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“I am grateful that I still live under one roof with my family”: Gratitude among South African university students

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Abstract

During the transition from school to university students are faced with many challenges to their well-being. This is especially true in resource constrained societies like South Africa. While there is extensive research linking well-being with gratitude, less is known qualitatively about what individuals are grateful for. A sample of 933 undergraduate students submitted gratitude lists, resulting in over 9000 unique ‘gratitude items’. Thematic analysis revealed several prominent themes, such as gratitude for relationships, material resources, being at university, life and health, and, finally, religious gratitude. These themes are discussed in the context of the importance of family relationships in the lives of emerging adults, the core role played by the educational context, the importance of socioeconomic resources and the association between religion, gratitude, and well-being. Strengthening these resources and cultivating gratitude for these prominent targets of appreciation may support students in their developmental trajectory.

Keywords: gratitude; emerging adulthood; thematic analysis; gratitude lists; gratitude interventions

The transition from school to university is an important step towards becoming an adult and taking on adult responsibilities and roles. The period between 18 and 25, when this transition most often occurs, is widely viewed as a specific phase of the life course, referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2015). During this time, young people delay committing to long-term adult roles such as marriage and parenthood, and explore opportunities related to education and careers. It is also a potentially stressful time, as emerging adults grapple with new roles and new responsibilities (Arnett, 2000; 2006). This is specifically true in the South African context where the majority of university students are first-generation students, in other words, neither of their parents has a bachelor's degree (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Additionally, access to university education remains out of reach for most young South Africans (Habib, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2017) and many are academically unprepared for this transition (Walton et al., 2015). It is therefore important to examine factors and processes that could support students' well-being in the trajectory to adulthood. In this study, we report on the experience of gratitude, which is associated with well-being in general (Alkozei et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2010) and could contribute to better coping and well-being among students (Lin & Yeh, 2014; Mason, 2019; Witvliet et al., 2019).

Gratitude

The last decade has witnessed a proliferation of research focusing on gratitude (Dickens, 2017; Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Gulliford et al., 2013; Watkins, 2013; Wood et al., 2010). As an overarching theoretical construct gratitude incorporates numerous aspects, including both dispositional or trait-like (the ability to notice and appreciate positive in the world) and situational (experiencing positive emotion in relation to a specific situation) components (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Lambert et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2010). Conceptualizations of gratitude also vary in relation to aspects such as the specification of an object of gratitude, the necessity of intentionality and benefit and the moral value associated with gratitude

(Gulliford et al., 2013; Lambert et al., 2009). Renshaw and Olinger-Steeves (2016) proposed a broad behavioral definition of gratitude as a positive response to receiving a benefit, positing that this definition accounts for both cognitive and emotional aspects of gratitude. Overall, gratitude entails individuals' thoughts and feelings when they consider the good in their lives, as well as their expression of being thankful towards others (Baumsteiger et al., 2019).

Despite these varying conceptualizations regarding the precise definition of gratitude, there is consensus in the literature that gratitude is associated with well-being (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014; Lambert et al., 2009; Watkins, 2013). Gratitude is positively related to various aspects of well-being, including social, psychological and physical well-being, and appears to contribute to well-being across the lifespan (Chopik et al., 2019; Emmons & Mishra, 2011). This may be due to gratitude's ability to aid in coping with stress, reducing toxic emotions, reducing materialistic strivings, improving self-esteem, enhancing positive memories, building social resources, motivating moral behavior, as well as promoting spirituality, goal attainment, and good health (Armenta et al., 2017; Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Wood et al., 2010; see Emmons & Mishra 2011, for a detailed discussion of each of these hypotheses). Additionally, there is a negative correlation between gratitude and psychological distress (Alkozei et al., 2018; Cunha et al., 2019).

Given the link between gratitude and well-being, several gratitude-based interventions aimed at improving aspects of well-being have been investigated. These include writing lists or letters, grateful contemplation, and behavioral expressions of gratitude (Watkins, 2013; Wood et al. 2010). Overall, gratitude interventions seem to increase well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, grateful mood, grateful disposition as well as positive affect. They also seem to decrease depressive symptoms (Cunha et al., 2019; Dickens, 2017).

