

## The gratitude-engagement cycle (0011)

Fiona Cownie

Bournemouth University, UK

### An exploratory study of 'The gratitude-engagement cycle'

**Gratitude and engagement.**

**Abstract (106 words):**

Gratitude drawn from notions of reciprocity, central to the inherent nature of HE, can be seen in two parts, feelings of gratitude and expressions of gratitude. This exploratory paper investigates evidence of feelings and expressions of gratitude within HE from the perspective of students, alumni and academics within a UK HEI. Qualitative in-depth interviews provide initial evidence that feelings of gratitude resonate within HE and that engagement emerges as an important consequence of feelings of gratitude. A conceptual framework is proposed comprising a cycle of feelings of gratitude and engagement. Expressions of gratitude may have the currently unfulfilled potential to leverage the gratitude-engagement cycle.

**Paper (993 words)**

how the links between the feelings and expressions were analysed from the research data. Also discussion of the nature of gratitude would be of interest (e.g. gratitude to whom

On the basis of the abstract submitted this research is not rooted in relevant literature (on one hand, I am sure that it must be, but on the other hand it is not possible to deduce this from the abstract). So need to emphasise that drawing from relational literature Whilst a statement of claim made by the paper is provided, it does not explain what the aim of the research originally was, unless it was to reinforce the proposal made by the paper, in which case the objectivity of the researcher falls into question. Clarity aim of research and how this element emerges This is not dealt with in the abstract. It is difficult to comment on validity and reliability because of insufficient detail provided in relation to Research methodology.

**Introduction.**

Engagement is central to learning. This paper investigates whether gratitude can offer an insight into how engagement might be enhanced. Gratitude centres on ideas of reciprocity an is an important relational concept, centred on ideas of reciprocity, appropriate for study within an HE environment characterised by exchange of ideas, information and feedback. Few authors have considered the role of gratitude within HE and therefore this study provides the opportunity to contribute new and important knowledge however. Howells (2012, 2004) recognises the relevance of gratitude within education. Howells (2004) suggests gratitude can generate constructive learning outcomes and a lack of gratitude can undermine the cohesion of an academic community. However, gratitude is not without its critics, Brunning (2014) claiming that a gratitude-culture is exploitative. —This exploratory qualitative study aims to:

*To explore the possible nature and links role of gratitude within between gratitude and engagement within learning exchanges in higher education.*

## Literature review.

~~This paper is underpinned by literature largely drawn from a relationship marketing paradigm, offering valuable new perspectives for understanding HE. Relational approaches to HE are increasingly evident (e.g. Bowden 2011; Bowden and Wood 2011; Cownie 2014; Helgesen 2008; Raciti 2012) but gratitude appears to have been overlooked. This is surprising given that gratitude sits at the heart of what might be considered to be the defining aspect of relational exchange – ongoing reciprocity. Indeed gratitude is seen as reciprocity's emotional core (Becker 1986; Dewani and Sinha 2012). Howells (2012) has recognised the relevance of gratitude for the educational context and examines gratitude within secondary education and most recently (Howells 2015) makes initial suggestions about gratitude's potential place in HE.~~

~~Palmatier et al.'s (2009) well-cited work is particularly well cited (e.g. Huang 2015), and whilst defining defines gratitude as 'the emotional appreciation for benefits received, accompanied by a desire to reciprocate' (2009:1), drawing from the earlier work of Emmons and McCullough (2004) and Morales (2005), its however their operationalisation of gratitude focusses on obligation rather than desire. The focus on desire as a defining aspect of gratitude is articulated by Dewani and Sinha (2012) in their conceptual study. This study continues that thought and proposes that feelings of gratitude are complex, combining notions of desire, intention and reciprocity. Importantly this study sees feelings of gratitude extend beyond as more than appreciation, embracing an intention to act on the basis of appreciation. Expressions of gratitude are enactments of feelings of gratitude. The literature (e.g. Dewani and Sinha 2012; Raggio et al. 2014) sees feelings of gratitude and expressions of gratitude as the conceptual pillars of gratitude.~~

