



Students' Lived Experiences of Gratitude: A Phenomenological Study

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v13i2.7290>

Abstract

Gratitude is a positive emotion that plays a significant role in adolescents' psychological well-being. This study aims to explore the subjective experience of gratitude among adolescents using a phenomenological approach. Four adolescents from a public vocational high school in Kalimantan participated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted based on the framework of emotionality, prosociality, and religiousness as the core factors shaping gratitude. Findings indicate that each participant's sense of gratitude was influenced by their unique life circumstances, including social support, religious values, emotional experiences, and family conditions. This study highlights the importance of implementing positive emotion-based interventions in educational settings to promote adolescents' well-being.

Keywords: *Gratitude; Adolescents; Positive Psychology*

Introduction

Gratitude is a central construct in positive psychology and plays a vital role in promoting psychological well-being, particularly during adolescence. Gratitude is understood as a positive emotion arising when individuals receive kindness from others, as well as a dispositional tendency that shapes how individuals interpret their life experiences (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). In contemporary positive psychology, gratitude is viewed not merely as a simple emotional reaction, but as a foundational mechanism that shapes thought patterns, social relationships, and long-term psychological resilience.

In recent years, concerns regarding adolescent mental health have increased significantly. Adolescents face numerous pressures, including academic demands, emotional and hormonal changes, family dynamics, and the pervasive influence of social media. These factors heighten vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and diminished psychological well-being (Steinberg, 2020). Contemporary research indicates that gratitude serves as a protective factor that reduces symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness in adolescents (Bono et al., 2020; Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021). Thus, understanding gratitude among adolescents is increasingly relevant.

Gratitude is closely related to the Broaden-and-Build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), which posits that positive emotions broaden individuals' cognitive and social capacities, enhance decision-making and creativity, and build long-term psychological resources. Adolescents who experience gratitude tend to

interpret difficult situations more positively, develop greater meaning in life, and foster stronger interpersonal relationships. Research has consistently shown that adolescents with higher levels of gratitude demonstrate better emotional regulation, greater stress-management capacity, and more supportive social interactions (Algoe, 2022; Ma et al., 2017).

In educational contexts, gratitude has been shown to enhance academic motivation, school engagement, teacher–student relationships, and academic achievement. Bono and Froh (2021) found that students who regularly engaged in gratitude practices demonstrated improved focus, higher enthusiasm for school activities, and greater overall happiness. Even simple interventions such as gratitude journaling can effectively increase positive affect and reduce problematic behaviors within a short period (Watkins et al., 2021; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2020).

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a critical period during which individuals form personal identity, internalize values, and determine life direction. During this stage, social support, meaning-making, and emotional regulation play essential roles in psychological well-being. Gratitude is one of the key factors that contribute to emotional resilience and the ability to cope with life challenges (Kim et al., 2023). Adolescents who are able to experience gratitude often demonstrate better integration of positive and negative experiences, acceptance of life’s limitations, and more realistic hopes for the future.

McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) proposed three primary factors that shape gratitude: (1) **emotionality**, the capacity to experience emotional depth; (2) **prosociality**, the inclination to respond positively to kindness; and (3) **religiousness**, the influence of spiritual values on feelings of appreciation. Recent studies confirm that these factors remain relevant in explaining gratitude formation across diverse cultural contexts, including Indonesia (Lin, 2020; Dias & Garcia, 2021; Homan, 2022).

Family dynamics including parenting style, emotional warmth, and relational stability also significantly influence gratitude development (Park & Ai, 2021). Adolescents raised in supportive environments tend to develop gratitude more easily, while those who experience family stress may cultivate gratitude through external sources of acceptance such as teachers or peers (Kim et al., 2023).

Given the essential role of gratitude in adolescent psychological development, deeper exploration of adolescents’ subjective experiences is crucial. This phenomenological study seeks to understand how adolescents make meaning of gratitude, how family and social contexts shape these experiences, and how gratitude operates in their daily lives. This understanding can inform the development of school-based psychological interventions that enhance the well-being of Indonesian adolescents.

Method

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to explore adolescents’ subjective experiences of gratitude in depth.