Although several studies on gratitude have utilized undergraduate student samples, few have explicitly positioned their research in the theory of emerging adulthood. Duprey et al. (2018) described gratitude as a cognitive asset that could be strengthened during identity development and that could support emerging adults in coping with stress. In a similar vein, Zhang et al. (2018) found gratitude to be a protective factor against the experience of psychological distress during emerging adulthood. Taken together the evidence suggests that drawing on gratitude may be an important psychological resource for university students in the transition to adulthood.

Gratitude among emerging adults in South Africa

South African research on gratitude is only starting to emerge, with existing studies examining gratitude among high school and university students. Guse et al. (2019) reported relatively high levels of gratitude among a group of high school students, as well as a positive association between gratitude and well-being. Mason (2019) similarly found that gratitude was associated with higher levels of well-being among university students, and suggested that cultivating gratitude could be beneficial to student support. A qualitative exploration provided insight into African adolescents' understanding and expression of gratitude, identifying possible culture-specific connotations in addition to universal conceptualizations (Guse & Matabane, 2019). However, there is still scant information on contextual variables related to the dynamics of gratitude in the South African context in general, and among South African emerging adults specifically.

The current study

South African university students often come from troubled and disadvantaged backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom, 2017), and a university degree could be seen as being a ticket to a brighter future. However, access to higher education in South Africa remains limited to only a small

proportion of school leavers (Habib, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Data from the General Household Survey 2017 indicated that only 11.6 % of youth aged 18–24 were attending tertiary institutions (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Of those students who enter university, only 45% eventually manage to complete their degrees and approximately 30% drop out within the first year of study (Habib, 2016). The reasons for dropping out range from struggling with the academic syllabus to being unable to afford the fees levied by the institutions (Dhunpath & Subayye, 2018; Wilson-Strydom, 2017). The often prohibitively high cost of higher education in South Africa was highlighted by a wave of protest action that spread across all South African universities in 2015, under the banner of the #Feesmustfall campaign. This campaign highlighted the inequalities and difficulties in South African higher education and the challenges faced by students as they attempt to access and succeed within this somewhat elitist system (Habib, 2016; Jansen & Walters, 2019; Pillay, 2016).

Given the challenges faced by South African students, as well as literature suggesting a link between well-being and gratitude, the purpose of this study was to explore gratitude as reflected in written gratitude lists of a group of undergraduate students at a large urban university. In particular, we wanted to identify what they were grateful for. While quantitative studies have focused on the benefit of gratitude among young people (e.g. Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2011; Mason, 2019), qualitative research on the narratives of those engaging in gratitude activities remains limited (Timmons et al., 2017). Additionally, there is evidence that contextual variables could play a role in the experience and expression of gratitude (Charzynska, 2020; Guse & Matabane, 2019). Exploring what students are grateful for could broaden our understanding of some important aspects of their lives as they navigate emerging adulthood, and inform efforts to support them during their time at university (cf. Mason, 2019).

This study formed part of a larger project that investigated academic achievement, gratitude, and well-being among undergraduate students. While the project involved a number of components, one of these entailed asking the participants to produce gratitude lists. This article reports an analysis of these gratitude lists. In particular, it aims to answer the following question: “What are South African undergraduate students grateful for?”

Method

Participants

The participants were 933 students enrolled in a first-year psychology course at a large South African university. The mean age of the participants was 19.95 years and the majority (76%) were female. This was a multicultural sample of students, where most identified themselves as being Black (African) (73%), followed by White (Caucasian) (10%), Indian or Asian (6%), and mixed ancestry (6%).

Data collection

The participants completed two gratitude lists at two distinct time points. At the first opportunity, participants had to indicate five things they were grateful for during that particular week while at the second opportunity (approximately three weeks later) participants had to indicate five things they were grateful for in their lives. The participants uploaded their answers on an online platform and could complete the lists at any time over a two-week period, after which the link to the platform became unavailable.

