

Gratitude in children and the relationship with life satisfaction and self-concept

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Abstract

Studying gratitude has been the focus of interest in recent years. The research, mainly involving adolescents and adults, identified positive relationships between gratitude, satisfaction with life and self-concept. The purpose of this study was to investigate their relationship in elementary school children. In all, 1931 children aged from 11 to 12 years were recruited from various areas of Greece to participate in this study. The children answered *the Gratitude Questionnaire - 6*, the *Satisfaction with Life Questionnaire* and the *Self-Concept Questionnaire*. The findings suggest positive associations between gratitude, satisfaction with life and positive self-concept, thus, enhancing and broadening the results among adolescents and adults and reinforcing the importance of gratitude in life wellness.

Keywords: Gratitude, positive psychology, satisfaction with life, self concept.

Introduction

The findings of many studies conducted in recent years in the context of positive psychology led to the appreciation of the role of positive emotions in human physical and mental well-being. This triggered the interest of psychologists towards enhancing the study of positive emotions, especially in contexts of education. Research into positive emotions has been heavily influenced by the relationship between emotional and cognitive development. According to Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson, 1998), positive emotions build cognitive social abilities, expanding the thought-action repertoire of problem solution, creating new ways of thinking. The experience of positive emotions and the broadening thought-action repertoire constitute long lasting resources for people and enhance their resilience. Fredrickson (2013) has related gratitude to other positive emotions that contribute to creating personal resources and broaden an individual's thoughts, enhancing personal and social development as well health and well-being.

In Greece, research into positive psychology has only developed in recent years. Previous studies have investigated well-being and satisfaction with life. However, no studies exploring emotions such as gratitude in schoolchildren aged 11-12 have emerged. The current study attempts to broaden the scope of existing research.

Gratitude

Gratitude as a positive personal trait and an affective state influenced by positive psychology has been studied in recent years. The concept of gratitude includes the disposition of the individual to express his appreciation/thankfulness to a person or to a higher power or to God when he receives a gift (Emmons, 2000). In a psychological sense, gratitude as a state can be understood as a subjective feeling of admiration and appreciation of life, as well as a disposition to recognize and respond with "thankful emotions" (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002). This means that we understand it as a positive social emotion experienced when an act of kindness or generosity is freely given from one person to another (Emmons, 2004). Gratitude is a positive emotion, typically evoked when one receives a "gift" (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As an affective trait, gratitude involves qualities such as intensity, frequency, span and density of grateful experiences in people's lives and the number

of persons to whom we are grateful. Roberts (2004), referring to experiences of gratitude, describes it as an acute, intense and brief physiological change that coexists with feelings of pleasure. It has also been understood as a higher level complex feeling as it requires cognitive complexity. For example, grateful experiences require the ability to distinguish oneself from others and to understand the act of offering intentionally (from the donor) (Weiner, 1985). Therefore, the feeling of gratitude includes a physiological change and a subjective cognitive appraisal of the situation.

According to Emmons (2000) gratitude, experience after having benefited from an altruistic action, can be understood as an emotion, as a virtue, as a motive, as a reaction, as an ability and as an attitude. So, gratitude can be distinguished as a personality trait and emotional state (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002). As a dispositional personality trait, gratitude refers to “a stable, generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful feelings toward the good in other people, toward positive experiences and goods acquired by someone (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 112; Watkins et al., 2003). Gratitude, as an emotional personality trait, sets the threshold for the occurrence of particular thankful emotional reactions (McCullough et al., 2002). In general, gratitude as a personality trait is understood as “part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world” (Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002).

Many studies regarding the relationship between gratitude and Big Five personality characteristics have found an association with positive emotional and social functioning, emotional warmth, generosity, trust, altruism and greater ability to dedicate oneself and pursue goals. Specifically, grateful individuals are more extrovert, open, pleasant, conscientious and more neurotic, angry and aggressive, less depressive and less emotionally vulnerable (McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang & Emmons, 2004; Wood et al, 2008). Gratitude, as a state phenomenon, is experienced with different intensity, depending on the situation and conditions of supply and appreciation of the goods offered (McCullough et al., 2004).