Participants

Four adolescents aged 15–16 from a public vocational high school in Kalimantan were selected using purposive sampling. All participants voluntarily joined in-depth interviews.

Procedure

Individual interviews lasting 30–40 minutes were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Questions were developed based on the conceptualization of gratitude and its contributing factors proposed by McCullough et al. (2001, 2002). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding. Transcripts were coded according to three core categories: emotionality, prosociality, and religiousness. The analysis also considered frameworks from Froh et al. (2009) on subjective well-being in adolescents related to gratitude.

Results

Participant 1: DS — Gratitude Based on Prosociality

DS is an adolescent who experienced a stressful childhood due to harsh parenting characterized by criticism, emotional neglect, and a lack of affection. This emotionally unsafe home environment contributed to symptoms of depression, self-harm behaviors, and repeated attempts to run away from home. A major shift occurred when DS moved to live with his uncle, who provided a warm and nurturing environment where he felt accepted, valued, and free from emotional violence.

In this context, DS's sense of gratitude emerged as a response to finally feeling loved and supported. Gratitude in DS's experience is closely tied to prosociality, expressed through his desire to reciprocate the kindness he received. He began helping with household chores, following rules, and studying diligently to make his family proud. The supportive environment also led to significant improvements in his emotional well-being he stopped engaging in self-harm and began to feel hopeful about his future. These findings align with studies showing that adolescents who experience strong social support tend to develop greater gratitude, resilience, and prosocial behavior (Bono et al., 2020; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2020).

Participant 2: CL — Gratitude Based on Religiousness

CL was raised by a single mother with unstable emotional regulation. The tense home atmosphere contributed to CL becoming easily angered, emotionally reactive, and frequently feeling misunderstood. He also held negative perceptions regarding self-worth and family affection, often believing that he was unloved, which led to conflicts with those around him.

A significant positive change occurred when CL moved into Brother House, a Christian residential facility that provided emotional, spiritual, and social structure. Through the guidance of a pastor, engagement in Bible study, daily reflection, and prayer routines, CL underwent notable emotional transformation. He became more capable of forgiving others, regulating his emotions, and viewing his life through a more positive lens.

Gratitude for CL is strongly grounded in religiousness spiritual values, religious practices, and moral teachings that emphasize appreciation and thankfulness. Recent studies show that religiosity enhances emotional regulation, gratitude, and meaning in life among adolescents (Park & Ai, 2021; Kim et al., 2023).

Participant 3: An — Gratitude Based on Emotionality

An comes from a financially disadvantaged family. His parents work irregular jobs and are unable to fully meet his educational needs. Despite these limitations, An displays remarkable resilience and self-acceptance. Through a scholarship, he is able to continue his education and even sets aside part of his allowance to support his mother.

An's gratitude is shaped by emotionality the capacity to interpret life's hardships as opportunities for growth rather than obstacles. An chooses to focus on the positive aspects of his life: having both parents present, the opportunity to attend school, and a supportive social environment. He aspires to become a police officer, driven by the desire to improve his family's circumstances. These findings align

with research showing that adolescents from low-income families with high emotionality tend to develop stronger gratitude and resilience (Lin, 2020; Dias & Garcia, 2021).

Participant 4: In — Gratitude Based on Emotionality

In shares a similar socioeconomic background with An, but the warm and supportive dynamics within his family have enabled him to develop gratitude from an early age. Despite relying on his older sibling to pay for school expenses who is also struggling financially In interprets this as a sign of love and sacrifice. He moves between his parents' home and his sibling's home to adjust to school requirements, yet he navigates these transitions with acceptance and gratitude.

Emotionality serves as the core factor shaping In's gratitude. He perceives his life as "good enough," feels genuinely loved, and deeply appreciates every form of support he receives. In also expresses the aspiration to make his parents proud in the future. These findings strengthen previous studies suggesting that adolescents with stable family support are more likely to develop gratitude, life satisfaction, and hope (Homan, 2022; Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that adolescents' experiences of gratitude are shaped through a complex interaction of emotional, social, and spiritual factors. These findings are consistent with recent research emphasizing that gratitude is a multidimensional emotion influenced by family dynamics, social relationships, and religious beliefs (Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021; Algoe, 2022).

