

## Chapter 12

# What Inhibits Gratitude?

*A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.*

–C. S. Lewis

Just as there are factors that enhance the cultivation of gratitude, there are also traits that may inhibit its growth. In the garden of gratitude, we have seen that there are certain qualities and lifestyles that provide the good soil and the healthy nurturance that is required for gratitude to grow. But just as bad soil, weeds, hungry animals, and bad weather may prevent a crop from growing well, there are also important factors that inhibit the growth of gratitude. In this chapter we will explore these factors. Although there seems to be much theorizing in this area, there is a dearth of data regarding the inhibitors of gratitude, and the data that we have is somewhat weak. Thus, much of what we will explore in this chapter is conjecture at this point in time. I will argue that there are at least four factors that are likely to inhibit gratitude: suspiciousness, indebtedness, envy and materialism, and narcissism. I will then attempt to show how narcissism or excessive ego-centrism may be at the root of all these traits. As Lewis remarks in the epigraph, when one is always looking down on people and things out of a sense of superiority, it is difficult to look up to appreciate the grand gifts in life.

### 12.1 How Suspiciousness Inhibits Gratitude

One of the weeds that may choke gratitude is a mindset of suspiciousness. Recall from Chap. 3 that the third recognition of gratitude is recognizing the goodness of the giver. A response of gratitude is unlikely unless one believes that the gift has been given out of benevolence, that the primary motive of the giver is to enhance

the well-being of the beneficiary. When one suspects that a benefit has come out of ulterior motives, then gratitude is unlikely to occur. An example from our “Debt of Gratitude” study illustrates this principle and provides some evidence in support of the potential for suspiciousness to inhibit gratitude (Watkins, Scheer, Ovnick, & Kolts, 2006). In our “high expectation” condition, respondents read a story about receiving a benefit (help moving in Study 1, providing missing lecture notes in Study 2), but the reader was informed that the benefactor expected an expression of gratitude and a similar return favor. Indeed, in Study 1 we told our participants that the benefactor was moving the following weekend. In this condition respondents reported that they would experience less gratitude than the other two conditions. One interpretation of this result is that respondents suspected that the gift was only provided so that the benefactor could get something back from the beneficiary. Thus, when one suspects the motives of others, this should inhibit gratitude. If one were chronically suspicious of others, I predict that they would be lower in trait gratitude. Although I know of no research that has directly investigated this idea, a first step would be to compare measures of suspiciousness and/or cynicism to trait gratitude questionnaires. If the inverse correlation is found, then prospective studies would be called for where measures of suspiciousness would be compared with future gratitude.

Why would an individual be chronically suspicious? Here I return to our discussion from the previous chapter. One of the most fertile soils for the cultivation of gratitude appears to be *secure attachment* (Bowlby, 1988). According to Bowlby and other attachment theorists, when a child’s caregiver is sensitive and responsive to a child’s needs, they develop a secure attachment, and this mental model of relationships abides and impacts how an individual relates to others into adulthood. When a child is securely attached, they develop a basic trust in others, such that they trust the benevolence of others. When one can trust the good intentions of others, they develop a style of recognizing the goodness of the giver, which promotes the development of gratitude. If however, the child is insecurely attached, then they tend to have ambivalent or negative mental models of others. One who is insecurely attached does not trust the intentions of others, and thus they should be more likely to be suspicious about whether a giver is actually intending to benefit them with a gift. I would suggest that even questioning the gift-giving motivations of others should inhibit gratitude. Of course, when one “knows” that the benefit is provided out of ulterior motives from the benefactor, gratitude should be very unlikely to ensue.

