



## Gratitude is associated with greater levels of protective factors and lower levels of risks in African American adolescents



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### A B S T R A C T

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The literature suggests gratitude is associated with positive youth development. The current study examined the relationship between gratitude and protective/risk factors among African American youth. Adolescents ( $N = 389$ ; 50.4% males) ages 12–14 completed measures of gratitude (moral affect and life-orientation), protective factors (e.g., academic and activity engagement, family relationship), and high-risk behaviors (e.g., sexual attitudes and behaviors, drug/alcohol use). Results indicated greater moral affect gratitude was the only variable significantly associated with greater academic interest, better academic performance, and more extra-curricular activity engagement. Greater moral affect and life-orientation gratitude both significantly correlated with positive family relationship. Greater life-orientation gratitude was the only variable significantly associated with abstinence from sexual intimacy, sexual intercourse, likelihood of engaging in sex during primary school, and abstinence from drug/alcohol use. The findings suggest that moral affect gratitude may enhance protective factors while life-orientation gratitude may buffer against high-risk behaviors among African American youth.

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African American youth evidence disproportionately high rates of negative indicators for sexual and reproductive health (CDC, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). In 2009, African Americans accounted for 65% of the HIV diagnoses reported among U.S. individuals ages 13–24 (CDC, 2011a). The rates of chlamydia in the U.S. were approximately 12 times greater for African American adolescents ages 10–14 (199.7 per 100,000 cases) compared to non-Hispanic white youth (16.3 per 100,000 cases) in 2010 (CDC, 2011b). In 2009, U.S. birth rates for African American teens (59.0 per 1000 females) were more than twice that of non-Hispanic white teens (25.6 per 1000 females; CDC, 2011c).

Traditionally, much of the literature on adolescent health has focused on negative indicators (e.g., prior abuse or trauma, low self-esteem, depression) of high-risk behaviors (e.g., Brown, Lourie, Zlotnick, & Cohn, 2000; Colon, Wiatrek, & Evans, 2000; Hallfors et al., 2004), while protective factors have received less empirical attention. The emergence of positive psychology has shifted the traditional focus on dysfunction to the study of human characteristics that contribute to optimal functioning and resilience in adverse situations (Seligman, 1998). Seligman (1998) asserted that such factors could serve as

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buffers against physical, mental, and behavioral risks, and that fostering character strengths in youth may lead to a positive developmental trajectory. Yearley (1990) defined virtue or character strengths as “a disposition to act, desire, and feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognizable human excellence or instance of human flourishing” (p. 13). The extent to which character strengths (e.g., gratitude) may be associated with adolescent protective factors (e.g., family support, academic achievement) and buffers against sexual-risk behaviors among African American youth warrants investigation.

The available evidence suggests that positive indicators of healthy youth development include sound judgment/impulse control (Malow, Devieux, Jennings, Lucenko, & Kalichman, 2001), self-regulation (Crockett, Raffaelli, & Shen, 2006), family support and communication (Dittus & Jaccard, 2000; Hutchinson, Jemmott, Jemmott, Braverman, & Fong, 2003), religiosity (McCree, Wingood, DiClemente, Davies, & Harrington, 2003), school connectedness (Blum & Ireland, 2004; Slap et al., 2003), love of learning, curiosity, leadership, and prudence (Ma et al., 2008). These protective factors have been found to be associated with a decreased likelihood of engaging in sexual-risk behaviors, cigarette smoking, and alcohol use (e.g., Blum & Ireland, 2004; Crockett et al., 2006; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Ma et al., 2008; McCree et al., 2003). Recent literature suggests that gratitude, a predisposition toward thankfulness and appreciation, is a promising character strength in positive youth development (Froh & Bono, 2011). Although emerging research has begun to link gratitude to adolescent well-being and health (e.g., Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009), the relationship between gratitude and risk behaviors among youth remains unexplored.

