

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Towards a Learning Mindset: First-Year University Students' Qualitative Perspectives on Gratitude in the Context of Learning Effort

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Abstract

Signature strengths, such as gratitude, can assist students in navigating the demanding first-year experience. However, more research is needed to explore the role of gratitude in relation to cognitive benefits for students. This article reports on a constructivist grounded theory study that explored South African students' conceptions and enactments of gratitude with regard to their learning efforts. Qualitative data were collected in individual open-ended interviews (n = 22, age-range = 18-23) and analysed using three interdependent coding phases (initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding). The resultant grounded theory was titled 'Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience amongst first-year university students'. The findings revealed that gratitude could take many forms and has a positive qualitative impact on students' learning resilience, and that gratitude and learning resilience are emancipatory in nature. Limitations and areas for further research conclude the discussion.

Keywords

first-year experience; gratitude; positive psychology; resilience; well-being

Introduction

The practice of writing down five things that one is grateful for on a weekly basis can bring about significant increases in well-being and decreases in ill-being (Emmons, 2008). Gratitude practices have been related to higher levels of resilience, improvements in life satisfaction and lower levels of depression (Fredrickson, 2004a). These findings could have particular relevance for university students.

A corpus of literature indicates that stress levels and the subsequent adverse effects are disproportionately higher amongst university students in comparison to the general population within the same age cohort in research across the globe (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa & Barkham, 2010; Grøtan, Sund & Bjerkeset, 2019). The stressors associated with university life are particularly prevalent during the first-year experience when students are expected to navigate numerous university-related demands and deal with maturational challenges (Arnett, 2015; Scott, 2018). Hence, stress can exacerbate a sense of unwellness amongst university students and leave them unfocused in their learning efforts

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(Mason, 2017; Richardson, Elliot & Roberts, 2017). Research is needed to explore ways in which students can be assisted in enhancing well-being and resilience in learning against the backdrop of stressful university experiences (Marcotte & Levesque, 2018; Mason, 2017).

Positive psychology (PP) emerged as a burgeoning field of research that argues for the identification and operationalisation of character strengths to promote well-being and resilient learning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The concept of signature strengths forms the bedrock of PP (Seligman, 2011). Signature strengths refer to stable yet malleable capacities and virtues that prompt people to act in specific ways (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The use of strengths has been positively associated with higher levels of well-being and resiliency in learning and serve as a buffer against the deleterious effects of stress (Dahlsgaard, Peterson & Seligman, 2005; Niemiec & Lissing, 2016). Seligman and colleagues developed the Values in Action (VIA) classification of six virtues and 24 strengths (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Gratitude is included as a signature strength in the VIA classification and refers to the capacity to recognise and appreciate benefits from others and to reciprocate with positive actions (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014). Gratitude has been extensively studied and is positively associated with a constellation of spiritual, physical and emotional benefits (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen & Froh, 2009; Ma, Kibler & Sly, 2013). Additionally, gratitude is related to cognitive benefits, such as broadening and building people's perspectives and skill sets (Froh et al., 2010). The cognitive benefits associated with gratitude, such as enhancing resilience in learning, could prove valuable to students within a university context (Wilson, 2016).

Despite decades of research on gratitude, an evaluation of the literature revealed two gaps. Firstly, few studies have investigated the cognitive benefits of gratitude related to enhancing learning efforts amongst first-year university students (Guse, Vescovelli & Coxford, 2017; Howells, 2012). Assisting first-year students in improving learning efforts is a critical responsibility of those working in student counselling contexts and could contribute positively to the academic project (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). Secondly, there is a paucity of qualitative studies that have explored participants' lived experiences of gratitude (Göcen, 2016). A qualitative exploration of the cognitive benefits of gratitude regarding learning efforts could offer a grounded description of students' thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. Such data could contribute to the existing body of mostly quantitative studies by adding to a nuanced and more holistic understanding of gratitude. Moreover, insight into the students' qualitative experiences of gratitude concerning learning efforts could guide the contributions that persons working in student development centres can make to the first-year students. Consequently, the purpose of this article is to report on a qualitative study that explored the cognitive benefits of gratitude in relation to learning amongst first-year university students.

