



## A preliminary study of the origins of early adolescents' gratitude differences



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### ABSTRACT

Extant research has focused on the consequences of individual differences in gratitude, especially among adults. We focused on addressing the antecedents of gratitude differences among early adolescents, which may be a critical time in gratitude development (Froh, Fan et al., 2011). Specifically, we examined the relations among personality variables (i.e., extraversion and neuroticism), social support (i.e., parents, teachers, peers), stressful life events, and gratitude in a sample of 647 middle school students from four middle schools in a Southeastern US state. Controlling for gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed statistically significant relations for the personality variables of extraversion and neuroticism. Furthermore, after controlling for demographic and personality variables, students' perceptions of social support contributed significance incremental variance to early adolescents' gratitude scores, with both parent and teacher support accounting for unique variance. Finally, stressful life events added significant variance after controlling for the demographic, personality and social support variables. Contrary to expectations, neither students' levels of social support nor neuroticism scores moderated the association between stressful events and gratitude. The results suggest implications for the development of more sophisticated theories of the antecedents of gratitude as well as the design of more comprehensive interventions.

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Research on the construct of gratitude represents an emergent aspect of the field of positive psychology (Bono, Froh, & Forreth, 2014). Although a majority of the literature to date focuses on adults, some research is emerging regarding gratitude in youth. The extant literature indicates that high levels of gratitude in adults can be beneficial in a variety of ways, and such a conclusion is emerging in adolescent research as well (Froh et al., 2014). Specifically, individual differences in gratitude show various positive consequences. These consequences include psychosocial factors in adolescents, such as relational fulfillment (Froh, Yurkewicz et al., 2009), prosocial behavior, and social integration (Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010), suggesting that gratitude plays a role in the production and maintenance of social ties. Furthermore, gratitude displays meaningful relations with various mental health variables. For instance, gratitude has shown positive relations with life satisfaction and hope (Hoy, Suldo, & Mendez, 2012), positive affect (Froh, Yurkewicz et al., 2009), and self-esteem (Li, Zhang, Li, Li, & Ye, 2012). Conversely, gratitude has shown negative relations with negative affect (Froh, Yurkewicz et al., 2009), depressive symptoms (Gillham et al., 2011), and risk behavior (Froh, Emmons et al., 2011). Additionally, gratitude relates to important school-related factors, such as school grades

(Froh, Emmons et al., 2011; Ma, Kibler, & Sly, 2013), academic interest (Ma et al., 2013), and positive and negative emotions in school (Tian, Du, & Huebner, 2015). Finally, gratitude has demonstrated inverse relations with adolescents' physical health symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, and sore throats (Froh, Yurkewicz et al., 2009).

Various definitions and theories of gratitude have been proposed. Gratitude has been considered to be a mood, a moral virtue, a personality trait, a coping response, and a way of life reflecting mostly an innate reaction (Emmons, 2008). As a personality trait, gratitude is understood in terms of the grateful disposition. This disposition represents a generalized tendency to recognize beneficence and respond with an emotion of gratitude to the actions of other people's benevolence (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude is characterized by Haidt (2003) as a moral emotion that is other-praising and is related to other people's or society's welfare. As an intrinsic value, gratitude can be felt beyond an interpersonal context (e.g., gratitude for a work of art, toward God, or for a scene in nature; Bono et al., 2014). Gratitude expressed as a result of an affective trait is considered to produce a stable predisposition toward grateful emotional responses (McCullough et al., 2002) or more generally, trait gratitude is "a life orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in life" (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891).

McCullough et al.' (2002) grateful disposition consists of four facets: intensity, frequency, span, and density. A dispositionally grateful person will feel more intensely grateful than a person who is less disposed

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toward gratitude. Additionally, one who is grateful will report feeling grateful more frequently during the day, and gratitude may be easily elicited by simple favors or acts of kindness from a benefactor. Conversely, individuals who are lower in gratitude will report feeling less grateful during the day and will require more substantial favors to elicit gratitude. A grateful person will have higher numbers of life circumstances for which he or she feels grateful at a given time (e.g., feeling simultaneously grateful for family, job, friends, health). Finally, the grateful person will be grateful to a larger number of people for a single positive outcome, attributing a benevolent occurrence to more people than the person who has a less grateful disposition (McCullough et al., 2002). The definition of McCullough et al. provided the foundation for the development of their measure of gratitude, the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002), which was modified based on previous research with children and adolescents and used as the criterion measure in this study (Froh, Fan et al., 2011).

Theories of the origins of gratitude are not well-specified. Nevertheless, various scholars suggest that differences in gratitude may develop through interactions in an individual's environment or may develop as the result of a naturally occurring predisposition. From the latter perspective, gratitude is fostered intrinsically, and the environment, especially the interpersonal environment, simply sparks individual growth of an already present disposition (e.g., Froh et al., 2010; McCullough et al., 2002; Rosenberg, 1998). Conversely, the find-remind-and-bind (Algoe, 2012) and moral paradigm (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) theories of gratitude suggest that gratitude expression is fostered by an individual's interactions with her interpersonal environment, thus reflecting Bandura's (1977) social learning theory.