Emmons and Shelton (2002) theorized that gratitude is a positive universal characteristic present in all cultures and it is an integral part of most of the world's religions. As early as the 1950s, Klein asserted that gratitude was a capacity present from birth that developed in tandem with a child's cognitive and emotional systems (Klein, 1957). Moreover, Klein (1957) viewed gratitude as a hallmark of emotional maturity and a major source for the capacity to love. Rosenberg (1998) provided a framework for the investigation of gratitude by suggesting that gratitude could be studied as a feeling state, as a mood that could fluctuate, or as an individual's predisposition to experience gratitude in certain situations. McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) conceptualized gratitude as a moral affect, suggesting that individuals scoring high in gratitude tend to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the benevolent behaviors that contributed to one's positive experiences (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). According to McCullough et al. (2001), gratitude has three moral functions: 1) as a *moral barometer*, gratitude is an emotional response to the beneficent act of a moral agent; 2) as a *moral motive*, gratitude drives the beneficiary to respond prosocially towards the moral agent or other individuals; and 3) as a *moral reinforcer*, expressed gratitude enhances the likelihood that a benefactor will engage in future prosocial behaviors. Based on this conceptualization, gratitude is an emotion that instills a sense of connection to people and communities (Froh, Fan, et al., 2011). Consistent with this conceptualization, gratitude has been positively associated with response to aid, social support, social integration, and levels of satisfaction with family, friends, school, self, community, and life among adolescents (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Froh, Yurkewicz, et al., 2009; Park & Peterson, 2006).

Moral emotion gratitude also has been positively correlated with academic achievement and absorption in activities (Froh, Emmons, et al., 2011). These relationships are consistent with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (1998, 2001). The theory postulates that gratitude broadens people's monetary thought-action repertoires and strengthens their enduring personal resources. According to this theory, a grateful person high in a moral motive would creatively consider a wide range of prosocial options that may promote the well-being of the benefactor or other individuals (Fredrickson, 2001). Over time, the broadened thoughts and actions will strengthen social bonds and friendships leading to enduring psychological and social resources. These resources, in turn, will broaden into other aspects of adolescent wellbeing, such as academic achievement and absorption in activities. Froh and colleagues further assert that the social resources developed by individuals high in gratitude may influence motivation and intrinsic pursuit of aspirations and goals (Froh, Emmons, et al., 2011). Although gratitude, defined as a moral emotion, appears to be associated with protective factors against sexual-risk behaviors (e.g., strong family relationship, school connectedness, academic success, involvement in extra-curricular activities), gratitude as a character strength is underexplored in youth (Froh & Bono, 2011).

Beyond moral emotion, the literature suggests gratitude is not simply the ability to detect beneficence on the part of others towards oneself. Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) proposed a broader view of the construct in his life-orientation conceptualization of gratitude. Life-orientation operationalizes gratitude as a tendency towards focusing and appreciating the positive aspects of life, people, and the world. This broadened view of the construct offers a more comprehensive conceptualization of gratitude that covers reported gratitude towards social and non-social sources (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Gordon, Musher-Eizenman, Holub, & Dalrymple, 2004). Wood et al. (2010) further assert that life-orientation gratitude is a dispositional (trait) tendency, an internal predisposition towards experiencing gratitude frequently, intensely, and across a generalized set of stimuli. Consistent with this definition, gratitude has been correlated with a wide range of adaptive personality, well-being, and health constructs (e.g., McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). For example, gratitude has been investigated as an alternative to materialism (Polak & McCullough, 2006), an integral part of subjective well-being (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008), a correlate to positive coping (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007), a buffer against depression (Froh, Fan, et al., 2011), and an adaptive mechanism that supports survival (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). These relationships are supported by Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (1998, 2001). The theory postulates that for individuals high in life-orientation gratitude, the habitual modes of broadened cognitive and behavioral activities will aggregate into enduring resources and resiliency that can be drawn on when confronted with stress, adversity, and social challenges (Fredrickson, 2004; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2002; Wood et al., 2010). Gratitude broadens

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