Gratitude Amongst University Students

Gratitude is a social emotion that consists of two interlocking processes. The first process indicates that an individual has attained a positive outcome and the second, recognition that an external source, such as another person, nature, or a spiritual deity, has contributed to the

positive outcome (Emmons, 2008). In the case where gratitude is directed towards other persons, it can be described as a form of reciprocal altruism, and it aims to foster mutually beneficial relationships (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Data suggest that gratitude is connected positively to a variety of prosocial outcomes, for example, well-being, positive youth development, and quality of life (Kashdan et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2013). Correspondingly, gratitude is negatively related to indicators of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression (Emmons & Stern, 2013). However, the experience and practice of gratitude play out within a context characterised by a unique set of intangible variables, such as cultural influences, political realities, and personal dispositions (Göcen, 2016; Wissing et al., 2014). Hence, the expression of gratitude should be interpreted from the vantage point of a particular context and not in a blanket manner.

Wilson (2016) indicates that gratitude is one of seven signature strengths that appear to be predictive of academic success in educational settings; the other strengths that are predictive of academic success are grit, zest, self-control, optimism, social intelligence, and curiosity (cf. Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). Whereas the majority of these seven signature strengths have been studied in relation to students' learning efforts (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Ickson, Kaplan & Slobodin, 2019), only limited studies have been conducted on the effects of gratitude on students' learning efforts (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). The literature on the role of gratitude in relation to learning efforts reveals four overarching themes, namely focus in learning, resilience in learning, gratitude as a pathway to hope, and the broaden and build perspective.

Regarding focus in learning, Howells (2012) adopts a positive and affirmative approach by suggesting that students intend to be focused learners. However, many students lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be focused learners (Mason, 2019). Due to the stressful nature of the first-year experience, students may enter the educational context in a state of distress that could limit their capacity to be focused learners (Howells, 2012). Distressed states tend to feed off each other in a downward spiral that leads to negative attitudes or beliefs that further exacerbate unfocused learning (Wilson, 2016). It is hypothesised that gratitude practices can assist students in approaching their learning in more focused states, which may culminate in upward cycles of engagement and ultimately in engaged learning (Howells, 2012).

The notion of resilience in learning is related to Dweck's (2016) conception of fixed and growth mindsets. A fixed mindset, also referred to as an entity theory of intelligence, refers to a personally held belief that persons have pre-established and set quantities of skills, talents, and capacities. Persons who hold fixed mindsets may mistakenly construe learning encounters as threatening to their psychological well-being since they regard themselves as being limited in terms of skills, talents, and capacities. Furthermore, persons who hold fixed mindsets will focus on coming across in a positive light and not necessarily on acquiring new skills in a learning situation. A growth mindset, described in terms of the incremental theory of intelligence, indicates that people can develop the skills through persistent effort and grit (Duckworth & Seligman, 2006; Dweck, 2016). It is theorised that gratitude could assist students in cultivating growth mindsets, thereby strengthening their resilience and perseverance in learning (Howells, 2012).

Research has suggested that gratitude and hope are closely related (Witvliet, Riechle, Root Luna & Van Tongeren, 2018). The concept of hope involves three interdependent aspects. Firstly, hope entails a positive and meaningful future perspective that creates a dynamic tension between persons' current and future or desired states of living. Secondly, hope requires pathways thinking, which is the capacity to engage in creative problem-solving in addressing challenges and stressors in the pursuit of relevant life goals. Lastly, hope is dependent on the personal agency that would allow persons to be proactive and deliberate in the pursuit of their goals. Research has indicated that individual differences in hope are significant predictors of students' overall grade point averages and graduation rates (Dixon, Keltner, Worrell & Mello, 2018; Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams & Wiklund, 2002).

Based on the broaden and build theory postulated by Fredrickson (2001, 2004b), positive emotions such as gratitude generate broad thought-action repertoires that form stable intellectual and social resources. For example, positive emotions could enhance problem-solving capabilities (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Consequently, it is posited that gratitude as a positive emotion could be empowering in nature by assisting students in concretizing a sense of resilience in the face of stressors (Emmons & Stern, 2013). In this regard, Wilson (2016) found that students who were supported by educators to reflect on gratitude towards learning reported higher levels of gratitude compared to a control group who were not supported.

Notwithstanding the immense contribution of research on gratitude related to human well-being (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Froh et al., 2011), reference to the qualitative effects of gratitude on learning effort amongst first-year students is scant (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). Therefore, this article endeavours to contribute to the field by sharing findings from a qualitative study on students' perspectives on the role of gratitude in learning efforts.

Method

Research design and approach

A qualitative design articulated from a constructivist grounded theory perspective was adopted to conduct the study (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory aims to describe processes and drivers as depicted through participants' lived experiences. Since grounded theory is regarded as an appropriate approach in areas where there is a limited understanding of social processes, it was deemed an applicable methodology in this study (Glaser, 2002). Furthermore, grounded theory was selected because it allowed the researcher to advance an argument on the value of gratitude to students' learning efforts, thereby making it possible to create a framework for possible interventions. Lastly, a constructivist approach was adopted due to the flexible, albeit rigorous analytic processes that allowed for the postulation of a grounded theory resonant with participants' realities as creators of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006).