Data analysis

Each item on the gratitude lists was analyzed separately because some students did not provide a list of five things, but only listed one or two things. In total (across the two lists) a total of over 9000 individual items (“Things that the student is grateful for”) were analyzed.

The method of data analysis used was based on the step-wise approach put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006) but was modified through the introduction of the qualitative data analysis methodology advanced by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Specifically, we implemented Miles et al.'s (2014) guidelines regarding data display and data transformation.

The first author read through the items to achieve a general overview of the nature of the data and possible preliminary themes were generated. It was noticeable that the two separate lists ("what I am grateful for this week" and "what I am grateful for in my life") were very similar and appeared to contain the same basic themes. We therefore decided to use the same themes for both lists.

The second step involved using the preliminary themes developed in step one, and assigning each item to one or more of the themes. Items that were clearly linked to more than one theme, were double coded – that is, they were coded as belonging to both themes (for example, an item such as "I am grateful for God for giving me such wonderful parents" was coded as relating to both religion and to family), thus resulting in the item being counted twice in the final analysis. This double coding was deemed appropriate, as the aim of the thematic analysis was to identify themes as comprehensively as possible and thus it would have been inappropriate to assign items containing multiple themes to a single theme. Approximately 10-15% of the items received double codes. The final number of coded items (including items with double codes) was 10871 items. During the course of this step, a few additional themes were added, as a close reading of the items highlighted some entries that could not be coded in accordance with the preliminary themes.

In the third step, the broad themes were divided into sub-themes. This was done in accordance with Miles et al.'s (2014) directive regarding data transformation, as it provided a fresh way of looking at the items and highlighted possible oversight during the broader initial

thematic analysis. It also allowed for the nuances of each item to be examined in more detail, as there was more scope for items to reflect different aspects of the broad categorization.

In the final step of data analysis, the themes and sub-themes were re-evaluated and checked against the contents of the lists to see whether the themes were adequately representing the data. As part of the analysis process, the first author (who took primary responsibility for the analysis) discussed the process with the co-authors during each of the successive steps outlined above. In addition, the co-authors had access to the de-identified data used by the primary author, and conducted their own preliminary analysis, which confirmed the initial themes identified by the primary author. Finally, as part of the final data analysis step, the themes were again discussed among the co-authors to identify and resolve possible discrepancies, overlaps, and concerns.

This process of data analysis resulted in the identification of six broad themes, each with several sub-themes, which are presented in Table 1 below. These themes are discussed in more detail in the results section. We also indicated the frequency as it provides an estimate of the relative importance of each theme to students (Elliott, 2018).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the larger project was obtained from the university's Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee (ethical clearance number REC 01-24-2015).

Students provided informed consent and participation was voluntary. Information about the project, as well as the procedures for maintaining confidentiality and reporting on the data were explained to the students in class and in the online survey that required their informed consent.

Table 1: Summary of categories identified in the data

Themes & Sub-Themes	Total number of items (Total = 10871) receiving this code (including double coded entries)	%	Example Items
Relationships	4070	37.44%	
Sub-Theme: Family Relationships	2501		The presence of my mother in my life
Sub-Theme: Non-Family Relationships	1569		To have very supportive friends, who influence me well
Tangible Things	1256	11.55%	
Sub-Theme: Basic Necessities	793		Electricity and clean running water
Sub-Theme: Luxury Items (Cellphones, Cars)	256		Technological Devices
Sub-Theme: Money/Finance	167		Financial providence from my parents
Sub-Theme: Job, personal income	40		I have a job with a salary to get to and from UJ
University/Academic	1843	16.95%	
Sub-Theme: University/Education/Opportunity to Study	1012		To have the opportunity to study in order to better my life and future (life)
Sub-Theme: Resources (Fees, Books Bursaries)	156		My mom bought me a psychology textbook