Gratitude, having positive influence, reflects and enhances social actions of both the benefactor and the receiver of a gift (Fredrickson, 2004). Grateful experiences can lead to a recipients’ willingness to accept acts by recognizing the benefit (Roberts, 2004) and by expressing appreciation for it (Emmons, 2004). The expression of gratitude, as result of thankful appreciation (Fitzgerald, 1998), may lead to social behaviors towards the benefactor, other people or the community. In this way, gratitude can function as a motivation of social actions within a community (Roberts, 2004). Specifically, some researchers suggest that gratitude is a «main ingredient of social interaction» (Buck, 2004, p. 110).

Gratitude and Satisfaction with life

Satisfaction with life refers to the cognitive component subjective well-being and is strongly related to gratitude (Diener et al., 1985; Watkins et al., 2003; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010). Subjective well-being is conceptualized as including the assessment of life in general and also important specific aspects of life (Diener, Larsen & Emmons, 1984). According to Diener, Lucas & Oishi, (2002), well-being includes three main elements: satisfaction with life, the presence of positive emotions regarding important aspects of life and the absence of negative emotions.

Research in the field of education has indicated that satisfaction with life is associated with self-concept and self-esteem of children. Children with high satisfaction of life rate themselves high in positive emotions, such as well-being (Huebner, 1994). Positive ratings of personal characteristics by children predict high levels of satisfaction with life (Nevin et al., 2005). In addition, youth with high levels of confidence in their emotional stability as well as in their social and education skills feel an increased level of life satisfaction (Suldo & Shaffer, 2007). A longitudinal study in Chinese students suggests that awareness of main academic competence

is strongly linked to satisfaction with life over a period of 7 to 9 months (Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004).

Research regarding environmental conditions and satisfaction with life has focused mainly on the quality of family, school and social relations of young people. In particular, recent studies in adolescents suggest that people with high levels of general satisfaction with life report high levels of social support from family, teachers and friends. In contrast, low levels of satisfaction with life among adolescents correlate with low levels of family and social support (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Other studies examine the correlation of satisfaction with life between specific factors within different environments. For example, qualitative research suggested that mainly family factors are contributing to satisfaction with life of adolescents: a safe and comfortable home, a friendly environment characterized by family proximity and harmony, open communication and trust, parental support, participation in adolescent activities, family support regarding relations and activities outside the family (Joronen & Astedt-Kurki, 2005). Authentic traditional parental practices are considered to be among the strongest predictors of family satisfaction among high school children. Having parents who are viewed as positive and supportive is found to promote psychological autonomy (Edwards & Lopez, 2006). Results from recent research have indicated that well-being and education are strongly linked. Furthermore, school grades, personal beliefs about learning and positive school climate are all positively associated with total satisfaction with life (Suldo, Shaffer, & Riley, 2008). An intervention study among school children aiming to promote their positive development has shown that subjective well-being is related to academic success and positive school function (Bird & Markle, 2012).

Research has focused on the impact of different factors, such as gender, school grades, mental health, personality and culture on satisfaction with life. There is evidence that girls report higher levels of satisfaction with life compared to boys. However, the variance of difference is small (Suldo, 1990). School performance, as Suldo and Huebner suggest (2006), is associated with satisfaction with life and it varies according to the importance each culture places on academic achievement. For example, school satisfaction contributes more to satisfaction of life among Korean students compared to American adolescents due to the fact that Korean tradition places a higher value on success (Park & Huebner, 2005). According to Huebner and McCullough (2000) high academic self-efficacy is linked to high satisfaction with life. Many researchers state that gratitude could be viewed as an adaptive psychological strategy by which people interpret their daily experiences and at the same time receive its benefits, linking gratitude with satisfaction with life. Evidence for this association comes from empirical studies that consider gratitude a powerful predictor of satisfaction with life.

Several research data suggest that satisfaction with life is positively associated with self esteem (Huebner, 1991), health-related quality of life (Zullig et al., 2005), hope (Nickerson & Nagle, 2004) and participation in extracurricular activities (Gilman & Huebner 2006) etc. In contrast, the relationship is negatively associated with psychological problems, such as depression and social anxiety (Gilman & Huebner 2006). Furthermore, adolescents with a high level of satisfaction with life report less internalizing and externalizing problems, lower levels of neuroticism and emotional problems, higher levels of academic, emotional and social esteem compared to adolescents with low levels of satisfaction with life (Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