Context

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university that hosts approximately 60 000 students. First-year students comprise nearly one-quarter of the student population at the specific university. The student population reflects the broader South African demographics, namely 51% female, 80.7% African, 8.8% coloured, 8.1% white, 2.5% Indian/Asian (Statistics South Africa, 2016).

Participants

Data were collected from 22 first-year students using a nonprobability, purposive and voluntary sample (female = 13, male = 9, age-range = 18–23). Criteria for inclusion were that participants had to be 18 years of age or older and be enrolled for academic studies at the university where the study being reported on was conducted. Open invitations for participation were sent to students who had recently completed a learning and study skills intervention program at the specific South African university. It was anticipated that students who had attended the learning and study skills intervention programme would have obtained a good understanding of learning effort and could, therefore, be in a good position to reflect on the role of gratitude in the learning process. An open invitation to participate in the study was sent to all students who met the criteria. A total of 45 students voluntarily agreed to participate. It was determined that theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) was achieved after 20 interviews. Subsequently, it was decided to conclude the data collection procedure after 22 qualitative interviews.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data were primarily collected through individual open-ended interviews. The two guiding interview questions were: *What role does gratitude play in your learning and study efforts? How do you enact gratitude when you engage in the learning process?* Additional probing questions (e.g. *Can you provide an example to illustrate your response?*), requests for additional information (e.g. *You raised an interesting point, please tell me more*), and probing techniques (e.g. summarising and reflecting on participants' responses) were used to illuminate participants' experiences during the interviews.

From this point forward, theoretical sampling guided the remainder of the interviews. For example, during the first three interviews, it became clear that stress within the university context played an important role in participants' conceptions of the role of gratitude concerning their learning efforts. Consequently, participants in the subsequent interviews were explicitly asked about the role of stress in their learning efforts (e.g. *Stress appears to be an essential factor that influences learning efforts amongst students. What are your thoughts on the topic?*). The interviews, approximately 45 minutes to an hour in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis and Rigour

The software program ATLAS.ti version 7, was used to manage the data analysis process. As a first step in the qualitative analysis, I immersed myself in the data by transcribing the

interviews and repeatedly reading the data set. Next, data were analysed through three interdependent coding phases, namely initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding.

The initial coding was conducted at a granular level focusing on two- to three-word segments at a time. Initial coding was used in coding the first five interviews. Then a process of focused coding followed whereby the initial codes that made the most analytic sense were selected for further conceptual coding. Lastly, the conceptual codes formed the basis for additional theoretical coding. Despite the linear description of the coding process here, the procedure was iterative and required constant comparisons between codes, memos, and field notes.

To ensure rigour, Charmaz's (2006) model of credibility, originality and usefulness served as a criterion to evaluate the quality of the emerging grounded theory. Credibility was ensured through obtaining rich data from participants and subsequent participant verification. Additionally, ongoing reflexive memoing assisted in enhancing credibility. Originality was pursued through a literature check and ensuring that the emerging grounded theory offered a novel representation of the data. Usefulness was achieved through the explication of the emerging theory to the research context. The findings from the study were presented to a subset of five students from the sample of 22 participants who voluntarily agreed to attend a feedback session. This subset of students was representative of the total sample in terms of gender and age (female = 3, male = 2, age-range = 18-23). Participants agreed that the proposed grounded theory accurately represented their perspectives.

Research Ethics

The Research Ethics Committee of the university where the study was conducted approved the research project (Ref.#: REC/2014/07/003), and participants gave individual written informed consent. All identifying information (e.g. surnames, names, and student numbers) were treated confidentially and removed before data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation.

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis revealed an emerging grounded theory that was titled *Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience among first-year university students*. The proposed grounded theory narrates the demands that students encounter within the university setting and how gratitude aids in establishing an emancipatory state that enriches learning efforts. The grounded theory comprises five interlinked phases, namely (1) arriving at university, (2) being overwhelmed; (3) turning inward with a purpose; (4) the benefits of gratitude; and (5) the learning mindset (Figure 1).