Again let me emphasize here that the relationship between suspiciousness and a lack of gratitude is largely speculation on my part, but it seems to me that this would be a valuable avenue of research. If indeed suspiciousness does inhibit dispositional gratitude, then it may be that this inhibitor of gratitude should be targeted in interventions designed to enhance gratitude. In our “Debt of Gratitude” study (Watkins et al., 2006), not only did we find that the possibility of suspecting the motives of the giver decreased gratitude, but this slightly increased indebtedness as well. Some research supports the idea that trait indebtedness inhibits gratitude, and now I turn to explore this possibility.

## 12.2 How Indebtedness Inhibits Gratitude

Consider the following illustration. Imagine that someone invites me over for dinner. I don't particularly enjoy the evening, but when I get home I feel that because these people invited me over, I should probably respond to them in kind. I invite them over, spend about what I think they spent on me, and hope there are no more dinners to be exchanged. But let's turn the tables a bit. Imagine that I really enjoyed the dinner. I have great conversation with my hosts, they intrigue me personally, they seem interested in me and seem to enjoy my company. In all, I have a wonderful evening. I get home and say to myself, "I've got to have them over soon." So later I invite them over. I spend a lot of time preparing the meal, but I enjoy the preparation because I am anticipating a great evening. When they come over for dinner we have a wonderful time. More than likely this is the beginning of an enjoyable friendship. Now, in a *moral bookkeeping* sense, these two examples are identical. In both cases, I returned their favor with a similar gift. But hopefully these examples clearly illustrate the difference between a benefit given out of indebtedness, and a gift of gratitude. Indeed, I believe that consistent feelings of indebtedness actually inhibit the development of gratitude.

*Indebtedness* has been defined as "a state of obligation to repay another" (Greenberg, 1980, p. 4). Greenberg is probably the scholar who has done the most empirical work on indebtedness, and it is clear that he views indebtedness in this sense as an emotional state. He states that it is a "psychological state" (p. 3) that follows from receiving a benefit from another, and goes on to argue that it has motivational properties, as does any emotional state. In this sense, indebtedness is associated with "arousal and discomfort" (p. 4) until the social imbalance that is created by the benefit is resolved. In other words, until one repays the debt (or engages in some other psychological reframing to resolve the sense of debt), we feel discomfort, and so are motivated to repay the benefit.

Although several social scientists have equated gratitude and indebtedness (e.g., Greenberg, 1980; Komter, 2004; Mauss, 1925/2002; Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968), not only will I argue that gratitude and indebtedness are distinct states, I submit that the tendency to respond to benefits with indebtedness actually inhibits responses of gratitude. After receiving a benefit, if one feels an "obligation to repay", and feels discomfort until they are able to do so, it seems reasonable to suppose that the individual will have difficulty enjoying the gift, and thus will have difficulty recognizing the goodness of the gift, which consequently should result in less gratitude. Hence, indebtedness should inhibit gratitude. Is there any evidence to support this theory?

Although the evidence is admittedly weak, in two studies we have found that trait gratitude is negatively correlated with trait indebtedness (Elster, Maleki, McLeod, & Watkins, 2005; Van Gelder, Ruge, Brown, & Watkins, 2007). The disposition or trait of indebtedness is the tendency to respond to interpersonal benefits with feelings of indebtedness. Greenberg developed an initial measure of trait indebtedness (Greenberg, Bar-Tal, Mowrey, & Steinberg, 1982), but because

the internal consistency was not exceptionally high, we revised this questionnaire into what turned out to be a more psychometrically sound instrument (Elster et al.). Examples from the *Indebtedness Scale-Revised (IS-R)* include: “Owing someone a favor makes me uncomfortable,” “If someone does me a favor, I usually try to pay them back as soon as possible,” “When I am able to repay a favor or gift, it brings me great relief,” and “Often I have trouble enjoying gifts from others because I’m concerned about what I will give them in return.” In both of our studies, we found small but significant negative associations between the IS-R and the GRAT-R ( $-.26$  and  $-.19$ ). Moreover, gratitude and indebtedness were related to our well-being measures in opposite directions (positively for gratitude, negatively for indebtedness). Although these relationships support the theory that indebtedness inhibits gratitude, the cross-sectional nature of the design makes this support fairly weak. Results from prospective and experimental designs would provide stronger support for this theory.

