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Gratitude and life satisfaction: the mediating role of spirituality among Filipinos

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study aimed to determine the relationships between gratitude and life satisfaction; gratitude and spirituality; spirituality and life satisfaction, and the mediating role of spirituality between gratitude and life satisfaction. We utilised the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), and Daily Spiritual Experience Scale as measures. The study enjoined 415 participants whose age was 13 to 28 years old from the Philippines; more than the majority were Roman Catholics and from Christian denominations. Positive relationships were revealed between gratitude and life satisfaction, between gratitude and spirituality, and between spirituality and life satisfaction. Spirituality was also evidenced to mediate the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Gratitude positively affects spirituality which in turn positively affects life satisfaction. The results provided clarity to the mechanism of the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. The present study also supported the transcendental view of gratitude. It also provided empirical evidence to the relationship of the variables in the Philippine context. Counselling implications for the improvement of life satisfaction were also offered.

KEYWORDS

Gratitude; life satisfaction; spirituality; well-being

Introduction

‘Gratitude turns what we have into enough’ is a popular quote that may have become a cliché but continues to be true until today. The Bible offers several verses of being grateful or thankful. One famous verse would be ‘In everything, give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you’ (1 Thessalonians 5:18, KJV). Teachings and traditions in major religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emphasise the virtue of gratitude. These traditions emphasise the learning and practice of gratitude as a key to attain a good life (Emmons and Stern 2013). Being thankful or grateful is a value or character that is less observed today especially among the younger generations (Chopik et al. 2019).

Like many other words, gratitude connotes different meanings according to context. Gratitude could be considered as a virtue, an emotion, a moral sentiment, a motive,

a coping response, a skill, and an attitude (Allen, 2018). At the least, it is deemed as an emotional response to being a beneficiary of an altruistic act (Emmons and Crumpler 2000). Gratitude also has two meanings: a worldly one and a transcendent one. In its worldly sense, it is a feeling that results from interpersonal exchanges when a beneficiary appreciates being a recipient of a valuable gift from another. Gratitude is also considered a cognitive-affective state that is linked with the awareness and realisation that he has become a recipient of a valuable gift that he has not sought for, deserved or worked for, but rather because of the benevolence of the giver (Emmons and Stern 2013). At the transcendent level, gratitude characterises a sensitive awareness that steers to a sense of connectedness with others and with the generous sustaining forces at work in the world. This quality of gratitude is a marked distinction from the self-absorbed sense of satisfaction that a narcissist would feel in response to receipt of a benefit (Uhrer 2016).

In this study, gratitude is a grateful disposition which is an affective trait. It is a 'generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains' (Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Science, no date) (McCullough 2013). Hence gratitude in this study specifically represents the proneness of an individual to experience gratitude in daily life. A great body of research has investigated the relationship between gratitude and well-being dimensions, specifically life satisfaction.

Many believe that to be happy is to be satisfied with one's life. Veenhoven (2012) equates happiness with life satisfaction. A person's positive evaluation of his overall quality of life is life satisfaction (Veenhoven 2015). Diener (2000) and Veenhoven (2015) both agree that life satisfaction is a cognitive, integral component of subjective well-being. Life satisfaction, together with negative and positive affect, compose subjective well-being. Life satisfaction is relatively more stable and enduring than the other two components (Diener 2000).

A large body of literature has demonstrated that a higher level of gratitude is highly associated with a higher level of satisfaction (Datu and Mateo 2015; Kong, Zhao, and Ding 2015; Yildirim and Alanazi 2018; Szczesniak et al. 2019; Bernardo, Tan-Masukhani, and Daganzo 2018). The purpose of the present study is to replicate the association between gratitude and life satisfaction and to expand the investigation by testing the possible mechanism by which gratitude influences life satisfaction through spirituality. Further, it aims to add to the literature on empirical studies among Filipino samples.