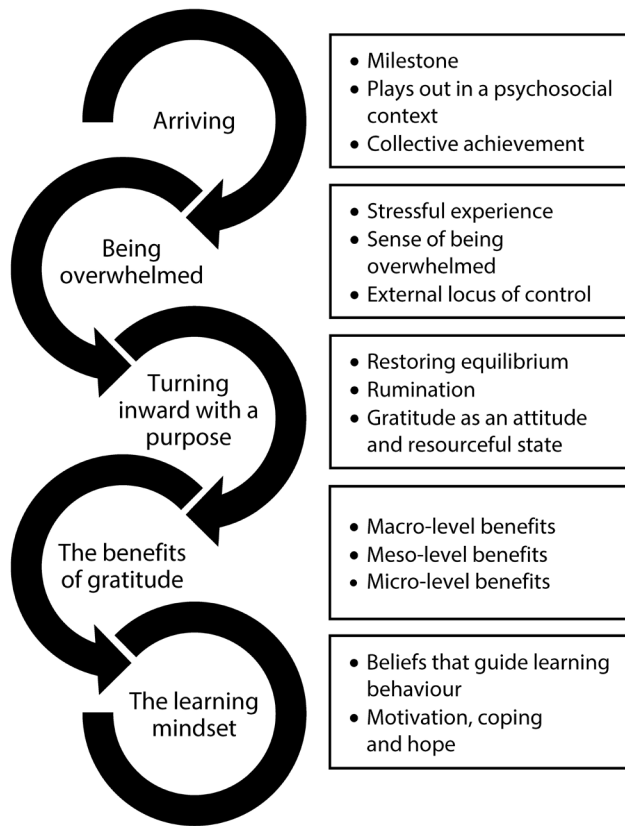


Figure 1: Phases of the proposed grounded theory

In Figure 1, the five phases are represented as interweaving spirals. These interweaving spirals illustrate the idea that the phases are iterative and do not necessarily occur in a linear and compartmentalised manner. The main features of each phase are included in Figure 1 and elaborated upon in the following sections.

Selected verbatim quotes are included to validate the interpretations. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender (M= male, F= female) and age. In the sections that follow, the five qualitative phases are presented. Then, the findings are summarised and discussed.

Arriving

The storyline of the proposed grounded theory begins with students' arrival at university. Entering university is regarded as a significant milestone in the lives of young people (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). Amongst other things, entry to university provides the context for psychosocial growth and development and preparing for one's future occupation (Blimling, 2010). Participants indicated that arriving at university was a notable milestone in their lives, as shown by Participant 1: "So, coming here [university] was like a dream come true. I felt I am on track and moving to become the person I want to be" (M, 19).

The culture in which psychosocial development and the process of entering university takes place has a significant effect on individuals (Blimling, 2010). Thus, students' experiences may be contingent on the dynamic interplay of diverse factors within the psychosocial environment (Arnett, 2015). This is particularly relevant within the South African context.

As a country steeped in decades of conflict and animosity, racial oppression and inequality strongly influenced the domain of higher education and resulted in asymmetrical educational opportunities (DHET, 2017). The abolishment of apartheid and the advent of democracy saw concerted efforts by the authorities to widen access to higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). However, the widening of access did not necessarily translate into student success (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015). Data indicate that close to half of students drop out of university before graduating (DHET, 2013). Moreover, many South African first-year students are first-generation students who are not native English speakers, come from disadvantaged schools, and experience an array of socioeconomic challenges (Scott, 2018).

Consequently, arriving at university is regarded by some as a significant and collective achievement in the lives of students, their families, and the country as a whole (DHET, 2013; Scott, 2018). Participant 7, an 18-year-old male, explained the experience as follows: *"I come from a rural area ... everyone celebrated when I was accepted to university ... I am the first person from my family to come to university ... it is important for us."*

The aforementioned is a significant finding, as Western cultures, where the majority of gratitude research has been conducted, tends to adopt an ontology centred on individualism (Arndt & Naude, 2016). In contrast, many persons of African descent tend to adopt a collectivist world view (Baloyi, 2008). Hence, the spirit in which the value of gratitude is studied and understood may, in some instances, be steeped in a theory of individualism. This particular finding suggests that the cultural background of participants influenced how they understood, amongst other things, the milestone of entering university. Participant 17 offered some additional context in this regard: *"Being grateful is about celebrating everybody's success as one's own ... we celebrate together"* (F, 18).

Thus, arriving at university was an event described in terms of collective achievement and shared gratitude. As such, it set the stage for further learning and studying as participants prepared for their future roles.

Being overwhelmed

Participants generally agreed that university life is stressful. This is consistent with the literature that confirms that stress levels and their subsequent adverse effects are particularly prevalent amongst university students (Bewick et al., 2010; Grøtan et al., 2019). Research suggests that students struggling with high stress levels and mental health problems are more likely to report low academic performance compared to students reporting few or moderate symptoms of mental health distress (Grøtan et al., 2019). Consequently, distress can affect mental well-being and negatively impinge on students' academic success.