There is however, one interesting conundrum regarding our results. Although we have found that trait indebtedness and gratitude are inversely related, some research has found that the *states* of gratitude and indebtedness are positively correlated. Stated differently, although grateful people tend not to be characterized by indebtedness, when people report that they are feeling grateful, they also tend to report feeling somewhat indebted (Tesser et al., 1968; Watkins et al., 2006). Although the correlations between state gratitude and indebtedness are inconsistent and tend to be quite small (and even non-significant in females, see Uher, Watkins, & Ovnicek, 2009) these results still need to be reconciled.

We have found that gratitude and indebtedness can be dissociated, showing that these are distinct states. Whereas increased perceived expectations from the giver decrease gratitude, they increase indebtedness. Moreover, gratitude and indebtedness appear to have distinct thought/action readiness modes (Watkins et al., 2006, see Chap. 2). Does this mean that there is no *debt of gratitude*? I submit that there is a sense of debt in gratitude, but it is very much unlike what we literally mean by the word debt (see Watkins et al.). In the literal sense of a debt the obligation is established by the lender (or benefactor). However, as we have seen, when a benefit is given with an expectation of return favors from the receiver, gratitude is less likely. Thus, I submit that in gratitude the “debt” is incurred, not by the giver, but by the receiver. In other words, the gift is provided from the benefactor without expectations of return, but the beneficiary infers the “debt” upon herself. Indeed, moral philosopher Roberts argues that in gratitude one gladly accepts the debt to someone who has acted on our behalf (Roberts, 1991a, 1991b, 2004). Thus, in responses of gratitude, one does not feel obliged to return the favor, rather one is intrinsically motivated to benefit their benefactor. If this is true, then when one is feeling grateful, they might also experience some “indebtedness”, but it is not indebtedness in a literal sense, rather it is a self-incurred feeling of desiring to favor their benefactor. To summarize, some evidence suggests that the tendency to experience indebtedness in response to favors from others may inhibit gratitude, but the relationship between state indebtedness and gratitude needs to be explored further.

## 12.3 How Envy and Materialism Inhibit Gratitude

It is easy to see how envy and materialism are intimately related. Envy has been defined as the state of desiring something that someone else has, and materialism is placing an exceptionally high value on possessing wealth and material goods (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Obviously, individuals who put a high value on possessing things should be much more likely to envy the possessions of others. Indeed, Belk even includes envy as an aspect of his conceptualization of materialism. A number of studies have now shown that both envy and materialism are negatively associated with gratitude (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Polak & McCullough, 2006; Ruge, Van Gelder, Brown, Gibler, & Watkins, 2007; Thomas & Watkins, 2002). This relationship has been demonstrated with both the GQ-6 and the GRAT, and with several different scales of materialism. Thus, the inverse relationship between envy/materialism and gratitude appears to be quite robust, supporting the theory that envy and materialism could inhibit gratitude.

How might envy and materialism inhibit gratitude? As early as the work of Melanie Klein (1957), proposals have emphasized how envy could inhibit the development of gratitude. The logic seems to be fairly straightforward: if one is focusing on material possessions that one does not have (as is the case in envy and materialism), one is not focusing on or appreciating the blessings that they do possess, which would inhibit gratitude. At this point it is important to point out that the reverse may be true as well: if one focuses on (and is grateful for) their blessings, they would not be focusing on those things that they desire but do not yet have. Thus, the correlations that I cited above are just as strong evidence that gratitude inhibits materialism and envy. My suspicion is that both of these paths are at work; envy and materialism inhibit gratitude, but gratitude inhibits envy and materialism as well. Just as with the relationship between indebtedness and gratitude, prospective and experimental work is needed to investigate the question of whether envy and materialism inhibit gratitude. It would seem that these designs would be fairly straightforward, but to my knowledge, they have yet to be accomplished.