Gratitude, spirituality, life satisfaction

It is evident from previous studies that gratitude has a positive association with life satisfaction. However, there are relatively few studies that explore the extent to which intervening variables have a role in this relationship (Kong, Zhao, and Ding 2015). Banking on the idea that gratitude has a transcendental component (Hlava, Elfers, and Offringa 2014), spirituality was investigated as to its possible influence on gratitude and life satisfaction.

Spirituality, just like gratitude has multiple meanings depending on the specific context. It is observed that there is no general and common definition of spirituality (Yabut 2017). In this study, spirituality refers to the ordinary experiences of connection with the transcendent in daily life. Awe, gratitude, mercy, sense of connection with the

transcendent and compassionate love are the constructs that embody the kind of spirituality being investigated here. This kind of spirituality is measured by the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood 2011).

Many studies have demonstrated the positive association between spirituality and life satisfaction. People who have higher levels of spirituality showed higher levels of life satisfaction (Anand, Jones, and Gill 2015; Marques, Lopez, and Mitchell 2013; Zullig, Ward, and Horn 2006; Khan, Shirazi, and Ahmed 2011; Kelley and Miller 2007; Villani et al. 2019; Tate and Forchheimer 2002; Lun and Bond 2013; Ellison and Fan 2008; Rudaz, Ledermann, and Grzywacz 2019). These studies placed spirituality as a predictor of life satisfaction in their models. In another study, spirituality was tested as a moderator between stressor and life satisfaction (Fabricatore, Handal, and Fenzel 2000).

One study placed gratitude as the mediator between religious/spiritual struggles and life satisfaction and it was revealed that gratitude mediated the relationship between specific spiritual struggles and life satisfaction (Szczesniak et al. 2019). In an attempt to explain the mechanism that explains behind the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction, Sun and Kong (2013), tested the affective mediators using the Positive and Negative Affect scales between gratitude and life satisfaction. In their study, it was supported that positive affect and negative affect mediate the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. The three dimensions of wellness such as body, mind, and spirit were likewise found to be significant mediators in the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction (Green, Noor, and Ahmed 2020). Other variables that were investigated to mediate between gratitude and life satisfaction are self-esteem and social support (Kong, Zhao, and Ding 2015). Perceived stress also proved to be a full mediator between gratitude and life satisfaction among the Arab population (Yildirim and Alanazi 2018). Perceived social support was also found to be a mediator between gratitude and well-being (Chen 2013).

In studies with Filipino samples, it was evidenced that gratitude mediated the negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (Bernardo, Tan-Masukhani, and Daganzo 2018). This particular study focused on children of Overseas Filipino workers. Another study enjoining Filipino samples revealed that meaning in life partially mediated the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being which included life satisfaction (Datu and Mateo 2015).

The present research

Based on the survey of previous researches, there is a large body of literature that demonstrate the significant association between gratitude and life satisfaction, and spirituality and life satisfaction. Several studies tried to investigate the mechanism by which this association between gratitude and life satisfaction exists. The present study therefore explores and expands the previous studies by investigating the mechanism by which gratitude is associated with life satisfaction through the construct of spirituality. Spirituality as a mediator was investigated because as of this writing, no published research investigated the role of spirituality as a mediator between gratitude and life satisfaction yet. Further, it also attempts to provide an opportunity to extend the cultural context on which these constructs are investigated by focusing on the Filipino samples in the study because Filipinos are known for having a deep sense of spirituality (Yabut 2017). This study will have its likely significance among the younger generations since it is reported that Filipino

adolescents profess that they believe that God exists, claim to have a personal relationship with God, report that they are confident in God's plans, and see no difference between spirituality and religion (Ocampo et al. 2013). Perez (2012) also reported that Filipino college students reported a high level of spirituality using the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale.

This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of spirituality in the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Specifically, it aimed to test the following hypotheses;

There is a significant direct effect of gratitude on life satisfaction.

There is a significant direct effect of gratitude on spirituality.

There is a significant direct effect of spirituality on life satisfaction.

There is a significant mediating effect of spirituality between gratitude and life satisfaction.