Several categories of stress emerged from participants' qualitative responses. These categories included intrapersonal (“... [I] feel like a failure...” [P#11, F, 19]), interpersonal (“... causes me to fight with loved ones...” [P#19, F, 18]), spiritual (“... sometimes I doubt the purpose of it all...” [P#7, M, 20]), financial (“... university studies are expensive ... it's putting stress on me...” [P#1, M, 19]) and emotional (“... feel anxious and sad...” [P#16, F, 22]) stressors.

Stressful experiences could give rise to negative emotional states, which in turn narrow and restrict, versus broaden and build students' thought–action repertoires (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Subsequently, the capacity to access intellectual and social resources required for optimal learning, as would be the case with a broaden and build experience, could become diminished (Fredrickson, 2004b). This culminates in a context where it becomes normative for students to adopt fragile versus resilient attitudes in response to their learning efforts (Wilson, 2016).

As students struggle to cope with ever-escalating levels of stress amid a context of diminished agency, a sense of powerlessness can emerge (Mason, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). This sense of powerlessness was confirmed by the data and described by participants as feeling overwhelmed. The following two quotes give voice to participants' experiences:

... I get confused with the busyness, and it's like an overwhelmingness that gets hold of my mind ... it's so difficult to cope with studies at those times ... it robs me of all my motivation.
(P#15, F, 19)

When my life is hectic when there are too many stressful things happening, I feel someone else is driving my life ... I would describe it as helplessness ... circumstances are dumbing me down.
(P#17, F, 18)

The quotes above illustrate that students face a series of challenging situations that have a cumulative effect and may become overwhelming: “... during the semester, I said to myself that this is too much; I need to deal with these problems” (P#6, M, 18). Moreover, the sense of feeling overwhelmed infringes on students' capacity to learn and study, as illustrated by the following quote: “Feeling stressed out doesn't allow me to study ... all the energy all drawn out of me, I cannot focus ... feel unmotivated” (P#8, F, 23).

Another central idea that emerged from the data was that students tended to view stressors as factors external to them and over which they had little control. In this regard, Seligman (2011) suggests that how people routinely explain events in their lives has a significant impact on their sense of resilience. Persons who perceive that they have limited control over external events (such as stressors within the university context) and therefore adopt an external locus of control would be more likely to struggle with focus and resilience in learning (Grötan et al., 2019; Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016). In this regard Participant 14 indicated the following: “Sometimes I feel as if I cannot cope with a situation ... I do not have the skills to cope ... exam times would be an example” (F, 20).

Persons from collectivist nations have reported higher scores on external locus of control compared to individualistic societies (Rossier, Dahourou & McCrae, 2005). Hence,

the inclination to exercise control over a person's life is consistent with the world view of individuality and self-reliance found primarily in Western contexts (Arndt & Naude, 2016; Baloyi, 2008). Subsequently, a reliance on individualistic agency may not be considered as vital to participants in non-Western contexts. Notwithstanding their inclination for collectivist thinking, participants indicated that they retain high levels of autonomy by turning inward when attempting to address the sense of being overwhelmed.

Turning inward with a purpose

In the face of feeling overwhelmed, numerous students indicated that they turn inward. The decision to turn inward was described as moving into a reflexive space where challenges could be considered and addressed in a composed manner. Participants described the process as follows:

For me, it is my safe space ... I retreat to my safe space when life becomes too hard ... it allows me to think ...
(P#17, F, 18)

My inner sanctuary helps me unwind from stress ... it is where I make sense of things again.
(P#20, F, 19)

Turning inward can take on many forms. Participant 6 noted, "I meditate to calm down" (M, 18), whereas another participant explained that "I lose myself in reading..." (P#22, F, 18). Other participants point to prayer ("Praying to God is my security..." P#3, 19, M) and exercise ("Running to clear my thoughts" P#5, 18, M) as forms of turning inward. Participant 20 added that she derives benefits from turning inward through "... discussions with my brother ... he helps me gain a better understanding of the opportunities that I have received" (F, 19). In reaction to the participant's response, the following question was posed during the interview: "Can you give me an example of how your brother helps you to gain a better understanding?" She answered as follows: "For me, it is about thinking clearly and looking for what is good ... he is a pastor [the participant's brother] and he is very good at that sort of thing" (P#20, 19, F). The importance of religious belief also emerged as a form of solace for participants ("... my belief in God helps me during difficult times" P#14, 20, F). This is consistent with previous research that found religiosity and spirituality to be essential aspects in promoting a sense of purpose and meaning amongst students in university settings (Wissing et al., 2014), especially in African contexts (Mason, 2017).