Sub-Theme: Specific Incidents (Passing a test, studying for a course, attending a lecture)	675		Was able to pass all my class and semester tests well for every module
Life and Health	1278	11.76%	
Sub-Theme: Life	753		To be alive and have made it this far in life
Sub-Theme: Waking up and general well-being	124		The strength of waking up every morning and looking forward to the rest of the day (week)
Sub-Theme: Health	401		To be healthy, disease free
Religion	670	6.17%	
Sub-Theme: God, Faith, Spirituality	538		To know that there is a God and He does great things in my life (life)
Sub-Theme: Specific Religion or Church Attendance	132		The ability to wear my hijab (head scarf) without being discriminated against
Other	1754	16.13%	To be in a country free of war and oppression

Two of the authors were involved in lecturing the students and we were mindful of several potential ethical risks due to being dual-role researchers. We acknowledged the power imbalance between the lecturer-researchers and students and assumed responsibility to act in the best interest of the participants, viewed as a vulnerable population (Pool & Reitsma, 2017). Following Cleary et al. (2014) we implemented several safeguards to ensure research integrity. These included complying with institutional ethics requirements and clearly

identifying ourselves as researchers when explaining the study in class. Students also had more than 24 hours to consider participation and to provide consent, which was done online through clicking on a link. Further, there was no undue coercion or influence to participate in the study. Finally, data was de-identified prior to analysis, and was presented for analysis as entries on an Excel spreadsheet containing no personal or identifiable information.

Findings

The analysis indicated that the largest theme was relationships (37.44%), with items indicating gratitude for relationships with family (23.01%) or non-family (14.43%) members (see Table 1). Within these sub-themes, students were grateful for relationships with a variety of different individuals.

In terms of family relationships, students most often referred to general gratitude for family without necessarily mentioning specific individuals. In the first list (gratitude for the week) these entries were sometimes linked to specific events e.g. “visiting home after such long time [sic]” and “I went to church with my family” while in the second list (grateful in life list) family was mentioned more generally, e.g. “I am grateful that I still live under one roof with my family” and “the fact that I come from a good home”. When specific individuals were mentioned, parents were most frequently named, with entries such as “Amazing mother and family” (gratitude in life list) and “The sacrifices my parents make for my sibling and I [sic]” (gratitude this week). Other family relationships mentioned specifically included siblings (“My brother finally decided to go to school”; gratitude this week), grandparents (“to have a grandmother who cares and supports me”; gratitude in life list), and other extended family members (“my aunt will pay my fees next as she told me not to apply for NSFAS¹” – gratitude this week list).

¹ The South African government’s financial aid scheme for financially constrained learners, involving a government loan scheme.

It is also important to note that many of the items related to family relationships received double codes (e.g. “Caring, helpful and supporting family and friends” was coded in both family and non-family relationship categories, and “i [sic] have a loving family and an awesome God watching over us”, was coded as both family relationship and religion). It seems that being grateful for a relationship was often linked to something else for which the student was grateful. Specifically, the family relationships were often connected to very practical examples of assistance, such as “i [sic] am grateful for the family that i [sic] have because they make sure that i go to bed without an empty stomach” and “That my sister, even though she has responsibilities of her own, she still supports us financially.”

Relationships with non-family members mostly focused on platonic friendships and other relationships, with relatively few items mentioning romantic relationships. Examples of entries focusing on friendships include “i [sic] had a wonderful conversation with my best friend” (Gratitude this week) as well as “i [sic] made new friends for the first time on campus, so now i [sic] do not eat alone” (Gratitude this week) and “the friends that I have made and kept during my life” (Gratitude in life). Examples of items referring to romantic relationships include “The person I love said they love me too” and the very simple “my boyfriend”.

While relationships was the major theme, as discussed above, two other broad themes were gratitude for tangible things (11.55%) as well as being grateful for being at university or grateful for things in the academic environment (16.95%). These two themes overlap conceptually, as they both relate to being grateful for practical items and experiences that are important to the context the participants are currently inhabiting.

In terms of tangible things, it was striking that the largest sub-theme related to basic necessities, such as food and warmth (a total of 793 items), while far fewer items related to luxuries such as mobile phones. Some of the items in the basic necessities theme were "I had

no foods [sic] for days and my friend offered something to eat” (gratitude this week), “Being one of the small group of people living in a proper home” (gratitude this week) and “Thankful that I never go to bed hungry” (gratitude in life).