Materials and method

Participants

There were 415 students from four schools and universities in the Philippines who participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 13 to 28 years old ($M = 19.74$, $SD = 3.84$). Most were females (62.2%) and Roman Catholics (72.5%). They ranged from junior high school to master's degree students, but more than the majority were college students (68.2%).

Measures

There were three self-report measures used in this study. All of these are typical scales used in similar studies. The variables were measured using the following scales;

Gratitude questionnaire (GQ-6)

The Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough 2013) was used to measure the proneness to experience gratitude in the daily life of the participants. It is a six-item, self-report measure that the participants had to indicate their degree of agreement using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item is 'I have so much in life to be thankful for'. The scale showed a Cronbach's alpha of .639. Principal component analysis (PCA) revealed only one factor extracted.

Daily spiritual experience scale (DSES)

Spirituality was measured by the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Underwood and Teresi 2002). It is a 16-item self-report test that aims to determine common, or daily, spiritual experiences – not mystical or supernatural experiences (e.g., hearing voices) – and how they are an everyday part of an individual's life. Fifteen items were answered on a 6-point Likert-type scale: many times a day, every day, most days, some days, once in a while, and never or almost never. One item was answered on a 4-point Likert type scale. One factor was extracted through principal component analysis while Cronbach's alpha yielded .95.

The satisfaction with life scale (SWLS)

The SWLS (Diener et al. 1985) is a short 5-item instrument devised to measure global cognitive judgements of satisfaction with one's life. It does not measure any aspect of life such as health or career but assesses an overall satisfaction of life. In this study, Cronbach's alpha is .67 while principal component analysis yielded one factor extracted.

Procedure

The questionnaires were delivered to the participants in their classrooms. They were recruited to participate in the study through their teachers. They were informed of the nature of the study indicating that joining in the study was voluntary, confidential, and involved no risk or harm. Other relevant ethical information and considerations were put in place. They were informed that they could withdraw at any point of the study. Participants who gave their informed consent were the only ones given the questionnaires. Payment nor extra credit were not used as incentives as participation was purely voluntary. The participants accomplished the survey questionnaires individually. The study had the approval of the university's Ethical Review Committee.

Statistical analyses

In the conceptualization of the study, power analysis was performed using Gpower 3.1. It was predicted that a total sample size of 107 would be necessary to achieve at least a small effect size, power of .80, two predictors, and an alpha of .05. This present study sample size is even above the required sample size. Post hoc calculation revealed that the present sample size has a power of 1.0.

Pearson correlation was first conducted to determine linear relationships among the variables and to check for multicollinearity. As shown in the correlation matrix (Table 1), significant bivariate correlations were present among the variables. Significant correlations were not above .81, indicating that the multicollinearity assumption of multiple regression was not violated. Tolerance was .934 and variance inflation factor was 1.0 indicating that there was no collinearity among the factors and multiple regression can be performed.

Direct effects on life satisfaction were estimated using multiple regression analysis, while mediation analysis in regression was utilised to estimate indirect effect or mediation of spirituality between gratitude and life satisfaction. PROCESS Macro in IBM SPSS ver. 23 for Windows was used to test the mediation (Hayes 2017). Bootstrap resampling of 5000 was also used to analyse the statistical significance of mediation with 95%

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients of the variables ($N = 415$).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Gratitude	32.91	5.23	-	.24**	.20**
2 Spirituality	73.98	15.67		-	.36**
3 Life Satisfaction	24.55	5.94			-

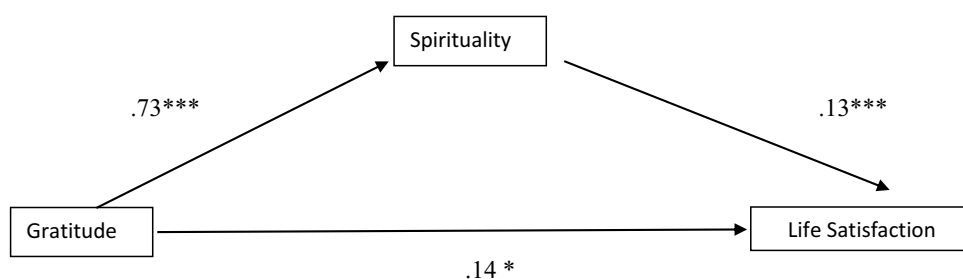
** $p < .01$

confidence interval. This procedure was deemed superior to Baron and Kenny's procedure and Sobel's test for testing mediation (Ozdil and Kutlu 2019).