Thus, regardless of the form that turning inward takes, participants appeared to enter a state where a sense of equilibrium could be restored. This sense of balance, or an inner sanctum, offers participants the opportunity to establish distance between themselves and the challenges that they encounter, and allows them to generate energy to engage with their studies in a meaning-directed manner. This notion was expressed as follows by Participant 8: "... it is about getting to grips with life again ..." (M, 23).

Students' conceptions of turning inward are synonymous with Howells' (2012) notion of an innermost attitude. She explains that an innermost attitude necessitates thinking from the depths of a person's being (Howells, 2012). Hence, it is a state of deepened reflective thinking and practice that could have a positive effect on a person's thoughts, feelings, and

emotions. In such instances, gratitude is not the expression of appreciation, but an attitude towards life steeped in, amongst other things, positivity and growth orientation (Dweck, 2016; Emmons, 2008).

However, a small subset of participants (4/22) indicated that they tended to ruminate when turning inward. One participant explained her experience as follows: *"If my mind is tired and I worry a lot, thinking about my problems makes it worse. I can say that I become fearful, or angry at other times"* (P#10, F, 19). In response to this answer from the participant, I, as the researcher, posed the following question: *"Are there times when you think deeply about your life and manage to find answers?"* The participant retorted: *"If I am not tired, I would say that I feel positive ... feeling tired makes me see things quite negatively ... when I had a good day, and I think about those good experiences, yes, then I feel much better, then I find answers to problems"* (P#10, F, 19).

Consequently, it appears that reflecting on essential matters while in a resourceful state might be more critical than merely turning inward. Stated differently, embracing gratitude as an attitude towards life, as opposed to the mere expression of appreciation, could prove beneficial to students. Participants in subsequent interviews confirmed this conjecture. Amongst others, Participant 12 mused that *"When I choose to think about hard things ... when I am comfortable or thankful for what is good when I think about it at those times, I find better answers"* (F, 21). Participant 20 also highlighted a similar sentiment: *"Being grateful ... not just about saying thank you for good things ... for me, it's about interacting with good things and the stressors with a positive attitude"* (F, 19). Thus, turning inward *with a purpose* appears to be more critical than merely turning inward. Moreover, purposeful exploration of concern from one's innermost being within a mindset of gratitude (Howells, 2012) seems vital if the goal is to enter a state of mind that could promote positivity (Fredrickson, 2004a, 2004b). This interpretation is coherent with findings that suggest positive emotions, such as gratitude, could have a beneficial effect through fostering a sense of resilience in the face of stressors (Howells, 2012). The finding further suggests that students ought to pay attention to managing their states (e.g. what and how they manage thinking, feeling and behavioural patterns in a given moment) when engaging in learning efforts. In this regard, expressing gratitude could assist students in entering a resourceful (focused, calm and centred) versus un-resourceful state (e.g. apprehensive, anxious or stressed) that could prove beneficial in promoting learning efforts (Howells, 2012; Nelson & Low, 2011). According to Emmons (2008), people can be assisted in cultivating resourceful states via reflecting on and writing down what they feel grateful for. However, students should not be forced to express gratitude but ought to be assisted in doing so through their own volition if the goal is to enhance resourceful learning (Nelson & Low, 2011; Wilson & Harris, 2015).

The benefits associated with gratitude

Through the process of theoretical sampling, the value of gratitude concerning students' learning efforts was explored further. All participants agreed that gratitude plays a vital role in terms of learning efforts. From participants' feedback, the role of gratitude was categorised according to macro-, daily living- and individual-level influences.

At a macro-level, participants indicated that a culture of gratitude could play an essential role in managing transformation and student protests, amongst other things. The notion of transformation has been a foremost factor in discourse in the recent history of South African higher education (DHET, 2013). Dissatisfaction with the rate of transformation, amongst other things, gave rise to a spate of protests, such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall (Booyesen, 2017). Whereas some of the claims put forward by students and their respective leadership, such as a call for more significant financial investment in higher education have merit (Booyesen, 2017; Scott, 2018), South African scholar Jonathan Jansen warns that debilitating cultures of ingratitude and resentment amongst South African students are areas of concern (Maphanga, 2014).

Students' qualitative perspectives echoed such sentiments. For example: "*Being grateful will allow us to find a shared connection through education. We must be thankful to lecturers, to government, our parents ... to have the chance to study*" (P#13, F, 20). Another participant added that "*... being grateful is important ... there is a time to be grateful ... a time to disagree ... there must be gratefulness for differences too ...*" (P#2, M, 21). Participant 16, a 22-year-old female, agreed and added that gratitude has a role to play in addressing political challenges such as patriarchy: "*... the contributions of all must be respected ... women have to be seen as well ... not having equal opportunities adds more burdens ... makes graduating with a degree more difficult.*" Another participant added, "*Because of the struggles that our parents and grandparents had to face, we have the opportunity [to study at university] ... people suffered ... gratitude is not just about feeling good ... it is about saying thank you for the sacrifices*" (P#17, F, 18).

