



THE  
JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# AN EXPLORATION OF GRATITUDE

IN THE THANK YOU FILM AWARDS

RESEARCH REPORT

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The University of Birmingham is a top ranking British University. Founded in 1900, it was England's first civic University and was ranked University of the Year 2013–14 by The Times and The Sunday Times.



The original Department of Education was founded in 1894 and became the School of Education in 1947. Ranked in the top 50 Schools of Education in the world today, it has a long-standing reputation as a centre of excellence for teaching and research in a wide range of areas of education practice and policy, with fields of expertise including disability, inclusion and special needs, education and social justice, and professional education.

## Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is a unique and leading centre for the examination of how character and virtues impact on individuals and society. The Centre was founded in 2012 by Professor James Arthur with a multi-million pound grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Based at the University of Birmingham, it has a dedicated team of 30 academics from a range of disciplines, including: philosophy, psychology, education, theology and sociology.

With its focus on excellence, the Centre has a robust and rigorous research and evidence-based approach that is objective and non-political. It offers world-class research on the importance of developing good character and virtues and the benefits they bring to individuals and society. As well as undertaking its own innovative research, the Centre also seeks to partner with leading academics from other universities around the world and to develop strong strategic partnerships.

A key conviction underlying the existence of the Centre is that the virtues that make up good character can be learnt and taught. The Centre believes that these have largely been neglected in schools and in the professions. It is also a key conviction that the more people exhibit good character and virtues, the healthier our society is. As such, the Centre undertakes development projects seeking to promote the practical applications of its research evidence.

# An Exploration of Gratitude

## In The Thank You Film Awards Research Report

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# Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to elicit new knowledge and understanding of how 5–16 year-olds in Britain understand the virtue of gratitude. The research reported on is based on an investigation of 182 films submitted to the Thank You Film Awards. The Awards are a national programme that encourages young people to make a short film based on the concept of 'gratitude'. The concept can be represented in abstract terms, or directed towards a person, group or organisation that has improved their lives or the lives of others in the wider community.

Utilising a conceptualisation of the contested contours of gratitude, developed by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, as a theoretical framework, the research sought to answer the following three research questions:

- RQ1: What are the Thank You Film Award participants grateful for?
- RQ2: What motivates gratitude expressed by the participants of The Awards?
- RQ3: What structural form did the Thank You Film Award participants' expressions of gratitude take?

Thematic analysis of the films shows they can be organised around the following ten themes: justice; service; inspiration; society; education; religion/spirituality; interpersonal relationships; love; entertainment; and courage.

Whilst the scope of the research is limited, key findings from the analysis of the films include:

- 60% of the participants invoked virtue concepts as the reason for their gratitude: love, courage, self-discipline, justice and service were the most common;
- The participants were most likely to make a film about people who inspired them;
- Secondary age pupils were more likely to be grateful for benefits which went beyond their own immediate individual gain, while primary school pupils tended to focus on benefits which were self-orientated; and
- Gratitude in the films is overwhelmingly expressed as a Triadic concept (ie, a concept involving a specific benefactor) and so-called supererogatory behaviour is perceived to be important.

The research demonstrates how the emerging Jubilee Centre conceptualisation of gratitude can be used as a framework for future empirical studies investigating young people's understandings of gratitude. The findings and subsequent discussion also provide a firm foundation for future research investigating similar themes.

# 1 Background

The Thank You Film Awards (The Awards) is a programme run by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues and was launched in 2012. The Awards were conceived as a way for young people to 'Say thank you to someone or something' via the medium of a short film, animation or slide show. While this brief was intentionally broad, it was the desire of the research team to operationalise research around the awards programme, allowing participants to formulate their own expression of gratitude. Since its launch, over 200 films have been submitted to the Jubilee Centre, of which 182 were the subject of the research in this report.

The Awards are predominantly advertised to schools and youth organisations across the UK, and consequently most of the young people who have submitted films to date were inspired to do so by teachers at their schools, films were, however, also received from individuals, however. Anyone expressing an interest in the programme can request an information pack, which explains the programme as well as providing information about how the concept of gratitude might be explored in the film, and technical suggestions about how to actually film and edit the entry. For this research, films were judged in a two stage process; academics from the University of Birmingham specialising in gratitude and education created an initial shortlist, and these films were then judged by a professional panel made up of filmmakers and educational professionals. The young people who made the shortlisted films were then invited to cinemas to see their films screened and for the overall winners to receive prizes.

Some of the films made and submitted to The Awards can be seen on the Jubilee Centre website – [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk).

Gratitude is sometimes referred to simply as an episodic emotion – namely, a fleeting feeling that comes and goes – or as an individual display of expressing thanks, such as saying 'Thank you' when someone opens the door for you. In the recent psychological and philosophical literature on gratitude, much of which is inspired by the recent virtue ethical turn in moral philosophy, gratitude is however more typically explored dispositionally, as a stable morally valuable trait of character; namely, a *virtue*. Since May 2012 Gratitude as a virtue has come under considerable investigation in various projects at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. The study of gratitude is part of a broader increase in interest in the examination of character, its role in education and wider society (Arthur, 2003; Jubilee Centre, 2013). Leading the research on gratitude has been the *Attitude for Gratitude* (Arthur *et al.*, 2015) project, which sought to examine gratitude both theoretically and empirically by adopting an inter-disciplinary approach that brought together philosophical and psychological understandings of gratitude. The project undertook both a conceptual analysis of gratitude as well as empirical studies exploring, amongst other things, how gratitude is conceptualised by the layperson. This report takes these theoretical and empirical conceptualisations and applies them to an analysis of the Thank You Films. Before turning to the methodology employed, the concept of gratitude is briefly explained below.