Gratitude and Self-concept

Self-concept reflects a process of development of the self, which includes a set of knowledge, beliefs and emotions that a person has about himself or herself. The self-concept perspective has a number of conceptual components, for example a focus on one's mental abilities, a focus on physical self, on acceptance by others, as a social self (Beane & Lipka, 1980). It is «a description of the person for himself, including cognitive and psychosocial beliefs that determine not only his behavior but also his future pursuits and shape his psychological identity. The image of self-concept is primarily constituted by the way in which individuals are treated by others, in

particular by important people and the subjective interpretation that they give to this treatment» (Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2011, p.343). Self-concept, as a self-reference to personality traits including abilities to achieve goals, is linked contemporary with the interaction model that suggests the influence of environmental factors (Bracken, 1992). According to Bracken (1992), the self-concept is multifaceted in nature incorporating our views of ourselves in terms of academic, social, emotional, familiar, physical and ability domains of development. All parts of self-concept are influenced by environmental factors which are, in part, interrelated, creating in such a way secondary, interdependent dimensions of identity and roles.

Self-concept, as a general sense of self-worth (Rosenberg & Court, 1979), can be assumed to be a mediator of the relationship between gratitude and satisfaction with life. Empirical studies have revealed that grateful people report higher levels of self-concept, that is, they evaluate themselves more positively and experience greater well-being (McCullough et al., 2002; Kashdan, Uswatte & Julian, 2006). In addition, it seems that self-concept contributes to the sense of satisfaction with life. Consequently, self concept is likely to be related to a higher level of satisfaction of life and gratitude (Kong & You, 2013). The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship of gratitude with satisfaction with life and self-concept in school children. Furthermore, it intends to study the role gender plays on the above correlation.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in 2018, in 5th and 6th year classes of 16 different schools in Athens, Salonika, Corfu, Crete, Florina, Komotini, Mytilene, Kozani, Messinia, Laconia, Arcadia and Trikala. In total, 1931 students aged 11 to 12, took part in this study: 966 boys and 965 girls of which 911 were from E' class and 1020 from D' class.

Measures

Measure of Gratitude. The Six-Item Form (GQ-6) (GQ; McCullough et al., 2002) was adapted for use in Greece by Michailidis & Maridaki-Kassotaki (2020). Responses were anchored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores range from 6 to 42, with higher scores reflecting high levels of gratitude. The GQ-6 has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha=0.74$).

Measure of Satisfaction with Life. Children completed a version of Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al, 1985). Two items were added to the scale relating to the lives of children in school ("I have a great time at school", I have a great time with my friends"). Children provided ratings on scales of one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree) for each item. Scores ranged from 7 to 49, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of life satisfaction. In this study, the value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient for life satisfaction was $\alpha=0.84$.

Self-Concept. Students' self-concept was assessed by using Kontopoulou's (2008) questionnaire. There are 17 items in this measure that reflect children's' beliefs about themselves compared to their peers (I am handsome, I am consistent, I am smart). Factor analysis conducted in this study indicated three factors. The first factor "School competence" includes 4 items and the reliability was $\alpha=0.75$. The second factor describing "Interpersonal relations" consists of 5 items with reliability $\alpha=0.71$. The third factor (5 items) reflects the perceived beliefs of children "Sincerity and Emotional stability". The Cronbach α was 0.69. Three items from the original questionnaire were not included because of the reflected low loading <40.

Table 1. Reliability of the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ6), Satisfaction of life and Self-concept

Scales	Cronbach α	M.	S.D.
Gratitude	0.73	33.79	5.16
Satisfaction of life	0.82	40.45	6.79
Self-Concept: School competence	0.75	12.77	2.39
Self-Concept: Interpersonal Relations	0.71	16.03	2.75
Self-Concept: Emotional stability	0.69	15.90	2.74

Results

Gratitude as a function of gender

One way ANOVA was conducted to identify an association between items of gratitude and gender (male vs. female). A significant association was found between total values of gratitude and gender, such that girls reported higher total gratitude scores compared to boys $F(1,1930)=60.62, p<0.001$. Girls had higher scores on all items of the gratitude questionnaire: «I have so much in life to be thankful for» $F(1,1930)=27.11, p<0.001$, « If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list» $F(1,1930)=32.32, p<0.001$, «When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for» $F(1,1930)=26.94, p<0.001$, «I am grateful to a wide variety of people » $F(1,1930)=18.69, p<0.001$ ”, « As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events» $F(1,1930)=35.27, p<0.001$, and «A long time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone» $F(1,1930)=20.05, p<0.001$.