Hence, consistent with the literature, the qualitative data suggest that experiencing gratitude should be viewed as a practice that can elicit social change within the education context and not merely as a blanket requirement for mastering a specific set of positive emotions (Emmons, 2008). Furthermore, gratitude ought to promote reciprocal altruism at a macro-level through fostering mutually beneficial relationships between persons across the political system (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Maphanga, 2014). Within such a milieu, gratitude can potentially enhance students' learning efforts and promote a climate of meaningful exchange that endorses purposeful learning (Booyesen, 2017; Maphanga, 2014).

At the level of daily living, the data revealed that a sense of gratitude could assist students in adopting a resilient attitude when encountering stressors. Concerning resilience, Participant 14 explained that "*Being grateful reminds me that it's not all about me. The world is not out to get me. It gives me the confidence to deal with problems positively*" (20, F). Such a proactive stance is in stark contrast to a sense of powerlessness that could emerge when facing stressors. This finding is also consistent with literature that suggests gratitude could have a buffering effect, thereby enhancing a sense of resilience when people encounter challenging life circumstances (Emmons, 2013). A second benefit was related to positive interactions between lecturers and students. In this regard, one participant explained that "*It is important to understand that lecturers often make sacrifices for students ... the effort that some lecturers take in preparing slides and classes ... I feel grateful and respect and it leads to stronger relationships*" (P#4, M, 18). Researchers have found that gratitude has positive effects on interpersonal relationships (Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

At an individual level, participants spoke about the potential that gratitude has to enhance their focus and resilience in their learning efforts: "*Being grateful ... keeps me grounded ... realize that I am here to study and make the most of the opportunity*" (P#9, F, 18). Participant 17 added: "*Being grateful gives me the motivation to expect more of myself. I am showing that I am grateful for the opportunity by putting in 100 percent effort*" (18, F). Additionally, participants suggested that entering a state of being grateful is a valuable resource in establishing cycles of increased learning efforts. For example: "*... being grateful helps me to be more motivated; it makes me concentrate for longer and to remember better*" (P#4, M, 18).

The role of gratitude in forging a learning mindset is explored further in the next section.

The learning mindset

The concept of a mindset refers to a set of assumptions, perspectives, and a philosophy of life that persons hold (Anderson, 2019). The notion of a learning mindset, therefore, points to a set of personally held assumptions and beliefs that guide students' philosophies of and approaches to learning. For participants in this study, gratitude fulfilled an essential function in their learning mindsets. Specifically, gratitude aided with volitional behaviour and better coping skills and inspired a sense of hope.

Regarding volitional behaviour, participants indicated that a sense of gratitude assisted them in establishing a motivational framework that drives their learning efforts. Amongst others, Participant 13 suggested that gratitude "*... helps me to feel energized and connected to those around me*" (F, 20). Another participant indicated that "*... my motivation is stronger when I appreciate what I have ... my family who supports me, my talents, appreciate just everything that helps me to learn and study*" (P#21, F, 21). In this regard, Ryan and Deci (2017) indicate that motivation is driven by three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, relatedness and competence. From participants' comments, it was apparent that a sense of gratitude satisfied the requirements of autonomy ("*... my family believes in me and that makes me feel confident in myself as a student ...*" P#4, M, 18), relatedness ("*... feeling grateful helps me to know that people support me ...*" P#18, F, 18), and competence ("*... every single day I say thank you for the skills, the opportunities I got to make it to university ...*" P#5, M, 19).

Gratitude was also related to coping efforts. Expressly, participants indicated that a sense of gratitude served as an emotional scaffolding for effective coping. One participant remarked, "*Gratitude reminds me that there are people who believe in me ...*" (P#6, M, 18). Other participants echoed this sentiment. For example, Participant 19 stated, "*Knowing that others count on me gives me the responsibility to cope with whatever life throws at me*" (F, 18). Participant 15 added that "*God gave me the talents and skills to be here [at university] ... thankful for the gifts*" (F, 19).