## 1.1 CONCEPTUALISATION OF GRATITUDE

A great deal of the gratitude research literature is focused on the philosophical and psychological (adult) conceptual understandings of the virtue (Carr, 2013; Lambert, Graham and Fincham, 2009), its relationship to subjective well-being and other positive psychology pillars (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Froh, Yurkewicz and Kashdan 2009), and how to foster gratitude in young people (Froh and Bono, 2014). There is a scarcity of work relating to the subjects upon which young people bestow gratitude and their reasons for doing so. In one of the few relevant studies available, Gordon *et al.* (2004) analysed what effect the September 11, 2001 attacks had on American young people's expressions of gratitude. Their analysis of essay responses using a quasi-experimental design focused solely on who or what the beneficiary was and paid no attention to the reasons why a child was grateful, hence could not draw distinctions between 'a child being grateful to her parents for putting a roof over her head and another for her parents unconditional love' (Gordon *et al.* 2004: 550). The present analysis of expressed gratitude hopes to add to the current literature, inform the debate around young people's understandings of gratitude as well as illuminate how the concept is operationalised by the participants of the programme.

In particular, this project has sought to complement the research that the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is carrying out into the virtue of gratitude. The present research uses a theoretical framework principally informed by Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson's (2013) publication, *Recent Work on the Conceptualisation of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology*. Readers should refer to the larger text for full details;

nevertheless, a summary of the conceptual controversies from within the literature highlighted by that work is useful here, with specific focus on those which concern the potential expressions of gratitude.

### 1.1.1 Structure of the Virtue of Gratitude

Perhaps the most pertinent example of a conceptual controversy regarding gratitude, upon which our analysis of the films can be brought to bear, is the discourse surrounding the logical structure of gratitude as a concept. Gulliford *et al.* (2013) describe this structure as being either *Triadic* or *Dyadic*. A Triadic understanding of gratitude holds that there must be three variables involved in the exchange; a benefactor, a benefit and a beneficiary. That is to say that the essence of gratitude is '*to be grateful to someone for something*' (Roberts, 2004: 63). Thus the logical structure of the emotion, according to a Triadic understanding, assumes the logical form of X is grateful to Y for Z. One can draw a distinction however between this Triadic understanding and the notion of a more generalised form of gratitude. Generalised gratitude can be understood as the 'emotion or state resulting from awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable or meaningful to oneself' (Lambert *et al.* 2009: 1194). This, in essence, is what has been called the Dyadic structure of the virtue.

The Dyadic understanding assumes that the presence of a benefactor is not a necessary logical condition for gratitude to be experienced. To use a simple example: 'Child X is grateful for the snow', the logical structure being 'X is grateful for Z'. However, as Gulliford *et al.* (2013) highlight, it is possible to envision an implicit benefactor contained within this exchange. Therefore, our transaction becomes: 'Child X is grateful to 'nature / god / fortune' for the snow'. The notion of an implicit benefactor

plays into a theistic tradition, according to which untargeted Dyadic gratitude is actually linked (conceptually, psychologically or both) to a belief in a higher power of some sort (Steindl-Rast, 2004). We take no stand on this debate here, but simply reiterate the finding that there are at least two structurally contrasting conceptualisations of gratitude at work in the literature. The first posits a directed, social emotion which embraces the notion that gratitude must take place as an exchange between actors, whereas the second (generalised) posits the idea that gratitude is the 'habitual focusing on and appreciation of the positive benefits that life brings in the absence of any specific benefactor' (Wood, Froh and Geraghty, 2010: 1).

The Dyadic conceptualisation of gratitude has been fundamentally questioned by some who see a difference between gratitude and more generalised appreciation. On that understanding, so-called Dyadic forms of gratitude are mistakenly described as being about gratitude; rather they invoke another discrete concept, that of appreciation. Appreciation denotes a broader relationship between an individual and a state of affairs when compared with gratitude, which is inherently directed at an individual. Again, it is outside the purview of the present report to take a stand on this debate. We will thus continue to talk about Triadic versus Dyadic forms of gratitude without adjudicating the question of whether Dyadic forms are most serviceably seen as alternative forms of gratitude or as representations of another emotion, namely appreciation. The research arm of the Thank You Film Awards was constructed to explore how the structural debate in question was realised within the Thank You Films. Are young people inclined to express a Dyadic or Triadic form of gratitude?

Do the films within our sample indicate any age-related or developmental differences in the expression of gratitude?