Table 2. Mean of gratitude as a function of gender

	Gender		Total	F-value (1, 1930)
	Male	Female		
Gratitude	M.O.	M.O.	M.O.	
1. I have so much in life to be thankful for	5.98	6.22	6.10	27.11***
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list	5.44	5.77	5.60	32.32***
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for	4.86	5.21	5.03	26.94***
4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people	5.64	5.89	5.77	18.69***
5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events	5.69	6.01	5.85	35.27***
6. A long time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone	5.28	5.59	5.43	20.05***
Total	32.89	34.69	33.79	60.62***

Note: *** $p<0.001$. Values across the scale range from 6 to 42

Two levels: high and low levels of gratitude as a function of gender

Ward's method was used to evaluate the distances between people with high and low levels of gratitude. According to One-way Anova, the mean of group with a high level of gratitude was $M= 35.45$, and ranged from 29 to 42 scores. The mean of the group with a low level of gratitude was $M=24.90$ and ranged from 6 to 28 scores, $F(1,1930)=2389.09, p<0.001$. According to results of crosstabs analyses, the majority of students (84.3%) belong to the group of high gratitude. More girls (88.8%) than boys (79.7%) indicated high levels of gratitude $\chi^2(1, 1931) = 30.13, p<0.001$ (Table 3).



Table 3. Participants with low and high scores of gratitude according to Crosstabs analyses

Gratitude	Gender					
	Male		Female		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
High	770	79.7	857	88.8	1627	84.3
Low	196	20.3	108	11.2	304	15.7
Total	966	50	965	50	1931	100

Satisfaction with life as a function of gender

We conducted one-way ANOVA to investigate the association of life satisfaction with gender (male and female). The results revealed that the total mean score of life satisfaction was higher for girls than for boys $F(1,1930)=10.62, p<0.001$. Young girls scored higher than boys in the following items: «So far I have gotten the important things I want in my life» $F(1,1930)=10.01, p<0.01$, «I would change nothing in my life» $F(1,1956)=7.56, p<0.01$, «I am satisfied with my life at home» $F(1,1930)=5.37, p<0.05$, and «I have a great time at my school» $F(1,1930)=19.69, p<0.001$ (Table 4).

Table 4. Means of satisfaction with life as a function of gender

Satisfaction with life	Gender			F-value (1, 1930)
	Male	Female	Total	
	M.O.	M.O.	M.O.	
1. I am satisfied with my life	6.19	6.18	6.18	0.008
2. So far I have gotten the important thing I want in my life	5.58	5.78	5.68	10.01**
3. I think that many things in my life are excellent	4.45	5.56	5.51	3.14
4. I would change nothing in my life	5.01	5.23	5.12	7.56**
5. I am satisfied with my life at home	6.01	6.14	6.08	5.37*
6. I have a great time at school	5.39	5.69	5.54	19.46***
7. I have a great time with my friends	6.32	6.36	6.34	0.48
Total	39.95	40.95	40.45	10.62**

Note: * $p<0.05$. ** $p<0.01$. *** $p<0.001$. Values across the scale range from 7 to 49

Self concept as a function of gender

One-way ANOVA was performed on measures of responses to self concept (total, school competence, interpersonal relationships, and emotional stability) and gender (male vs. female). There were significant differences between girls and boys for «Emotional Stability» $F(1,1930)=21.77, p<0.001$. Girls reported higher emotional stability compared to boys. Girls felt more obedient $F(1,1930)=7.18, p<0.01$, more sincere $F(1,1956)=15.19, p<0.001$, more girls perceive themselves to be “a good kid” $F(1,1930)=10.77, p<0.001$, more consistent $F(1,1930)=15.47, p<0.001$ than boys. Furthermore, they scored higher than males in emotional stability $F(1,1930)=3.94, p<0.05$. There were no significant differences between boys and girls for «School Competence» and «Interpersonal relations» (Table 5).

