcomes should have been the same. Therefore, the study can be used to corroborate the notion that gratitude and indebtedness are two different concepts.

Tsang (2006b) found that in terms of benevolent motives and unclear motives, the beneficiary felt more grateful when the benefactor acted on benevolent motives rather than unclear motives, but both unclear and benevolent motives did not have different influence on indebtedness. In addition, in terms of selfish and selfless motives, the beneficiary felt more grateful if the benefactor acted on selfless motives compared to selfish motives, but the benefactor's selfish and selfless motives had no different effect on indebtedness. Based on these findings, the present study concluded that gratitude and indebtedness are two different affects. Concept-wise, Tsang summarized the relevant literature and indicated that gratitude and indebtedness differ in three aspects: (1) indebtedness occurs with negative emotions such as discomfort and uneasiness; however, gratitude is an emotion with positive value; (2) indebtedness prompts avoidance motivation; however, gratitude prompts prosocial motivation; (3) indebtedness stems from the norm of reciprocity; even though gratitude also can be affected by norm of reciprocity, it may extend beyond the quid pro quo. If a beneficiary returns the favor due to indebtedness, the beneficiary will first consider the cost expended by the benefactor, and then repay something of equal value. Conversely, a grateful beneficiary will consider other options rather than only something of equal value when returning the favor.

Algoe et al. (2010) clearly elucidated that gratitude is a positive emotion and indebtedness is a negative emotion. Gratitude inspires people to give their benefactor thanks in creative ways, but when people feel indebted, the focus is only on returning the favor. In other words, they are more focused on the quid pro quo. Additionally, the study indicated that indebtedness maintains relationships, but gratitude enhances relationships, demonstrating that gratitude and indebtedness are different.

In addition, based on previous studies' findings that the beneficiary feels guilty when the beneficiary is unable to return the favor (Cohen, 2006; Dahl et al., 2005; Soscia, 2007), we believe that although guilt and indebtedness are not completely the same, the beneficiary should feel indebted since they feel guilty (more serious than feeling indebted) when the favor cannot be returned. This shows that indebtedness may occur after gratitude. Watkins et al. (2006) indicated that debt incurred by gratitude is generated internally, which is different from indebtedness. Indebtedness is derived from external economic pattern factors. Synthesizing the two above mentioned viewpoints, we propose the following arguments. Debt incurred by gratitude can include feeling indebted (at least feeling indebted is one of the debts of gratitude). "Generated internally" implies that this type of indebtedness is a reaction produced internally by the beneficiary. In other words, indebtedness is an internal reaction generated under the premise that the beneficiary must feel grateful first but is unable to return the favor. The present study refers to this type of indebtedness as internal indebtedness. Internal indebtedness is generated after the beneficiary feels grateful. So-called conventional indebtedness refers to indebtedness produced by external factors, of which are unable to evoke feelings of gratitude in the beneficiary.



## (2) Suggestions for Follow-Up Research

The present study describes indebtedness elicited by external factors, which we refer to as external indebtedness. We have yet to study whether feelings of indebtedness stemming from internal factors are negative same as external indebtedness. If someone gave help and the beneficiary is grateful and the beneficiary has intentions to return the favor, before the favor is returned, the beneficiary's internal indebtedness is a positive or negative emotion has yet to be discussed. We believe this is a topic worth exploring.

Although the present study shows that external indebtedness is a negative emotion, it is in terms of feelings. However, if the mindset of beneficiaries who desire to repay the debt can be put into good use, it may produce positive outcomes. In detail, because those with external indebtedness feel they owe a favor, they would want to return it quickly. Although the beneficiary may not return over the amount of the received favors before (quid pro quo mindset), at least he/she will return. According to this principle, the beneficiary should be driven to the action that promotes the outcome the benefactor wishes for if directions were given to the beneficiary. Thus, how to make the best of external indebtedness is another topic worth exploring.

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