Gratitude, wellbeing, and the decline of materialism: A cross-cultural study of character formation in children and young adolescents

Understanding the development of positive character traits that contribute to civil society, concern for others, and the prudent use of resources is a major task for developmental scientists. This project focuses on the development of gratitude and materialistic values in 7- to 14-year-olds and the role played in that development by their parents and their culture.

Gratitude is a key aspect of character formation; adolescents and adults who are grateful report high psychological wellbeing, tend to be more connected to community, and tend to have fewer materialistic values. Excessive materialism is neither environmentally sustainable nor psychologically healthy, but in societies that encourage consumerism it is difficult to raise children to have non-materialistic values. Developing gratitude in children may help to counteract excessive materialism.

Gratitude is more than just saying “thank you!” Parents can teach very young children to respond to a gift or help with those two words, and the politeness that’s involved is a very good start to feeling gratitude. True gratitude, however, involves feeling as much toward the benefactor who provided something needed or desired as about the help or gift received. This takes time to develop in children and adolescents, and parents, and the cultural group in which they live, can play an important part in whether and how this more sophisticated type of gratitude develops.

UNCG students (both graduate and undergraduate) will help collect data from five different cultural groups (African Americans, European Americans, and immigrants from Mexico, China, and Brazil). These cultural groups feel differently about connectedness among people, and are therefore expected to socialize their children differently in relation to their benefactors. In each cultural group, however, parents vary in the extent to which they encourage their children to think about their benefactors rather than on the gifts received.

Children will respond to questions designed to elicit their views about gratitude and materialistic values. Parents will also be interviewed about their values and their children’s development of character, with a specific focus on gratitude and on materialistic values.

This project will be the first to examine the development, in children and adolescents, of gratitude, materialistic values, and the relations between them, and will show how both culture and parent individual differences are related to children’s values. Our findings will be published both in peer-reviewed journals and, even more importantly, will be highlighted in booklets intended for teachers’ and parents’ use. Our goal is first to provide the empirical evidence and second the materials that can be used by parents and teachers to promote children’s and adolescents’ gratitude and, in the process, develop a more psychologically healthy and environmentally sustainable view about the acquisition of material goods.