~~Feelings of gratitude sit alongside another key pillar of gratitude: expressions of gratitude (Dewani and Sinha 2012; Raggio et al 2014). Raggio and Folsie (2011) found that it was expressions of gratitude which drove intention to volunteer, in the context of disaster management.~~

~~Therefore this This study seeks to identify the possible links between evidence of both feelings of gratitude, and expressions of gratitude within HE and engagement from a variety of participant perspectives, of students, alumni and academics in HE.~~

## Methodology.

~~This exploratory study examines two research objectives:~~

~~To explore the potential link between feelings of gratitude and engagement within HE;~~

~~To explore the potential link between expressions of gratitude and engagement within HE.~~

~~This exploratory study explores gratitude within the context of a faculty of a single HEI. The faculty comprises comprising over 3000 students studying at undergraduate and~~

~~postgraduate level and roughly 170 academics. A sample of 43 participants generated 45 hours of data through individual in-depth interviews. The sample comprised academics, current students, and alumni and academics in order to gain insights from both sides of the learning process, together with mid and post-study perspectives. Participants responded to requests to be involved and therefore are acknowledged to be particularly engaged. Thus this could be considered to be an outlier case study. The research tool was designed to explicitly ask participants about their experiences of gratitude within HE and to consider outcomes of gratitude within their experiences of HE. Credibility of data was prioritised (Creswell and Miller 2000) for example recognizing the desire rather than obligation nature of gratitude when making inferences from data. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 11: open coding was conducted followed by thematic analysis.~~

### **Findings: Discussion.**

~~Feelings and expressions of gratitude emerged as key themes from the data. Additional themes included antecedents and consequences of gratitude. Engagement emerged as an important consequence of both feelings and expressions of gratitude. Students, alumni and academics spoke about engagement relating to the behaviours of both students and academics. The potential link between gratitude and engagement is an interesting and important area with particular relevance to HE and is the focus of this discussion.~~

### **Engagement.**

~~Students and academics spoke about engagement in similar terms, citing attendance, asking questions, reading as key aspects of engagement. However one academic warned of the disadvantages of using attendance and share of voice as the only method of assessing engagement, talking about the performative dimension of these behaviours.~~

~~Interestingly, students spoke unprompted about academics' engagement, citing academics who read off power-point slides without providing added insights, as being unengaged. Academics who were perceived to invest within the learning experience or their relationships with students, were examples of engaged academics.~~

### **Feelings of gratitude.**

~~Students and alumni spoke to the idea of about feelings of gratitude being present within their HE experience. For academics, this was more varied, with some speaking enthusiastically about the importance of feelings of gratitude and expressions of gratitude within HE, and others speaking strongly against the appropriateness of gratitude in HE. The foci for students' feelings of gratitude were academics, student mentors, student peers and the institution. For academics, feelings of gratitude focussed on academic peers, their line manager and students: there was no evidence of gratitude towards the institution.~~

~~There was a clear sense amongst both students and recent alumni that Feelings of gratitude was/were an important influence on their engagement within the learning environment. Students spoke about wanting to engage, in part for their own learning and achievement, but also to reward those academics who had demonstrated their own engagement and in doing so had generated feelings of gratitude within students. Whilst responses from academics were more varied, there was a sense that for some, feelings of gratitude stemmed from students' engagement.~~

~~I think gratitude is essential for university because...one of the most important ways that a student can show gratitude...is by trying, by taking everything on board, by working, by not taking it lightly, taking the most of the opportunity.~~

~~Alumni-1year/male/18-24/undergraduate/UK.~~

~~Thus there appears to be a potential cycle of gratitude and engagement which speaks to both students and academics.~~

### ~~Expressions of gratitude.~~

~~Conversations about expressions of gratitude suggested that whilst Whilst some students made efforts to communicate their gratitude to academics, either via email or through formal acknowledgement schemes, often expressions of gratitude were either intended and unfulfilled, or were considered to be awkward. -~~

~~Expressions of gratitude from students were welcomed by many but not all academics. Expressions of gratitude from staff were considered by students and alumni to be few and far between. However the few examples which were mentioned (e.g. words of thanks within the classroomclass context; expressions of thanks within Facebook groups) appeared to be appreciated and potent in stimulating engagement in students' minds.~~