## 1.2 MOTIVATION FOR GRATITUDE

### 1.2.1 Supererogatory Behaviour and Intentionality

Going further than the assertion that gratitude, as distinct from appreciation, requires a Triadic structure to 'exist', some argue that the benefactor must, in order for genuine gratitude to be warranted, behave in what is deemed a supererogatory manner. In other words, the benefactor must go above and beyond the call of duty in order to warrant anything more than appreciation alone. On this view, the utility expended by the benefactor must be greater than an expected moral baseline. Roberts (2004) argues that the beneficiary must *construe* supererogatory utility expenditure by the benefactor and that an actual benefit materialising or not is secondary to this relationship; post-baseline effort and intention are key to the exchange. Carr (2013) continues this motif, arguing that gratitude can be in excess, or morally superfluous, if the cost to the benefactor is 'little or no trouble'. Roberts (2004: 24) uses the example of patients being grateful to doctors for correct diagnosis and treatment to highlight the notion of unwarranted gratitude. Should one be grateful to a doctor for simply performing their job adequately? Those who adhere to such strictures adamantly apply this supererogatory condition; however, complicating this issue is the fact that a *moral* baseline does not always coincide with a *statistical* baseline. Thus, a patient who is used to bad treatment by doctors may reasonably consider a doctor who treats him well to go beyond a statistical baseline (and hence warrant gratitude) although this is nothing more than what the patient should have expected

morally from a decent medical practitioner. Once again, it is outside the remit of this report to pass a philosophical judgement on the supererogatory condition; we are simply interested in exploring whether the films cast any light on young people's views on it.

Another conditional clause, which must be considered, is that of intentionality; a school of thought within the literature holds that any benefit must come from 'an appropriate benevolent motivation – voluntarily and with full intention – by some benefactor' (Carr, 2013: 18) in order to warrant a display of *true* gratitude (Heider, 1958). This intentionality clause is not universal in the literature; indeed some argue that it is possible to be grateful for actions which harm the beneficiary or are intended in a malicious way (Fitzgerald, 1998). In such cases, some theorists deem it possible and indeed beneficial for one to feel gratitude for negative life experiences, calling to mind the Nietzschean maxim of 'Out of life's school of war: What does not destroy me makes me stronger' (Nietzsche, 1889: 2). While feeling grateful for surviving a car accident is easily understood, being grateful for events or actions *intended* to be of detriment to the beneficiary is, however, more problematic. Robert C Roberts' (2007) example of the Dalai Lama's expressed gratitude to the Chinese Government for teaching him patience, while fitting into a wider Buddhist ideology (Shantideva, 2008) of self-reflection, does highlight this paradox. Carr (2013: 19) rejects the understanding that such events can be triggers of gratitude, holding that positive responses in such situations, while being 'psychologically admirable', are in fact exemplifications of a 'weaker or more derivative sense of the term'. In any case, the notion that one can or should be grateful for negative life experiences is an interesting one, which warrants exploration here.

The research team endeavoured to understand whether participants hold with the notion of intentional or unintentional gratitude and therefore whether a genuinely motivated benefactor is necessary for an expression of gratitude.

### 1.2.2 Individual or Societal benefits?

One distinction it is important to make here is what we see as the difference between those benefits which impact on the individual alone, and those which have a wider influence on society. Individual benefits are considered to be those which do not go beyond the boundaries of the beneficiaries' well-being alone. In this understanding, gratitude expressed towards family, friends and material objects (technology etc.) is considered to be an individual benefit, as any utility increase is limited to the recipient alone.

Societal benefits are in this instance taken to mean any benefit in which the benefactor's endeavour could be considered a form of public service. While this distinction is relatively straightforward on paper, it is not however, a binary condition; benefits can and do fall on both sides of the 'line' and therefore the coding process must be nuanced to reflect this. So, for example, gratitude expressed to an individual teacher by an individual student is considered to be a societal benefit as the benefit is offered in equal measure to all students within that institution. In other words, a benefit, which is individually experienced, can be considered a societal benefit if it is bestowed universally.

We wished to examine this distinction and explore whether participants' films expressed gratitude to a greater extent in what could be described as an individual or societal manner. Psychologists largely hold to individual positive valence, suggesting episodes of gratitude as well as grateful dispositions are linked directly

to subjective well-being (Froh, Sefick and Emmons, 2008). To complicate this issue, however, psychologists have also found that gratitude can engender prosocial (read societal) behaviours in beneficiaries ranging from reciprocal altruism (Emmons and McCullough, 2003; Schwartz, 1967) to increased voter retention and mobilisation in elections (Panagopolous, 2011). Research has also shown that prosocial behaviours (reciprocal altruism in this case) in response to beneficial actions can go beyond the norms of reciprocity when gratitude is present in the exchange (Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006). Grant and Gino (2010) argue that perceptions of what they call social worth mediate the pro-social endeavours of benefactors resulting

from expressions of gratitude from beneficiaries. Does it therefore follow that, just as gratitude is a trigger for pro social behaviours, pro societal behaviours are a trigger for gratitude?

It was evident from the initial year of The Awards that societal benefit behaviours were a regular subject in both primary and secondary school films; consequently we were keen to examine this trend more closely. The research team were interested to discover the balance between films that featured individual benefits on the one hand and societal benefits on the other, and wanted to gauge whether age had any effect on this.



## 2 Methodology

This section reports on the methods employed to analyse the films submitted to the Thank You Film Awards.