Results

Displayed in Table 1 are the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients of the study variables. As shown in Table 1, the mean scores for all study variables were above the midpoint associated with the scales, suggesting that the participants scored high on the scales. All of the correlation coefficients among the variables indicated significant low positive associations.

Before testing the mediation, regression analyses were first undertaken to test the direct effects. There showed a significant direct effect of gratitude on life satisfaction ($B = .14$, $t = 2.58$, $p = .0102$). Significant direct effect was also shown of gratitude on spirituality ($B = .73$, $t = 5.11$, $p = .000$); and significant direct effect of spirituality on life satisfaction ($B = .13$, $t = 7.05$, $p = .000$). Approximately, 14% of the variance in life satisfaction was accounted for by the predictors ($R^2 = .144$). Indirect effect of spirituality on the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction was also revealed, ($B = .09$, $SE = .03$, $95\% CI = .05 - .15$). Figure 1 shows the tested model.



*** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Figure 1. Tested mediation model of spirituality on gratitude and life satisfaction. *** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction. The second purpose was to investigate whether spirituality, daily spiritual experience, mediated the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first to determine the mediation of spirituality between gratitude and life satisfaction. This present study gives sufficient clear support and findings for all posited hypotheses.

First, it is revealed that all predictors in the model were found to be significant predictors of life satisfaction. Specifically, spirituality and gratitude are both positive predictors of life satisfaction where higher scores predict higher life satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous results. A more grateful viewpoint would predict

a higher appreciation and satisfaction with life which is consistent with other studies (Emmons and McCullough 2003; Bernardo, Tan-Masukhani, and Daganzo 2018; Yildirim and Alanazi 2018). Second, gratitude shows a positive link with spirituality (Mills et al. 2015; Elosua 2015; Uhder 2016). A higher score in gratitude is associated with higher spirituality. Third, there also shows a positive association between spirituality and life satisfaction which is consistent with prior studies (Villani et al. 2019; Anand, Jones, and Gill 2015; Kelley and Miller 2007).

Fourth, the mediating effect of spirituality on the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction is a new interesting facet in this present study. Not only does spirituality directly affect but it also shows that it is a significant intervening factor in the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Gratitude directly affects spirituality which in turn affects life satisfaction. This affirms the notion that being grateful to God enhances the psychological benefits of gratitude. Gratitude to God added unique variance in predicting well-being over and above general gratitude (Rosmarin et al. 2011).

Spirituality in this study is more than just religion or religious rituals and traditions. The bio-psychosocial-spiritual model explains that there is a spiritual dimension in humans that is independent of the biological, psychological, and social dimensions (Koenig, 1995 in Tate and Forchheimer 2002). Yet this spiritual dimension strongly affects each of the other dimensions and may, in turn, be affected by them. It is distinct from, yet conceptually related to religion or religiosity. The transcendental theme of spirituality enables man to rise above any experience in life because of the belief of a Higher Being who has an overarching connection to individuals and circumstances. Thus, spirituality enables man to seek meaning and purpose, to have hope and faith, to pray, to meditate, to love, to view life positively, and to experience other self-comforting systems (Koenig, 1995 in Tate and Forchheimer 2002).

This finding further gives evidence to the view that gratitude as a factor in life satisfaction is influenced by spirituality. Emmons (2008) described that the transcendental meaning of gratitude is ethereal, supernatural, and transcendent. It is the opposite of the worldly sense of gratitude which is beyond the positive feeling one experiences upon receipt of benefit. It is beyond the experience of benefit or context of the self. But it arises and transcends out of the personal to the level of a peak experience of cosmic oneness or profound connection with nature (Stendl-Rast, 2004 in Hlava, Elfers, and Offringa 2014).