It strikes me that this is an area of research that could benefit from the information-processing paradigm. If attention is chronically biased toward material items that one longs to purchase, this should predict an attention bias away from goods and relationships that one might be grateful for. Thus, the priming of materialism or envy should result in the allocation of attention and memory away from those blessings that one could be grateful for. It seems to me that the modified emotional Stroop task or the dot probe attention allocation task could be used for investigating these ideas. It is probably important to point out that consumer oriented cultures encourage the allocation of attention to potential material purchases, which should increase envy and materialism and consequently decrease gratitude. Thus, although commercialism might keep the economic machine of a society humming, it may also inhibit gratitude that in turn should decrease well-being. Research that investigates how consumer oriented cultures discourage gratitude would be

very interesting in this regard. In sum, a number of studies have shown inverse correlations between envy/materialism and gratitude, and these relationships could be indicators of the fact that envy and materialism inhibit gratitude.

## 12.4 How Narcissism Inhibits Gratitude

From virtually the beginning of the recent wave of gratitude research gratitude scholars have suggested that narcissism and arrogance should inhibit gratitude (e.g., McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; McCullough & Tsang, 2004; McWilliams & Lependorf, 1990; Schimmel, 1997; Watkins et al., 2003). Given the frequency of this theorizing and the seemingly obvious connection between narcissism and ingratitude, it is somewhat surprising that very few studies have reported this relationship. Early in our research we investigated the relationship between narcissism and trait gratitude using Phares' Selfism Scale (Phares & Erksine, 1984). This measure is designed to assess "subclinical" narcissism, and indeed we found that this measure was moderately to strongly associated with the GRAT ( $r = -.49$ ; Watkins et al., 2003). Because the Selfism Scale is not often used to tap narcissism, we conducted several follow up studies with the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), which is more commonly used in narcissism research. In several studies using this measure and the GRAT, we were unable to find any reliable associations between narcissism and gratitude. Relationships between the measures were not statistically significant, and at times we even found trivial positive correlations between gratitude and some of the subscales of the NPI. These results were somewhat disconcerting to us, but at an APA convention Julie Exline encouraged me to investigate the relationship while controlling for self-esteem. As every good narcissism researcher knows, self-esteem is positively correlated with narcissism as assessed by the NPI. Because there was good reason to suspect that gratitude is positively associated with self-esteem, it could be that the relationship between self-esteem and gratitude was suppressing the narcissism/gratitude association. Indeed, in several subsequent studies we found that gratitude was positively correlated with self-esteem, and when we controlled for self-esteem with partial correlations, the expected negative association between narcissism and gratitude emerged (McLeod, Maleki, Elster, & Watkins, 2005). These results seem to imply that it is only an unhealthy pride that inhibits gratitude. Again however, it is important to admit that these studies were cross-sectional and correlational, and thus prospective and experimental studies are needed to establish more firmly that narcissism does indeed inhibit gratitude. One experimental approach would be to induce unhealthy or hubristic pride, and then to evaluate the impact of this manipulation on gratitude for a benefit.

How might narcissism inhibit gratitude? In an engaging psychodynamic piece on "everyday narcissism", McWilliams and Lependorf (1990) explain why narcissists have difficulty saying "thanks." They argue that narcissists believe themselves to be "guiltless" and "needless", and it is the latter conviction that prevents gratitude.

When an individual feels grateful for the contribution of another, they are essentially admitting that another person has filled an important need in their life. Hence, the reason narcissists have difficulty experiencing and expressing gratitude is because gratitude is essentially an admission that others have filled a personal need. As Modell (1975) argues, those high in narcissism have an “illusion of self-sufficiency”, and experiencing and expressing gratitude runs counter to this illusion.