### 2.1 RATIONALE

Utilising the conceptualisation of gratitude (as a conceptually contested concept) outlined above as a theoretical framework, the research sought to answer the following three research questions:

- RQ1: What are the Thank You Film Award participants grateful for?  
 RQ2: What motivates gratitude expressed by the participants of the Thank You Film Awards?  
 RQ3: What form did the Thank You Film Award participants' expressions of gratitude take?

In order to answer these questions, the expressions of gratitude in the films were studied individually, using thematic analysis. The primary aim of this analysis was to answer the first two research questions; what are young people grateful for and what motivates them to be grateful. We also wanted to examine the form of gratitude expressed and therefore films were simultaneously coded for: structure; intentionality; and intensity of beneficial behaviours.

### 2.2 FILM SELECTION

In the two years The Awards have been available, over 200 individual films have been submitted. These films varied widely in technical quality as well as adherence to the initial brief given to participants. Consequently, a decision had to be made regarding which

films to include in the coding and analysis process; technical quality of the films was considered to be unimportant in relation to the research questions (RQ1–3) stated above. Technical considerations (barring those which rendered films unwatchable) were therefore ignored in the selection process. More pertinent to the research questions was the participants' adherence to the initial brief. As mentioned earlier, participants were asked to 'produce a short film saying thank you to someone or something *and* explaining why'. Reasoning was therefore a central requirement of the selection process. Films which simply said thank you to a person or item without giving context were excluded from the analysis. This process resulted in 182 films being suitable for analysis; Table 1 below shows the breakdown of films chosen, by school.

**Table 1: Overview of the Films Analysed**

School	Number
Primary	101
Secondary	81

### 2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Once the selection criteria had been established, the films were grouped by age category and coded in NVIVO 10 using the principles of Thematic Analysis as a rubric. Thematic analysis focuses on pattern and repetition within naturally occurring discourse (Silverman, 2008). Krueger (1994) suggests the notion of theoretical saturation, by which the author refers to a tipping point at which said patterns and repetitions are pervasive through familiarisation with the available data.

The research questions and indeed the limited complexity (films ranged from 20 seconds to five minutes) of the available data required both an inductive and deductive process. The coding took a two-step approach. Firstly, films were coded for *manifest* themes; those which sat easily on the surface. This resulted in a large list of individual topics and reasons for gratitude which, while interesting, was of limited efficacy in highlighting the more general research goals. The second coding process looked for *latent* motifs, which would serve to group the individual topics and reasons into a hierarchy of themes as well as distinguishing which particular conceptualisation of gratitude, based on earlier clarifications, was presented in the film.

### 2.4 LIMITATIONS

The principal weakness of using data collected in this way is an inability to know to what extent the independence of participants was maintained within schools. In other words, how autonomous from teacher direction was the 'selection' process? This is especially true of the primary level entries, which often took the form of whole class thank you messages to an individual. Some schools also received introductory workshop presentations from members of The Awards team. However, while teachers may have helped guide the choice of topic, the students' reasoning seemed genuine and thoughtful. As a measure of independence was unobtainable, it was decided to treat each entry as if fully independent of external guidance for the purposes of this analysis.

As with any research in which self-report responses are requested, social desirability response bias (Randall and Fernandes, 1991) could play a role in determining the focus of participants' films. The question posed by this

is: do the films show what young people are grateful for, or do they show what young people think they *should* be grateful for in the eyes of adults? Furthermore, the effect of any inductive coding must be understood. By grouping themes into any hierarchy, the research team applied their own understanding of the themes to the data and thus may have influenced any conclusions drawn.

### 2.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For each of the methods, ethical approval was granted by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee. Further ethical considerations were addressed given the fact that the research was being carried out with young people. A member of staff from each school was required to agree to the nature of the programme, and gave permission for their students to be involved, while for individual unsolicited entries parental permission was sought. Letters were sent to students and parents explaining the *Thank You Film Awards* activities and evaluation, stressing the confidentiality of any research published and their right to withdraw films from the research process.

# 3 Findings

In this section, the findings from the analysis are reported. The section is structured around the three research questions outlined earlier in the report.

## 3.1 WHAT ARE THE THANK YOU FILM AWARD PARTICIPANTS GRATEFUL FOR?

Chart 1 below shows the subject categories which emerged as a result of the coding process. The chart highlights the principal subjects of the films analysed. We can see that: Family (23.6%); Material Items (13.6%); Emergency Services (11.5%); Educational topics (10.9%); and Friends (9.3%) dominate the subjects of the films. There were 52

distinct topics covered by the students, but it was found useful to group them into those categories to facilitate thematic analysis. There were little in the way of demographic differences<sup>1</sup>. However, echoing Gordon *et al.*'s (2004) finding that gender plays a role in the subjects of gratitude, there appears to be a non-significant<sup>2</sup> trend towards traditional gender stereotypes in the topics selected. Films made about stereotypically masculine topics (police, armed services, fire-fighters) tended to be produced by groups of male pupils or male dominated groups, while traditionally female roles (nurses, teachers, charities) tended to be made by groups with a majority of female students.