The present study involves participants from the Philippines which is predominantly Roman Catholic and some parts are distributed among different Christian denominations, Protestant religion, and Islam (Miller n.d.). Most of these religions in the Philippines profess to uphold the Bible as a basis for faith and practice. Almost all of the present study samples are confessed members of Bible-upholding religions. Biblical viewpoint emphasises gratitude as a virtue that is taught and ought to be practiced because it is believed that the benefit received from the benefactor is ultimately and initially a gift from God. This finding may be attributed to this viewpoint that perceives God as the ultimate source of the benefits which expresses itself in gratitude (Szczesniak et al. 2019).

Uhder (2016) pointed out that gratefulness is perceived as an acknowledgement of the benevolence and the faithful provision of the Divine in all aspects of life. This attitude of gratefulness is present both in the prosocial and transcendent forms of gratitude which have long been and continuously highlighted in the Christian church until today. It is regarded that gratitude completes a circle that begins with God. Gratitude is perceived to

finish a full circle that begins with God extending himself out to humans who in turn responds in thanksgiving, thus completing the harmonising movement. This circle of giving, taking, and thanking is seen as harmoniously belonging together.

One of the many passages in the Bible recounts the story of Christ described as baffled and asking for the people whom he healed to have not returned and given thanks (Luke 17: 17–18, KJV). In many parts of Paul's writings, who was Jesus' apostle, emphasised complementing the grace bestowed of God to man by an expression of thanksgiving.

One important implication of this finding is that the Philippines is a less developed country and people in societies experiencing more difficult situations (poverty and low life expectancy) tend to be more religious and the relationship between religiousness and well-being, which includes life satisfaction, was stronger than those in more developed societies (Diener, Tay, and Myers 2011). Hence, the particular sample in this study may have manifested a more grateful attitude that increased their life satisfaction through their sense of spirituality despite their socioeconomic situation. Christian spirituality teaches that the poorest is the one who is greedy for many things, even if he has acquired everyone's wealth for himself. The poor who is content with what he has is truly the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing at all (Karcher in Zed 2016).

The present study has implication among Filipino adolescents and young adults since the study sample is composed of these age groups. The Filipino youth's concept of a spiritual person includes the relational aspect of spirituality where they consider spiritual connectedness as a source of happiness (Mansukhani and Resurreccion 2009). Potentially, the Filipino youth can be helped in his development and well-being by tapping into their sense of gratitude and spirituality.

The potential application of gratitude interventions to complement in therapy among the clinical and healthy population for improvement of subjective well-being, which includes life satisfaction is viewed with promising hope (Alkozei, Smith, and Killgore 2018). Given this present finding, gratitude interventions may well benefit in complement with programmes enhancing spirituality to optimise life satisfaction. The present research has empirical and practical implications for mental health practitioners, counsellors, pastors, and ministers as the findings can assist them in planning, conceptualising, and implementing interventions that will harness psychological and spiritual resources for enhanced well-being. Future researches on spirituality-mediated models may be conducted to extend the external validity of this finding. Likewise, cross-cultural samples may also be conducted to investigate cross-cultural differences in the findings.

Some limitations of the study may also be considered. First, the cross-sectional nature of the design may limit the causality and directionality of the relationships among gratitude, life satisfaction, and spirituality. Second, the utilisation of self-report measures may have a weakness in terms of social desirability and subjectivity, though they may have sound reliability and validity. Third, the sample was drawn from university and high school institutions, which may impose a limit on the extent to which generalisation can be drawn in the Philippine setting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study shows and adds to our understanding of the mechanism through which gratitude is related to life satisfaction among adolescents and young adults

in the Philippine context. That gratitude which significantly influences the perception of satisfaction with life is related to one's experience of spirituality. More grateful individuals may manifest higher levels of satisfaction with life with respect to their level of spirituality. Empirical and practical implications may benefit counsellors and mental health practitioners in the pursuit of helping individuals harness their psychological and spiritual resources for enhanced well-being specifically life satisfaction. Likewise, implications for future research are suggested.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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