~~—Indeed it is proposed that mirroring Raggio and Folsie's (2011) findings about the relationship between expressions of gratitude and participation, expressions of gratitude have the currently unfulfilled potential to leverage the gratitude-engagement cycle (figure 1).~~

### ~~Engagement.~~

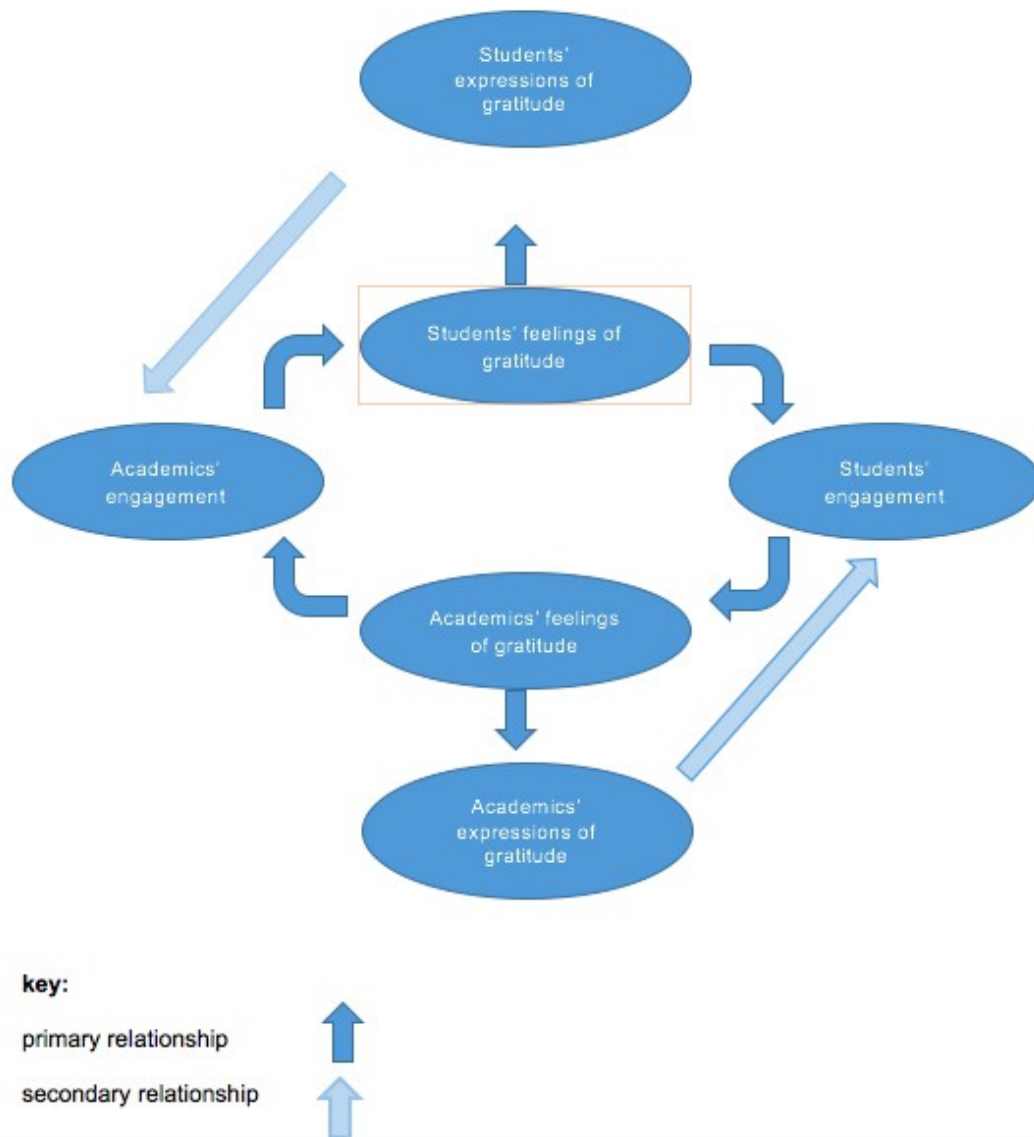
~~Engagement appeared to be related to feelings and expressions of gratitude particularly in the minds of students and alumni. Students and academics spoke about engagement in similar terms, citing attendance, asking questions, and reading as key aspects of engagement. However one academic warned of the disadvantages of using attendance and share of voice as the only method of assessing engagement, talking about the performative dimension of these behaviours.~~