While the subjects of gratitude are in themselves of note, the reasons given (of which there were 182 in all) are perhaps more interesting when interpreting young people's understandings of gratitude. These terms were of little use individually; however, many were synonyms of each other or were used in a manner which allowed a group of 10 key themes to emerge during

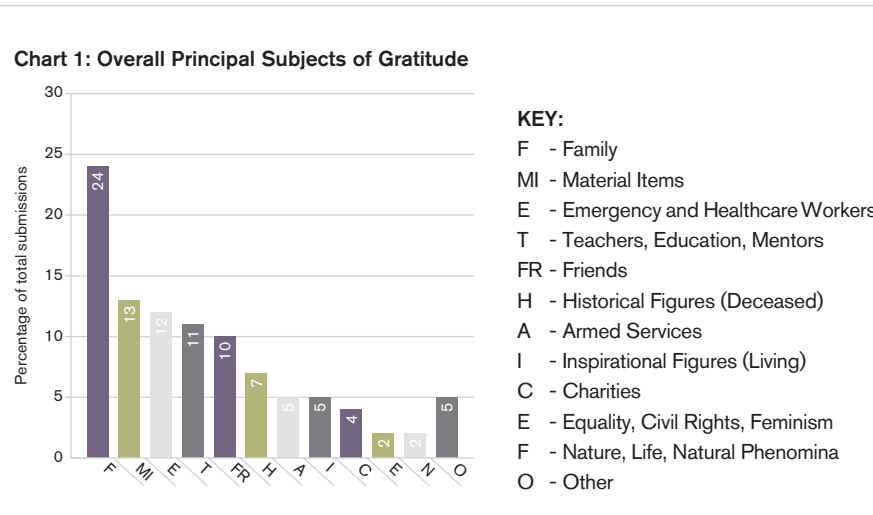
the coding process. As Table 2 below shows, the key themes are fed by tributary motifs which coalesced at the first round of coding. These themes were grouped via thematic similarities. Patterns of linguistic usage emerged and became pervasive within the data and these formed the foundations of the key inductive themes presented here.

**Table 2: Inductive Themes**

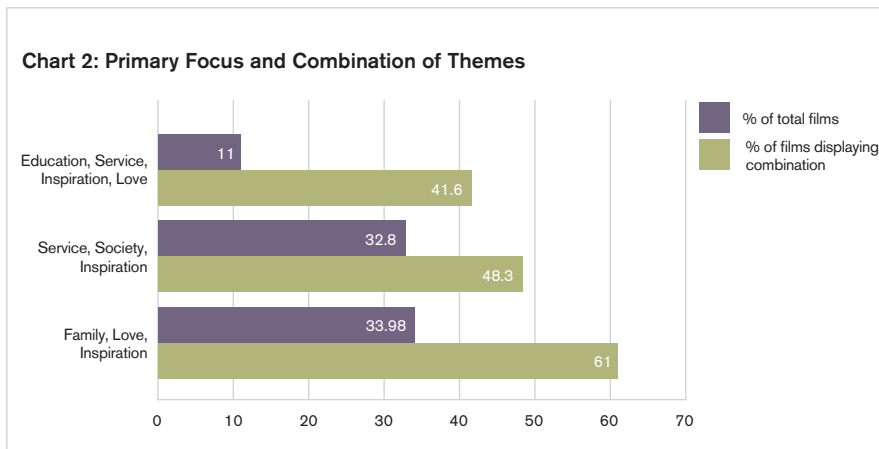
Key Themes	
Courage	Courage, bravery, risk, sacrifice.
Education	School, learning, opportunities, education, books, imagination, future, to pass exams, teach people.
Entertainment	Enjoyment, fun, laugh, funny, jokes.
Inspiration	Inspire, motivation, help me to, make me.
Interpersonal Relationships	Mother, father, best friends, sisters etc.
Justice	Fairness, sharing, equality, feminism, civil rights, set example.
Love	Kindness, care, love, helping, there for me, look after me, forgiveness.
Religion/Spituality	God, Jesus, Allah, church, creation, nature, life.
Service	Devotion, support, sacrifice, generosity, helpful, kind, for others.
Society	School, everyone, people, country, makes the world better, try to help, service.

Many films covered a number of themes. For example, one film about Nelson Mandela included: justice; service; inspiration; society; love; courage; family; and education. Despite this crossover, it was noted that films would typically have a central thread around which the narrative tapestry was woven. In the case of the Nelson Mandela film, for example, the central focus was equality, which forms part of the justice family of terms in our coding structure. During the analysis, patterns and

relationships between the key themes emerged. Chart 2 shows the most prominent of these relationships. The upper bar represents the percentage of total films received focusing on either education, service or family. The lower bar represents the percentage of those films which included the combination of themes shown (family with love and inspiration). In other words, 11% of total films focused on education, while 41.6% of that 11% contained themes of service, inspiration and love.



<sup>1</sup> Limited demographic information collected – based on entry forms submitted by applicants and participants in the films.  
<sup>2</sup> Subjects were grouped into three categories: Trad-Male (Armed Forces, War Leaders, Emergency Services, Footballers, Computer Games) Trad-Female: (Feminism, Charities, Animals, YouTube Communities, Friends) and Neutral (Family, Education / Teachers, Religion, Authors and Entertainers). Analysis of the gendered groups showed that Trad- Male topics were likely (not statistically significant) to be covered by male groups (P=0.1) and Trad-Female topics were more likely to be covered by female groups (P=0.8).