1. Gratitude as a Protective Emotion in Adolescence

All four participants described gratitude as playing a significant role in helping them cope with psychosocial challenges. DS, for example, demonstrated substantial positive change after receiving acceptance and support from his uncle's family. This aligns with Bono et al. (2020), who highlight that gratitude can buffer the negative effects of stressful childhood experiences and enhance emotional resilience.

Similarly, An and In both living under economic hardship were able to maintain a positive outlook on life. Lin (2020) found that gratitude is strongly associated with higher subjective well-being among adolescents from low-income families, reinforcing the notion that gratitude serves as a protective factor in economically vulnerable contexts.

2. The Role of Emotional Regulation and Emotionality

Emotionality emerged as a crucial component in shaping gratitude, particularly for An and In. Both adolescents demonstrated the ability to accept their life circumstances, which subsequently evolved into feelings of gratitude. Watkins et al. (2021) suggest that adolescents with high positive emotionality are more likely to cultivate gratitude because they naturally interpret life experiences more positively. Similarly, Dias and Garcia (2021) found that hope functions as a key mediator linking gratitude and emotional well-being.

3. Prosociality and Interpersonal Relationships

In DS's case, prosociality became prominent once he experienced kindness within his new family environment. Behaviors such as helping with household chores and studying harder reflect the reciprocation of kindness, an outcome commonly associated with gratitude (Ma et al., 2017). Yost-Dubrow and Dunham (2018) also assert that adolescents who are grateful are more inclined to engage in prosocial behaviors due to an internal motivation to return kindness.

Gratitude is also shown to strengthen interpersonal relationships. Algoe (2022) describes gratitude as a “social glue” that enhances relational bonds. This was evident in DS’s growing openness and improved social interactions within his uncle’s family.

4. Religiousness and Personal Transformation in Adolescents

Religiousness played an essential role in shaping gratitude among CL. The religious guidance and structured spiritual environment at Brother House served as a turning point in his emotional development. Park and Ai (2021) note that religious practices and spiritual values significantly enhance gratitude and psychological well-being in adolescents.

Furthermore, longitudinal research by Kim et al. (2023) shows that intrinsic religiosity can improve emotional regulation, self-acceptance, and forgiveness traits that were clearly reflected in CL’s transformation. Thus, religiousness not only shapes gratitude but also strengthens emotional competencies that support healthy adolescent development.

5. Gratitude as a Mechanism for Building Resilience

All participants demonstrated that gratitude contributed to increased resilience when facing difficult life circumstances. Bono and Froh (2021) argue that gratitude enhances psychological resilience by fostering positive emotions, increasing perceptions of social support, and enabling individuals to find meaning in challenging experiences.

Gratitude has also been shown to reduce risks for psychological problems such as depression and anxiety (Kleiman et al., 2021). For DS, reduced self-harm behaviors appear to be linked to strengthened social support and heightened positive emotions following the development of gratitude. In CL’s case, improved emotional control aligns with religious practices that reinforced his sense of gratitude.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of gratitude in adolescents, particularly within the Indonesian sociocultural context. The findings reinforce McCullough et al.’s (2002) model, highlighting emotionality, prosociality, and religiousness as the core components of gratitude formation. Additionally, the results support the Broaden-and-Build theory, which explains how positive emotions cultivate long-term psychological resources.

Practically, the findings suggest that gratitude-based interventions can be effectively implemented in school settings to promote adolescent well-being, especially for those experiencing psychosocial or economic stress. Programs such as gratitude journaling, daily reflections, and spiritual-based guidance have been shown to increase positive emotional experiences (Watkins et al., 2021; Bono & Froh, 2021).

Conclusion

This study reveals that adolescents’ experiences of gratitude are strongly influenced by the factors of emotionality, prosociality, and religiousness. The four participants demonstrated different expressions of gratitude shaped by their unique life contexts.

Gratitude was shown to enhance emotional well-being, strengthen social support, promote prosocial behaviors, and increase life satisfaction. These findings highlight the importance of developing school-based gratitude programs to support adolescents’ psychological well-being. Such interventions can help young people cultivate positive emotions, build resilience, and navigate life challenges more effectively.

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