~~Interestingly, students spoke unprompted about academics' engagement, citing academics who readreading off power-point slides without providing added insights, as being unengaged. Engaged Academics who were perceived to invest within the learning experience or their relationships with students, were examples of engaged academics.~~

~~There was a clear sense amongst both students and alumni that gratitude was an important influence on their engagement within the learning environment. There appears to be a cycle of feelings of gratitude and engagement which speaks to students, alumni and academics. Expressions of gratitude may have the currently unfulfilled potential to leverage the feelings of gratitude-engagement cycle. Figure 1 is a tentative conceptualisation of this cycle.~~

~~**Figure 1: Cycle of feelings of gratitude, expressions of gratitude and engagement.**~~

**Figure 1: Cycle of gratitude and engagement.**



### Conclusion:

Gratitude seems to resonate within engaged many students and recent alumni within this exploratory case study whereas academics have more varied perspectives. Discussions relating to engagement within HE must not neglect academics' engagement. This study suggests that feelings of gratitude are experienced within HE and that these may be an important driver of engagement for both students and academics. Expressions of gratitude have the potential to further power this cycle of gratitude and engagement and are worthy of further research.

### References

- Becker, L., C. 1986. *Reciprocity*. Routledge and Kogan Paul, New York. NY.  
 Bowden, J. 2011. Engaging the Student as a Customer: a Relationship Marketing Approach. *Marketing Education Review*. 21 (3), 211-228.

- Brunning, L. 2014 Higher education and the culture of gratitude. *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/opinion/higher-education-and-the-culture-of-gratitude/2014988.article>. Accessed 5 September 2016.
- Gownie, F., 2014. Students' reports of normative commitment within UK higher education. *Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing*, 8-10 July 2014 Bournemouth University.
- Creswell, J.W. and Miller, D.L., 2000. Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39(3), pp.124-130.
- Dewani P., P. and Sinha, P., K. 2012. Gratitude: An Emotional Approach in Business Relationship Research *Journal of Business Management* 6(1), 1-11.
- Emmons, R., A. and McCullough, M.,E. 2004 *The Psychology of Gratitude*. Oxford University Press. New York. NY.
- Helgesen, O. 2008. Marketing for Higher Education: A Relationship Marketing Approach. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. 18(1), 50-78.
- Howells, K. (2012). *Gratitude in Education: A radical view*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.
- Howells, K. 2004. The role of gratitude in higher education. *Transforming Knowledge into Wisdom, Proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> HERDSA Annual Conference, MIRI, Sarawak*. July 2004
- Huang, M. 2015. The Influence of Relationship Marketing Investments on Customer Gratitude in Retailing *Journal of Business Research* June 2015 68(6), 1318-1323.
- Morales, A.C. 2005. Giving Firms an E for Effort: Consumer Responses to High-effort Firms. *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, 806-812.
- Palmatier, R., Burke Jarvis, C., Bechhoff, J. and Kardes, F. 2009. The Role of Customer Gratitude in Relationship Marketing *Journal of Marketing* 73 (Sept), 1-18.
- Raciti, M. 2012. Predicting First Year Student Transfer Intentions: Do Relationships Matter? *Australasian Marketing Journal*. 20(1), 65-72.
- Raggio, R. D. and Folse, J., A., G. 2011. Expressions of Gratitude in Disaster Management: An Economic, Social Marketing and Public Policy Perspective on Post-Katrina Campaigns. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 30(2), 168-174.
- Raggio, R., D., Walz, A., M. Godbole, M., B., and Folse, J., A., G. 2014. Gratitude in Relationship Marketing: Theoretical Development and Directions for Future Research *European Journal of Marketing*. 48(1/2), 2-24.