In terms of the academic context, the vast majority of items (especially in the gratitude in life list) were concerned simply with being thankful for the opportunity to be studying at university. Examples include “I am grateful that i [sic] wake up every day to come to school instead of staying at home and doing nothing with my life [sic]”, “The opportunity to study at a Higher [sic] institution, to better my life”, and “I’m grateful for being able to further my studies, even with no parents” (all from the gratitude in life list). In addition to being grateful for being able to be at university, the “gratitude this week” list also contained many items relating to gratitude for specific incidents that had happened at university such as “I’ve just made my mother proud by passing the supplementary exam” (gratitude this week).

The theme of life and health (11.76%) contains references to gratitude related to simply being alive (e.g. “I thank God for the gift of life” and “my life as a whole”; both from the gratitude this week list). A further sub-theme within this theme related to expressing gratitude for health and general well-being (examples include, “To have all my senses working, especially the sense of hearing” and “Physical and Mental Well being [sic]”; both from the gratitude in life list). What was notable about these items was that they often had religious overtones and that being thankful for life, in general, is a concept often tied to religious feeling.

The religious nature of some of the expressions of gratitude was noted in the theme of religion, which accounted for 6.17% of the items. Only items that expressly mentioned God or religion were included in this theme, and although many of the items in the ‘life and health’ theme (mentioned above) had religious overtones these were not double-coded as also

belonging to this theme unless they specifically mentioned God or religion. The vast majority of items in the religion theme did not focus on a specific religion or church grouping, but instead simply mentioned God or religion as playing a role in their gratitude. For example, “just because I live I'm grateful to God” (gratitude this week), “Praying when I go to bed-talking with GOD [sic]” (gratitude this week), and “I am grateful for the Lord's mercy upon my life” (gratitude in life).

In addition to the five themes described above, an ‘other’ theme was also created. This theme contained all items that did not fit neatly into one of the existing themes and ensured that every list entry received was coded. Items in this category included items related to general happiness and well-being (not already coded as Life and Health) and items related to security, protection, love, support, achievements, and opportunities. Although some trends could be identified in the items coded in the “other” category the items were not sufficiently thematically coherent to justify their inclusion as additional themes.

Discussion

The detailed presentation of the results is indicative of the vastness and richness of the data that was available. The use of thematic analysis to identify prominent gratitude themes within the lists provided by the students allowed for a transformation of the data in such a way that it is possible to draw several meaningful conclusions relating to the nature of gratitude for South African students.

Grateful for supportive relationships

As noted in the findings, almost half of all the items in the gratitude lists related to relationships, which supports existing literature on sources of gratitude. Previous studies using gratitude lists obtained from children and adolescents reported relationships as being a prominent theme (Gordon et al., 2004; Poelker et al., 2016) and in particular gratitude

towards family (Oros et al., 2015). Ghosh and Deb (2017) reported a similar trend among Indian university students.

From a developmental perspective, it is interesting to note that gratitude for familial relationships (parents, siblings, extended family) was far more prominent than for non-familial relationships (friends, other individuals), which was, in turn, more prominent than gratitude for romantic relationships. Strong, supportive interpersonal relations are particularly important during life transitions (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). During emerging adulthood, shifts occur in young people's social networks, with peers and romantic partners becoming increasingly important (Arnett, 2000; Tanner, 2006). However, family relationships remain salient, especially for those emerging adults who pursue tertiary education and who are still financially dependent on their parents (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Family relationships remain sources of emotional support, and levels of intimacy and warmth in relationships with parents and siblings tend to increase or stabilize (Fingerman et al., 2016; Lindell & Campione-Barr, 2017). Gratitude for family, as expressed by the participants, seems to reflect this interconnectedness and indicates that they valued their familial relationships highly in their trajectory towards adulthood. Pertinent to the current study, Lin and Yeh (2014) found that grateful undergraduates experienced stronger tangible social support, which indirectly had a positive effect on their well-being. Therefore, the participants' gratitude towards friends and family may point to harnessing interpersonal resources in a particularly challenging context.