Although this explanation makes some sense, I would like to propose that it is not so much that a narcissist believes that they have no needs that others can fill, only that their needs are “special” in some way, and because of their sense of superiority and uniqueness, they feel entitled to the provision of others to meet those needs. In other words, because they believe themselves to be superior to others, they expect and believe they are entitled to have others meet these needs. Thus the provision of benefits by others ceases to be a gift for narcissists, these favors are simply payments for what they believe they are due. In this way, those high in narcissism have trouble *recognizing the gratuitousness of the gift* (see Chap. 3). Because their expectations (entitlements) of others are so high, rarely does an interpersonal benefit outstrip their expectations, and so gratitude is rare. Clearly these are competing theories to some extent. Future research that informs on this issue would be helpful, not only in informing about inhibitors of gratitude, but also in providing direction for interventions that might counteract these factors that seem to prevent gratitude. So perhaps it is not so much that those high in narcissism believe that they are self-sufficient beings, as it is that they believe that their superiority entitles them to benefits and pleasures (“I deserve these benefits”), and thus all benefits are simply due payment for who they are. I think that Chesterton (1908/1986, p. 234) summarizes the difficulty that narcissists may have in enjoying life’s benefits:

Humility was largely meant as a restraint upon the arrogance and infinity of the appetite of man. He was always outstripping his mercies with his own newly invented needs. His very power of enjoyment destroyed half his joys. By asking for pleasure, he lost the chief pleasure; for the chief pleasure is surprise.

## 12.5 Conclusions About the Inhibitors of Gratitude

In this chapter I have argued that four factors are likely to inhibit the experience and development of gratitude. *Suspiciousness* is likely to inhibit gratitude because when one suspects the motives of the giver, they are unlikely to *recognize the goodness of the giver*, and hence gratitude is unlikely. Second, I have argued that the experience of *indebtedness* inhibits gratitude. When one receives a benefit from another, but primarily experiences a feeling of an obligation to repay the debt, this should inhibit their enjoyment of the benefit and thus should prevent experiencing gratitude. In this sense, indebtedness should inhibit the *recognition of the goodness of the gift*. Third, *envy* and *materialism* should inhibit gratitude because these traits will direct an individual’s attention to material goods that they do not possess, rather than to benefits that they may be grateful for. Finally, I have argued that *narcissism*

prevents gratitude because it increases one's expectations/entitlements of others. Thus, benefits from others cease to be gifts because they are simply just payment for what they believe they are due. In this sense, narcissism actually prevents the *recognition of the gift* itself.

If future research confirms that these factors do indeed inhibit gratitude, the looming question is how these traits can be decreased. Given that these are likely to be traits, this would not be an easy task, but some discussion about potential interventions with these factors is called for. First, it is important to highlight again that all of the research that I have reviewed in this chapter is cross-sectional and correlational in nature. Thus, although the studies provide some support for the theory that suspiciousness, indebtedness, envy/materialism, and narcissism inhibit gratitude, they are equally supportive of the opposite theory: that gratitude inhibits suspiciousness, indebtedness, envy/materialism, and narcissism. My own belief is that these factors are related in a reciprocal fashion. For example, although narcissism probably inhibits gratitude, exercises of gratitude probably inhibit narcissism as well. Thus, the most obvious recommendation for counteracting these inhibitors of gratitude would be gratitude interventions. Future gratitude treatment studies should investigate this possibility.

