1. Gratitude is a very popular positive psychology intervention.  In your opinion, what is special about gratitude, compared to other interventions? What is the evidence base that supports gratitude as more effective, compared to kindness, compassion, best possible selves, and the like?  And, most effective for what?  (please consider your own research goals in answering this part of the question).

The question on whether gratitude is different, compared to other positive psychology interventions, is a vitally important one. Looking into the history of the subject, primary interventions of gratitude itself were often compared against a ‘negative’/‘focused on hassles’ control, instead of a neutral activity or a null control. This has been often a source of complaint in researchers looking for results that can hold up to stringent examination, as well as researchers attempting to compare the relative efficacy of studies in a meta-analysis, as a significant improvement compared to a negative comparison means less than compared to other ‘positive interventions’ (Dickens 2017). Indeed, one of the first experimental investigations of Gratitude found significant effects on subjective well being (SWB) for the gratitude intervention, but only in contrast with a ‘negative’ control (Emmons & McCullough 2003). Thus, considering the history of the study of gratitude as a field, evidence that supports gratitude as more effective as compared to other positive psychology interventions (kindness, compassion, best possible selves, etc.) is particularly valuable.

To begin to answer this question, it is first important to acknowledge that while there is strong evidence on what is special about gratitude, compared to other interventions, there is also a reasonable amount of evidence indicating that is not the case. Several meta-analysis on positive psychology interventions as a whole (Boiler, Haverman, Westerhof, Riper, Smit and Bohlmeijer 2013; Sin & Lyubomirsky 2009) have indicated that these interventions are generally effective at improving SWB and reducing depression, but neither meta-analysis investigated the effects of gratitude specifically. One recent meta-analysis of 71 studies on the effect of gratitude specifically, done by Leah Dickens in 2017, looked at results while explicitly accounting for relative control conditions (neutral mindset, negative mindset, positive mindset, etc.). Unsurprisingly, gratitude interventions had greater SWB, life satisfaction, happiness, and less depression when compared against a neutral or negative condition. In contrast, when comparing gratitude to other positive psychology interventions, there was only a modest increase in SWB. Regardless of whether or not gratitude has anything ‘special’ compared to other positive interventions, the meta-analyses indicate that it is much too easy to state the benefits of gratitude when comparing against neutral or negative situations.

In my opinion, a great deal of evidence also exists that supports the unique value of gratitude as compared to other positive psychology interventions. One significant ‘edge’ that gratitude exercises have over others is that gratitude can be practiced on your own time, without access to other resources (Dickens 2017). For example, Kindness and compassion generally requires other individuals to provide or other individuals to receive. In fact, comparing against Kindness specifically, Kerr and colleagues (2015), were able to experimentally induce an increase in gratitude by having subjects perform gratitude exercises, but were not able to increase kindness with kindness exercises. Both interventions were self-administered over 2 weeks, and the gratitude intervention also improved hedonic well-being. The brief nature of the intervention did not ameliorate effectiveness on gratitude, which was ‘special’, as compared to a kindness intervention. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) highlighted another advantage of gratitude, as compared to a ‘best possible selves’ intervention, namely that some individuals felt more ‘self concordant motivation’ (SCM) towards one activity and not the other. This is important, as SCM strongly predicted likelihood of practicing either intervention, and the regular practice of the intervention, regardless of which one it was, lead to increases in positive affect (PA) and decreases in negative affect (NA). Given that long term benefits require sustained effort, it is much easier to achieve if the ‘fit’ of the exercise matches with the individual. Thus, gratitude can have a unique benefit insofar as some people have individual difference preferences for activities. For individuals that feel greater SCM when practicing gratitude, they would have greater benefits to increases in PA and reductions in NA as compared to other activities.