The chart highlights the similarities in reasons given for producing the films. This could indicate that young people are grateful for similar things and that their motivations for, and therefore their understanding of, what warrants an expression of gratitude are relatively similar.

### 3.2 WHAT MOTIVATES GRATITUDE EXPRESSED BY THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE THANK YOU FILM AWARDS?

#### 3.2.1 Inspiration is Central to Young Peoples' Expression of Gratitude

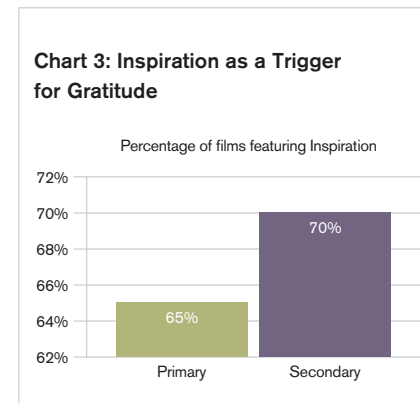
A majority of the films submitted included the idea of inspiration as a key motivation and reason for expressing gratitude as shown in Chart 3.

Inspiration featured in 65% of primary school and 70% of secondary school films. As we have seen, the majority of films dealt with themes of friends, family and pro societal behaviours, so perhaps the inclusion of inspiration as a key motivation should be expected. It does, however, occur regularly in those films which focus on other subjects: Individual inspirational figures were a feature

of many films and while the individual benefactors were varied in field (civil rights activists, authors and athletes were common), the reasons for choosing this person were often expressed in terms of their inspiring the participant to greater things.

#### 3.2.2 Virtue-based Reasons are Important

Once the reasons given had been placed into the logical families shown above, it was clear that, despite varied vocabulary, many of the motivations stated were grounded in virtue concepts (Arthur *et al.*, 2014). As mentioned earlier, these families were constructed through inductive understanding of participants' intentions so we cannot be certain we have tracked or co-located those intentions correctly in all cases, but it is no great logical leap to consider care, kindness and support in a familial context to be components of love. In 60% of the submissions, actions which stem from virtue concepts were cited as the reason for gratitude: love, courage, self-discipline, justice and service were all common amongst both primary and secondary school submissions.



#### 3.2.3 Supererogatory Behaviour is Perceived to be Important

As reported earlier, many films focused on the role of individuals within society and the benefits they offer to the general population. There was a tendency amongst participants to paint the actions of individuals such as soldiers, police officers and fire-fighters as a form of supererogatory behaviour. Many participants focused on the sacrifices and courage displayed by such workers as something which goes above and beyond the call of normal duty. While such workers do place themselves in greater risk situations than the average office worker, it is perhaps disingenuous to describe their behaviours as supererogatory in the truest sense of the concept as the professions are, by their very nature, high-risk activities. This being said, deciding to work in professions such as the armed or emergency services would presumably, in the perception of the average office worker, be above and beyond the 'expected' level of individual risk-taking and therefore could be considered supererogatory behaviours.

Films which focused on historical figures (Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, Mary Seacombe etc.) as well as many of the films directed at teachers, mentors or schools also gave primacy to the idea of going above and beyond as one of the main reasons for displaying gratitude. Secondary school produced films focusing on teachers and mentors who give up their own time to help with extracurricular activities (sports coaches, drama clubs etc.) were also highly prominent.

### 3.3 WHAT STRUCTURAL FORM DID THE THANK YOU FILM AWARD PARTICIPANTS' EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE TAKE?

#### 3.3.1 Structure of the Virtue

Within the remit of The Awards' brief, gratitude was overwhelmingly expressed as a Triadic concept. In fact only two films, directed at insects and nature, expressed what could be deemed a Dyadic understanding of gratitude. Interestingly, some primary age pupils tended to express gratitude to subjects removed from a personified explicit benefactor. These expressions seem to focus on the material benefit of an item without recognising how the benefit came to exist. For instance, a number of films expressed gratitude to items of technology such as mobile phones and computer games. The implicit benefactor in these cases would be the scientists and engineers behind the development of these technologies, but this is not openly stated in the participants' reasoning which focuses in these cases on the entertainment value of the items. Secondary age participants had a more *directed* or *targeted* understanding of gratitude, with all films naming an individual or organisation as the explicit benefactor.

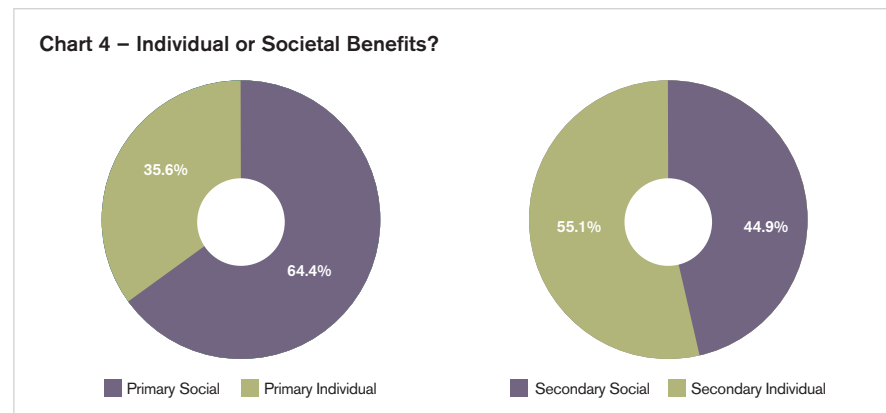


### 3.3.2 Individual or Societal Benefits?

Chart 4 shows the percentages of each cohort in which the target of gratitude was a benefit which was deemed to go beyond the individual. This societal classification was the result of a deductive process which examined the nature of the benefit independent of the manner in which it was expressed. For example, a number of films thanked teachers or schools for the education and opportunities provided and, although in many cases the pronouns used were 'I' or 'we', the benefit was deemed to be

societal, as the benefactor does not limit the benefit to individuals.