But simply suggesting that gratitude should inhibit that which inhibits gratitude, is not likely to be a satisfactory solution. Undoubtedly, in some individuals these traits may be so strong that gratitude treatments are rendered ineffective. Thus, active interventions to counter these factors may be called for. A first obvious step would be education regarding these inhibitors. When an individual knows that their suspiciousness prevents gratitude, this is an important first step to overcoming suspiciousness. Understanding how a sense of indebtedness and envy/materialism inhibit gratitude responses should be helpful in initiating the pursuit to overcome these factors. Perhaps most importantly, understanding narcissism and its pervasiveness may be very important. For me, one of the destructive aspects of discussing "narcissists" is that it implies that some are narcissists and most of us are not. Thus, our discussion of narcissism is often one couched in a categorical model, whereas the research seems to suggest that narcissism is better viewed as a dimension. Thus, I submit that all of us suffer from narcissism in some way; all of us are subject to the *self-serving bias* and egocentrism. Knowledge about the pervasive self-serving bias and becoming aware of aspects of narcissism in our day-to-day lives is likely to be helpful in overcoming these gratitude barriers. As C.S. Lewis (1943/1996, p. 114) remarked, "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed."

Lewis's observation suggests that one of the most effective antidotes of narcissism and arrogance is likely to be the pursuit of *humility*. Indeed, I propose that one of the most effective interventions to overcome these inhibitors of gratitude is likely to be treatments designed to encourage humility. Here again I think the wisdom of Chesterton (1924/1989, p. 75) is valuable:



It is not only true that the less a man thinks of himself, the more he thinks of his good luck and all the gifts of God. It is also true that he sees more of the things themselves when he sees more of their origin; for their origin is a part of them and indeed the most important part of them.

Here again however, the question that begs for an answer is “How does one pursue humility?” This is likely to be a dangerous enterprise because as most scholars have pointed out, humility is not characterized by a low view of one’s self, but rather a kind of *self-forgetfulness* where one rarely thinks of themselves in comparison to others. Thus, focusing on one’s own humility has the potential to be counterproductive. Although a discussion of humility treatments is beyond the scope of this chapter, I would like to suggest that a principal component of such an intervention would be on lowering one’s expectations and sense of entitlement towards others. Here again, I rely on the thought of Chesterton (1905/1986, p. 69):

The truth is, that all genuine appreciation rests on a certain mystery of humility and almost darkness. The man who said, “Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed,” put the eulogy quite inadequately and even falsely. The truth is, “Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall be gloriously surprised.” The man who expects nothing sees redder roses than common men can see, and greener grass, and a more startling sun. Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall possess the cities and the mountains; blessed is the meek, for he shall inherit the earth. Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are. Until we see that darkness we cannot admire the light as a single and created thing. As soon as we have seen that darkness, all light is lightening, sudden, blinding, and divine. . . . It is one of the million wild jests of truth that we know nothing until we know nothing.

Thus, I submit that interventions focusing on decreasing one’s expectations/entitlements of others should increase humility, decrease narcissism, and thus increase one’s potential for gratitude and appreciation. One aspect of this intervention is likely to be training in recognizing one’s entitlements, because often (if not usually) these expectations operate at a non-conscious level. To summarize, interventions that increase humility may help individuals overcome important barriers to gratitude.

In sum, we have seen in this chapter that four factors might inhibit gratitude: suspiciousness, indebtedness, envy/materialism, and narcissism. But I would like to conclude by proposing that the “master trait” that may fuel all of these inhibitors of gratitude is narcissism and arrogance. When one believes that they are truly better than others, one is much more likely to suspect the motives of givers. This is because if one believes they are exceptionally valuable and superior to others, one should be much more likely to suspect that when a benefit is provided to them it must be motivated by a desire to get something from them. Furthermore, when one believes that they are completely self-sufficient, then one should be much more likely to experience indebtedness in response to a benefit. This is because the narcissistic individual would be more concerned with simply “balancing the moral books” so that they would not be in anyone’s debt. If one believes that they are actually superior to others, they probably also believe that they are more entitled to material goods than others, and thus will be focused on those goods and be envious of others

who possess them. Indeed, there is evidence that narcissism is positively associated with trait envy. Thus, it appears that the “master trait” that may inhibit gratitude is narcissism and arrogance. Here I conclude with the wise counsel of Henry Ward Beecher:

Pride slays thanksgiving, but an humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow.  
A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.

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