The aforementioned qualitative interpretation suggests that gratitude may serve as an essential factor that regulates the reciprocal interaction between the challenges that participants encounter as part of their learning efforts and enabling factors in their environments (e.g. social support structure and religiosity). As such, an attitude of gratitude

appears not only to enhance coping (“... *being grateful makes me a better and stronger person*” P#16, F, 22), but also to promote a sense of competence (“... *as a grateful person I am more humble and believe in my abilities...*” (P#11, F, 19) and give rise to proactive responses (“... *the number one benefit ... is that I am not scared to pursue my goals...*” P#7, M, 18), which could enhance students’ learning efforts (Nelson & Low, 2011; Wilson, 2016).

Participants agreed that a spirit of gratitude enhances a sense of hope concerning their learning efforts and academic goals. In this regard, Participant 20 explained that gratitude serves as the basis for an “*encouraging future that keeps me believing that my life is going somewhere*” (F, 19). Another participant commented that gratitude helps him to remain resourceful when encountering challenges: “*When I think of the things that I am grateful for, it is like a reflection on good experiences, and what I have learned ... this improves my problem-solving abilities, and it improves my creativity in difficult situations*” (P#2, M, 21).

The qualitative data, as indicated in the quotes presented above, reflect elements consistent with hope theory (Snyder et al., 2002). Specifically, participants reported that gratitude played an essential role in creating a meaningful future perspective (“... *grateful for what I have now, like the support from my family ... also about remaining positive about the future ... positive about the contributions that I can make in the future*” P#17, F, 18), encouraging pathways thinking (“... *gratitude teaches you to think deeply about things in life ... helps with dealing with challenges that happen at university*” P#5, M, 19), and facilitating agency (“*I am have to take responsibility for my life ... my cross to bear...*” P#1, M, 19).

Collectively, participants indicated that volitional behaviour, coping efforts and hope form the foundation of a mindset that encourages meaningful learning within a university context. Hence, turning inward with a spirit of gratitude could assist students in transmuting the stressors of university life into opportunities that inspire and motivate them to engage in academic learning.

Discussion

This qualitative study provided a grounded theory, titled *Thanks: Gratitude and learning resilience among first-year university students* on the role of gratitude in relation to a sample of first-year university students’ learning efforts. The grounded theory proposes that gratitude could play an essential role in the learning efforts of first-year students. Specifically, it was indicated that gratitude could assist students in embracing the opportunity to further their academic studies by drawing on internal resources and establishing mutually beneficial and supportive relationships with others. Experiencing gratitude was presented as a process characterised by experiences of celebration (arriving at university), feeling overwhelmed (engaging with stressors) and drawing on internal resources (turning inward) to solidify a learning mindset characterised by hope that promotes well-being and resilience in learning despite stressful university experiences. Research by, amongst others, Emmons (2008) suggests that gratitude can be cultivated through practice and reflective exercise. This conceptualisation is consistent with the extant literature that regards gratitude as playing a supporting role in the promotion of well-being and learning resilience amongst university students (Howells, 2012; Wilson, 2016).

Conclusion

This qualitative study offered a unique insight into participants' lived experiences of gratitude as an avenue to enhance learning resilience within the university context. The study contributes to the existing literature by indicating that gratitude could have a positive qualitative impact on students' learning resilience, and that gratitude and learning resilience could be empowering. The processes of arriving, feeling overwhelmed and turning inward appeared to strengthen a sense of gratitude amongst the participants in the study.

The findings from the study should be viewed with some limitations in mind. Firstly, the study was cross-sectional, thereby offering a glimpse of participants' experiences at one point in time. Consequently, the research cannot account for dynamic changes across time. Secondly, data were collected from students at a single South African university. A different qualitative picture may emerge when considering the perspectives of students in diverse settings. Thirdly, because an open invitation to participate in the study was sent to participants, they may have been particularly motivated to share their perspectives. Considering the views of students who chose not to participate in the study could have offered additional insights into students' grounded realities. Fourthly, no baseline measures of gratitude were included as reference points in the study. A baseline assessment could have helped establish a better understanding of the research setting and participants' qualitative perspectives.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the study serves as a gateway for further research. Amongst other things, researchers could consider drawing on gratitude interventions and support initiatives to assist students in developing and enhancing gratitude as a resource to draw on during the first-year experience and beyond. Emmons (2008) offers guidelines on empirically based gratitude interventions that could be adapted for the university context. Furthermore, the empirical linkages between gratitude and academic success and well-being outcomes could be investigated across time, using longitudinal designs.

The most significant contribution of this study is the affirmation that an attitude of gratitude bodes well for the future of higher education and the well-being and resilience in the learning of students. Participant 12 summarised this view as follows: "*Gratitude is about more than just feeling happy ... also about the way you choose to act when life does not go your way ... it is an attitude of strength*" (F, 21).

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