It is also important to note that the majority of the students in the sample self-identified as Black African. From a cross-cultural perspective, Black African cultures are often seen as being more collectivistic (Adams et al., 2012) in which the family and the community is highly valued (Eaton & Louw, 2000). Therefore, gratitude extended towards family may also partially be linked to culture in this sample, as recently also reported by

Guse and Matabane (2019). Existing research indicates that family might play a more important role in the lives of young people from non-Western backgrounds when compared to their counterparts from Western backgrounds (Kagitcibasi, 2013; Leu et al., 2012), which may further explain the focus of gratitude of our participants.

In addition to family members, participants' gratitude towards friends affirms the importance of peer relationships. This is in line with existing literature that reported strong links between good quality friendships and well-being, especially in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Buote et al. 2007; Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Demir, 2010; Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Taken together, the main focus of gratitude for the young adults in our sample was relational in nature and reflected an appreciation for support received from others. Since gratitude enhances social functioning through the strengthening of interpersonal relationships and cooperation with others (Charzynska, 2020), our finding bodes well for the presence and development of prosocial attitudes among South African emerging adults.

Gratitude for basic material resources

While much psychological research tends to emphasize the importance of relational and emotional factors in well-being and gratitude (see, for example, Hlava & Elfers, 2014; Wood et al., 2008; 2010), the gratitude lists analyzed in this study serve as a very poignant reminder of the importance of physical and material resources to well-being. Gratitude for items such as food and shelter, which many may take for granted, was clearly a very real consideration for the participants in this sample. Similarly, a study among Argentinian children found that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported a higher frequency of gratitude for such basic needs, as opposed to children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Oros et al., 2015). In the context of South African students, it further reflects the continued difficulty that many experience regarding acquiring food (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2015). Given that food insecurity is associated with mental health problems during young adulthood (Nagata et

al., 2019), our findings point to the importance of implementing tangible efforts to provide food relief to students in need. Our findings also suggest that, while some students may indeed have ample material resources, they remain aware of the stark inequalities in South Africa and their privileged position.

Another interesting finding was that material objects such as mobile phones and clothing did not feature pertinently on the gratitude lists. While there is evidence that South African emerging adults are increasingly becoming Americanized through remote acculturation and are striving to buy goods from the United States (Ferguson & Adams, 2016), these goods were not objects of gratitude for the participants in our study. This is in line with research that indicated that materialism is negatively associated with gratitude (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

As emerging adults, the participants' gratitude lists further indicated that they may be following different trajectories towards adulthood. While some were grateful to have their basic needs met, possibly only on occasion, others were grateful for and aware of privilege. The young people in our study therefore seem to navigate the possibilities and opportunities of emerging adulthood from very different vantage points. As Arnett (2016) pointed out, young people may follow different paths during emerging adulthood and this is reflected in the responses of our sample as well.

Gratitude for being at university

Many participants listed being grateful for the opportunity to study and to succeed, similar to previous studies among children and adolescents, which indicated gratitude towards school, teachers, and opportunities (Gordon et. al., 2004; Oros et al., 2015; Poelker et al., 2016). An Indian student sample also listed gratitude regarding academic achievements (Ghosh & Deb, 2017). The high value placed on being at university needs to be considered in the context of

the South African higher education landscape, where access to university is limited (Wilson-Strydom, 2017). However, with the wisdom of hindsight, the extreme value placed on education by the students in this sample also provides a foreshadowing of the student protests mentioned earlier (Habib 2016; Jansen & Walters, 2019) which started not long after the data was gathered for this study. It is important to note that these protests were widespread and received almost unanimous support from the student body, meaning that many of the students involved in this research project are likely to have participated in the protests. Thus, gratitude for the opportunity to be at university is perhaps linked to a frustration with certain aspects of the system that provides opportunities but at the same time makes it difficult to access basic necessities such as food and shelter.