While the societal classification might appear broad, it was applied evenly to both primary and secondary cohorts, meaning that the rise in societal benefits can be considered statistically valid, as identical topics were included within it. The shift in focus is dramatic with older students displaying a much more pro-social understanding of gratitude than their younger counterparts.



### 3.4 OVERALL FINDINGS

Overall the main findings from the research are:

- The films can be organised around ten themes (some covered several themes). These are: justice, service, inspiration, society, education, religion / spirituality, interpersonal relationships, love, entertainment and courage;
- Family, material items and the emergency services were the three most common subjects in the films;
- Secondary age pupils were more likely to be grateful for benefits which went beyond their own immediate individual gain, while primary pupils tended to cite benefits which were self-orientated;
- In 60% of the submissions actions which stem from virtue concepts were incited as the reason for gratitude: love, courage, self-discipline, justice and service were the most common;
- Participants considered inspirational behaviour to be central to their motivation for expressing gratitude;
- Supererogatory behaviour was perceived to be important; and
- Gratitude was overwhelmingly expressed as a Triadic concept.

## 4 Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

### 4.1 WHAT ARE THE THANK YOU FILM AWARD PARTICIPANTS GRATEFUL FOR?

An initial aim of the research was to understand what 5–16 year-olds in Britain are grateful for and who they are grateful to. The research shows that the number of topics chosen by participants was varied and their justifications more so. Despite this, some key themes emerged – such as family and friends, emergency service, teachers and education as well as material needs. These themes are similar to the findings of Gordon *et al* (2004)<sup>3</sup>. Both the primary and secondary cohorts contained a similar mix of subjects/topics; as is perhaps to be expected the dominant subject of the films were interpersonal relationships, specifically those between family and friends.

As discussed, patterns did emerge in the course of the analysis which showed that young people's expression of gratitude is closely tied to interpersonal relationships and that the reasons for gratitude can be linked together to form themes. These themes could perhaps be interpreted by some as stereotypical, in that they are similar to one

another and may seem to be playing to societal norms dictating what one *should* be grateful for. While this may be the case of some films, many of the higher quality films, which have clearly taken a great deal of time and effort to produce, show an apparently genuine desire to thank the subject, and the reasoning and justifications appear heartfelt. These higher quality films, however, follow the same pattern of topics and reasoning as those films which have perhaps taken less time to produce. Thus the patterns of themes covered above appear to be robust.

Nevertheless, if one were to pose the question 'what do you think a young person would say they are grateful for?' to any school teacher, it is likely that many of the topics covered by The Awards' films would be mentioned. The format in which the question was posed to young people tends to lend itself to generic answers. However, the fact the responses are generic does not necessarily mean that the gratitude expressed is any less sincere. While these limitations do not invalidate participants' expressions of gratitude, care must be taken when one draws conclusions based on such data.



<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions are the reduction in expressed gratitude in the UK for Religious topics and nationalistic values (although US Values and political freedoms may be analogous). Gordon *et al* find an increase post 9/11, but the pre treatment value remains higher than that expressed in the UK.

#### 4.2 WHAT MOTIVATES GRATITUDE EXPRESSED BY THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE THANK YOU FILM AWARDS?

Analysis of the films submitted showed that for young people inspiration and supererogatory behaviour are central motivations for expressing gratitude.

The brief of The Awards was to make a film saying thank you to someone or something. Gordon *et al.* (2004) analysed similar data collected from essays written by young people on the topic of gratitude. A written exercise, however, perhaps allows a greater academic development confound to emerge, a limitation the authors acknowledge. Our employment of an audio/visual medium could help negate this problem by facilitating a greater depth of response from younger or less academically proficient participants. A brief of this nature could, however, influence participants' choice of subject as it implies a need for extraordinary individuals to be thanked. Working under such a brief is unlikely to elicit gratitude for mundane and ordinary things. If, however, we consider the difference between benefit triggered gratitude and generalised gratitude (Lambert, *et al.*, 2009), we can see that young people feel that to 'deserve' true gratitude an individual or organisation must display behaviours which are out of the ordinary (armed forces etc.) or so focused on the individual (family) that the perceived benefits' intensity is beyond the norm.

The recurrence of inspiration as an umbrella justification reinforces the idea of supererogatory behaviour being a motivating factor for gratitude. We could consider inspirational behaviour as satisfying any supererogatory condition imposed by young

peoples' conceptualisation of gratitude. Therefore, we move from appreciation of education to being grateful to individual teachers for their inspiration. Interestingly, one need only look at the acknowledgements included in academic publications to find phrases such as 'grateful for your inspiration' or 'gratitude for inspiring' used readily<sup>4</sup>. While hardly robust, this could indicate that inspiration and gratitude are linked in the wider understanding of the emotion.