Dispositional gratitude is thought to appear as early as age eight (Froh et al., 2014), playing an integral role in identity development (Bono et al., 2014). Studies of gratitude among adolescents have been sparse, but may be particularly important because gratitude is thought to generally occur within an interpersonal context. Thus, it has been considered a "prime candidate" for improving students' school satisfaction and the quality of their peer relationships (Bono et al., 2014, p. 70). Higher levels of gratitude may thus be especially important during secondary school, when autonomy becomes more important and students are generally less interactive with family members and more interactive with peers (Hill & Holmbeck, 1986). In this study, we examined gratitude as a dispositional trait because trait measures of gratitude show the most robust and pervasive network of nomological relations (Froh, Fan et al., 2011).

Studies of the antecedents of individual differences in youth gratitude have been sparse, especially relative to studies of the consequences of individual differences. Nevertheless, the extant literature suggests several personal factors and environmental factors that may be involved in the development of individual differences. These personal factors include demographic variables, personality variables (e.g., extraversion and neuroticism), and environmental variables (e.g., social support and stressful life events).

Few studies have addressed relations between gratitude and demographic variables. To our knowledge, no studies have addressed the relations between adolescents' gratitude and race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (SES). Furthermore, the few existing studies fail to suggest age effects across students from grades 3–12 (Froh, Kashdan et al., 2009; Froh, Emmons et al., 2011). However, some, but not all, studies suggest gender differences in mean levels of gratitude among adolescents. In a study of students of ages 11 to 13, girls reported slightly higher levels of gratitude than boys (Froh, Yurkewicz, et al., 2009). Several other studies have obtained similar results, with adolescents from several countries demonstrating gender differences, in favor of females (e.g., Chan, 2012; Gordon, Musher-Eizenman, Holub, & Dalrymple, 2004; Tian et al., 2015).

The nature of the relations between adolescents' personality characteristics and gratitude has not been addressed. In adults, gratitude has been positively related to extraversion and inversely related to neuroticism suggesting the importance of biologically-based personality determinants of gratitude in adults (e.g., McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons,

2004; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby 2008; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009). Research with children seems warranted given the robust associations between personality variables and a variety of related positive psychology variables, such as hope and life satisfaction (e.g., Heaven, 1989).

Gratitude has been related to adolescents' positive social relationships (Froh et al., 2010; Froh, Emmons et al., 2011; Poelker & Kuebli, 2014), but only one study has addressed the link between gratitude and perceived social support. Using single item measures of peer and social support of unknown reliability and validity, Froh, Yurkewicz et al., 2009, reported correlations of 0.18 and 0.20 between youth gratitude and parent and peer support respectively. Although social support was conceptualized as an outcome of gratitude in their study, given that the study was cross-sectional in nature, the directionality of the relation is unclear. It seems plausible that social support is an antecedent of gratitude or that the relations can be bidirectional as well.

The occurrence of major stressful life events has also been suggested as a potential antecedent of gratitude differences in adolescents. For example, some research has suggested that gratitude serves as a buffer against the negative impact of stressful life events (Isreal-Cohen, Uzevovsky, Kashy-Rosenbaum, & Kaplan, 2015; Li et al., 2012). The possibility of direct effects of stressful life events on gratitude is also suggested by the literature on its inverse relation with a variety of related variables, such as hope (Otis, Huebner, & Hills, 2016), life satisfaction (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002) and emotional problems (Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, McMahon, & Halpert, 2003; Stern, McCants, & Pettine, 1982), all of which are consistent with the notion that the experience of stressful environmental events, especially uncontrollable ones, can exert direct and indirect effects on the well-being of youth (Hobfoll, 1989).

In sum, little research exists regarding personal and environmental antecedents of gratitude differences, especially in youth. Further investigation appears warranted to address the origins of gratitude differences in adolescents, taking into account individual difference variables (e.g., gender, personality) as well as environmental variables (e.g., stressful life events, ongoing social support).

## 1. The current study

This study addressed gaps in the literature regarding the origins of individual differences in gratitude among early adolescents by simultaneously exploring several possible antecedents of gratitude differences among middle school students. Lacking a well-specified theoretical model of the origins of gratitude, we investigated the relations of multiple, previously examined variables across studies of children and adults in an exploratory fashion. Based on the literature, these variables represented potentially important individual and environmental antecedents of trait gratitude in early adolescents. Specifically, in addition to demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, SES), we examined two major personality variables (extraversion and neuroticism), one chronic environmental variable (social support), and one acute environmental variable (i.e., occurrence of stressful life events). In the present study, personality was represented by the Big Five domains of neuroticism and extraversion because these domains of the Big Five personality model have robust support in the literature with inclusion in all of the major multidimensional models of personality (McAdams, 2009) and because these two domains are especially related to emotions (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Ng, 2017).

Our specific research questions and associated hypotheses included:

1. What are the relationships between gratitude and key demographic variables (gender, grade, ethnicity, and SES)? Given the inconsistent or non-existent findings, we did not formulate specific hypotheses for the relations between gratitude and the demographic variables.
2. When controlling for demographic variables, what is the relationship between gratitude and the personality characteristic of extraversion? Specifically, we hypothesized that gratitude would be positively related to extraversion.

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