In addition, in the context of emerging adulthood, obtaining a tertiary qualification is an important turning point for career and social class destiny (Arnett, 2016). The gratitude expressed for the opportunity to study indicates that this life stage is indeed characterized by being a time of opportunity and identity exploration. While working towards a degree and possible career, these participants seemed to be developing into adults who may have a better life and future than their parents had, for which they were already grateful.

Gratitude in the context of religion

Religion featured prominently in the gratitude lists, similar to previous research on children's gratitude lists (Gordon et al., 2004) and clearly played a key role in the students' lives. This is unsurprising, given that South Africa is a religious society (80% of South Africans identified as religious in the 2001 census, the last census to measure religion) (Statistics South Africa 2011). Additionally, the relationship between gratitude and religion has consistently been reported (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). The association between gratitude and spirituality further seems particularly salient among underprivileged youth (Ng & Chan, 2015), which may also be applicable to some of the participants in this study. Previous research also

indicated that religiosity is associated with positive adjustment during emerging adulthood (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). The religious gratitude expressed by the participants in this study thus underscores the importance of this value in their lives, and may point to religion being a resource in the trajectory towards adulthood.

Reflexive note

The final discussion point is not about the content of the data itself, but about the emotional impact that these gratitude lists had on the researchers. As the data was being collected we were privileged to be able to read through some of the de-identified lists as they were submitted as well as having an overview of the total lists at the end of the process. The data was very emotive, and we found ourselves deeply touched by some of the things our students were grateful for. Certain entries such as “I managed to send money home” and “This may be insignificant but I am grateful that my parents could afford my textbooks for semester two” gave us heart-wrenching insights into the lives of our students. Others reminded us simply of our shared humanity and shared experiences during our own time at university (for example, one student’s grateful expression that “I am grateful because I answered a question in class for the first time since i [sic] came here” [gratitude this week list] reminded us of our own struggles at university). This sense of getting to know our students better was a core part of the gratitude exercise and emphasized to us the importance of reflecting on our students’ struggles and successes.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study provided an in-depth investigation of the things for which our sample of university students was grateful. As such, it is limited in its scope as the aim was simply to conduct a thematic analysis of the data and reflect on the emergent themes in the context of existing literature. Thus, although certain speculations could be made in the discussion regarding the possible link between the expressions of gratitude and student well-being, further research

would be required to investigate these possibilities. This is the key limitation of the research reported here. Another limitation concerns the fact that the sample consisted of first-year university students who are not representative of all emerging adults. Further studies could explore the expression of gratitude among those who are not studying, and who may be experiencing very different circumstances, such as unemployment.

Based on this limitation the primary recommendation is that the thematic structure identified in this study be used to develop further studies aimed at better understanding the role of gratitude in emerging adults' lives. For example, does gratitude mediate the association between family relationships and well-being? In the South African context specifically, could gratitude for basic material goods have an iterative effect, such as feelings of indebtedness or low self-esteem? What is the effect of promoting gratitude on academic achievement and sense of belonging at university? It is evident that more research is required to achieve an enhanced in-depth understanding of gratitude in young adults' lives.

Conclusion

This study focused on identifying what young people are grateful for, as reflected in an analysis of gratitude lists produced by students at a South African university. The analysis revealed that the students are most grateful for relationships, as well as for material things (food, shelter) and the opportunity to be at university. While previous quantitative studies linked gratitude to well-being, the subjective accounts of our participants reflected the importance of family, friends and religion in their lives, and by implication, their well-being. Although self-focus may be a core feature of emerging adulthood, our findings suggest that there is also an acknowledgement of the role of other people in their lives. This could serve as an important resource in young adults' development. Further, the fact that gratitude for material resources was a prominent theme suggests that, for some South African students at least, emerging adulthood may not only be a period of general instability, but also one of insecurity

related to basic needs not being met. Our findings also confirm the importance of university education in the lives of emerging adults in general, but possibly even more so for many young South Africans who are hoping to embark on a better future in a highly unequal society.

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