Table 5. Means of self-concept as a function of gender

Items	Male	Female	Total	<i>F-value</i> (1, 1930)
	M.O.	M.O.	M.O.	
I am a good student	3.25	3.34	3.29	6.92**
I learn easily	3.18	3.17	3.18	0.25
I am smart	3.28	3.21	3.25	3.95*
I finish my work fast	3.06	3.05	3.06	0.09
Total	12.8	12.8	12.8	0.06
I like others	2.93	2.87	2.90	2.73
I am liked by others	3.19	3.28	3.24	6.02*
I am handsome	3.15	3.17	3.16	0.12
I have many friends	3.26	3.19	3.23	3.61
I am a good friend	3.49	3.52	3.50	1.02
Total	16.03	16.02	16.03	0.02
I am obedient	3.07	3.17	3.12	7.18**
I am sincere	3.20	3.34	3.27	15.19***
I am a good kid	3.35	3.46	3.40	10.77**
I am consistent	3.16	3.31	3.23	15.47***
I control me emotions	2.83	2.92	2.88	3.94*
Total	15.6	16.2	15.9	21.77***

Note: * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$. Values across the first factor range from 4 to 16, across the second and the third factor from 4 to 20.

High and low gratitude, satisfaction with life and self concept

One-way ANOVA was implemented using high and low gratitude as an independent variable and life satisfaction and self-concept as dependent variables. The results indicated that students with high gratitude reported higher levels of satisfaction with life $F(1,1861)=65.47$, $p < 0.001$, higher school competence $F(1,1861)=18.84$, $p < 0.001$, better interpersonal relationships $F(1,1861)=13.56$, $p < 0.01$ and emotional stability $F(1,1861)=11.87$, $p < 0.01$ compared to students with low gratitude (Table 6).

Table 6. Means of satisfaction with life and self-concept as a function of high and low gratitude

Questionnaires	Gratitude			<i>F-value</i> (1, 1861)
	High M	Low M	Total M	
Satisfaction with life	40.51	34.93	37.91	65.47***
Self-concept: School competence	12.58	11.39	12.02	18.84***
Self-concept: Interpersonal relations	15.98	14.73	15.40	13.56**
Self-concept: Emotional Stability	15.95	14.72	15.38	11.87**

Note: ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

According to results of the study, girls display higher levels of gratitude compared to boys. The findings are consistent with the prior research of Froh, Yurkewicz & Kashdan, (2009); Tian, Du & Huebner, (2015). Froh, Yurkewicz & Kashdan, (2009) suggest in their research among



children from 11 to 13 years old, that boys present lower levels of gratitude than girls. This is because gratitude may express male weakness threatening the masculinity, especially during middle school years, when gender differences become significant. Gender differences are explained by the socialization of individuals in a social-cultural context.

Gratitude, as a personality trait, is thought to appear as early as age 8, playing an important role in identity development (Froh et al., 2014). There are few studies regarding the development of gratitude. However, they converge on the view that personal differences in the development of gratitude are resulting from one's interaction with the environment, thus reflecting Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. According to this theory, the development and change in gratitude results from different forms of environmental experience (Froh, Bono & Emmons, 2010; McCullough et al., 2002). This view is supported by research indicating that gratitude is positively associated with mental well-being (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002; Wood et al., 2010) and with the development of positive social relationships enhancing altruism and cooperation (Algoe et al., 2008; Froh, Bono & Emmons, 2010). In contrast, gratitude has a negative correlation with substance abuse and aggressive behavior (Suldo & Huebner, 2006) as well as with mental disorders (Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Regarding satisfaction with life, girls appear to report more satisfaction with life at home and at school compared to boys. Furthermore, it seems that girls are more satisfied with what they have in their lives. Previous research revealed that there was very little significant difference between boys and girls regarding satisfaction with life (Okun et al., 1990). In this research, there is a significant association between gratitude and satisfaction with life, consistent with the findings of Robustelli and Whisman (2018) which revealed gratitude as being a powerful predictor of satisfaction with life. Regarding self-concept of school ability and interpersonal relations, there were no differences between boys and girls. However, girls evaluate themselves as being more obedient, more honest and more consistent than boys. Furthermore, they report higher emotional control and stability compared to boys.

According to the findings of this research, children with gratitude are more satisfied with their life, report positive self-concept of school ability, are more satisfied with interpersonal relations and express positive emotions compared to their peers with low levels of gratitude. These results confirm previous research, where positive emotions of well-being, satisfaction with life and gratitude were correlated (Huebner, 1994). In the longitudinal study among Chinese students, the association between life satisfaction and awareness of academic ability was consistently positive (Leung, McBride-Chang & Lai, 2004).

In summary, the positive association of gratitude with children's satisfaction with life is an important finding that can broaden and enrich the field of positive psychology in the school environment. The promotion of the well-being of children through the development of positive emotional traits such as gratitude should be an important aspect of school education.

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