#### 4.3 WHAT STRUCTURAL FORM DID THE THANK YOU FILM AWARD PARTICIPANTS' EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE TAKE?

Participants largely understood gratitude as a Triadic concept, and gratitude was most often linked to supererogatory and intentional behaviours. Older participants were more likely to express gratitude for benefits which go beyond their individual enjoyment or gain.

The Triadic conceptualisation of gratitude (being grateful to someone for something) dominated the films submitted to The Awards. Most films were directed at an individual or organisation bestowing a perceived benefit on participants. This perhaps shows that participants in the programme held there to be a difference between appreciation of a favourable outcome and gratitude for a perceived benefit. The implicit benefactor evident in younger participants' submissions could also show that the structural understanding of gratitude amongst participants alters with their development. Older participants' acknowledgement of a personified benefactor may reflect an increased understanding of the emotion amongst participants and their own

relationship with it. This echoes Lawrence Kohlberg's (1971) argument, discussed further below, that humans develop from a morality which is self-interested to an interpersonal focus during adolescence. Therefore younger participants in The Awards are less aware of other actors in a benefit exchange than their older equivalents. Interestingly, nearly all films registered gratitude to be an intentional benefit, echoing Carr's (2013) and Roberts' (2004) distinctions mentioned above. However, two films, both from participants at the upper end of the secondary age range, expressed gratitude for the negative effects of their own poor decisions or the actions of others intended to be to their detriment. Both of these submissions employed Fitzgerald's (1998) notion of being grateful as a way of avoiding negative psychological effects of unwanted situations. More specifically, this may indicate that the scope offered by a more orthodox understanding of gratitude as a response to a positively construed benefit is narrower than the layperson's use of the term.

Our analysis showed that secondary age pupils were more likely to be grateful for endeavours which benefit wider society rather than the individual alone; in other words benefits which extend beyond the self. It has been shown that older children are better at thinking about concepts of an abstract nature than younger children (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958). This could help explain the trend for societal benefits rather than individual gains in the films of older pupils. These older students are more capable of considering society as a whole rather than focusing on individual benefits. The Kohlbergian stages of moral development suggest that,

as an individual becomes morally mature, their moral cognition will move away from a self-interest point of view (Pre-Conventional) to a social norms based understanding (Conventional) (Kohlberg, 1971). Kohlberg goes on to state that the Conventional Stage of development is typical of adolescents and young adults (Kohlberg, 1971). The above expression of societal gratitude by secondary level students appears to follow the Kohlbergian schema, with older students being more focused on benefits which go beyond the self. Indeed Gordon *et al.* (2004) find that older participants, in their examination of gratitude amongst young people, tended to be grateful for things which concern other people (family, friends, teachers and rescue workers) and that younger participants focused more on material objects. Gordon *et al.* (2004) conclude that this could be indicative of 'decreasing egocentrism and an increased interest in the value of interpersonal relationships'. Baumgarten-Tramer (1938: 549) also found the social aspect of gratitude developing as her subjects aged, and that what she termed '*material gratitude*' was most common amongst eight year-olds. As mentioned above, however, the framing of the task given to young people might play a role in eliciting societal responses from participants. A question for further investigation could be whether adolescents are genuinely more pro-social or whether they are simply more adept at understanding what question is being asked and how best to respond to it.

<sup>4</sup> Google Scholar searches for the exact phrases 'grateful for your inspiration' and 'gratitude for inspiring' returned over 315,000 results

## 5 Conclusions

Through a focused exploration of the films submitted to the Thank You Film Awards, the research presented in this report adds new knowledge to the wider research being conducted into how the virtue of gratitude is conceptualised by the general public, including young people. More specifically, the research attempts to understand how British 5–16 year-olds who took part in the Awards programme understand and express the virtue in question. In particular, the research showcased how the conceptualisation of gratitude as a contested concept, under development at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, can be used as a framework for further empirical research. The research shows that gratitude, as perceived by the participants, is closely linked to several other virtues. In particular, many of the films expressed gratitude for people who had demonstrated certain moral traits: love; courage; service; and justice in particular. Furthermore, the participants were more likely to express gratitude to people in the films if they have been inspired by them. Alongside the films made about people who had benefited society more widely, however, many films were also made about material objects

that primarily benefitted the individuals themselves. This trend was more obvious in the primary school films than the secondary school films, suggesting there might be a developmental link with age.

We believe the research findings represented in this report bring new knowledge to the field of gratitude research in general, and gratitude research with young people in particular. A methodological assumption, upon which the Jubilee Centre is working, is that theoretical conceptualisations of virtue terms, such as gratitude, need to be sensitive not only to the views of the 'wise' but also of the 'many' (Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson, 2014); namely, laypeople (including young people) as well as theorists. That assumption is in line with the philosophical foundations of virtue ethics as naturalistic and empirically informed. Our findings and the ensuing discussion seem to provide a good foundation for future larger research projects investigating similar themes. In addition, it is anticipated that the research will help to improve the design and quality of future gratitude-focused interventions, such as the Thank You Film Awards.



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