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Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being [☆]

Jeffrey J. Froh ^{a,*}, William J. Sefick ^b, Robert A. Emmons ^c

^a *Psychology Department, Hofstra University, USA*

^b *Half Hollow Hills School District, Dix Hills, New York, USA*

^c *Psychology Department, University of California, Davis, USA*

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Abstract

The development and manifestation of gratitude in youth is unclear. We examined the effects of a grateful outlook on subjective well-being and other outcomes of positive psychological functioning in 221 early adolescents. Eleven classes were randomly assigned to either a gratitude, hassles, or control condition. Results indicated that counting blessings was associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, optimism, life satisfaction, and decreased negative affect. Feeling grateful in response to aid mediated the relationship between experimental condition and general gratitude at the 3-week follow-up. The most significant finding was the robust relationship between gratitude and satisfaction with school experience at both the immediate post-test

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* Corresponding author. School-Community Psychology, Hofstra University, 210 Hauser Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549, U.S.A. Tel.: +1 516 463 4027; fax: +1 516 463 6052.

E-mail address: Jeffrey.Froh@hofstra.edu (J.J. Froh).

¹ Jeffrey J. Froh was affiliated with St. Joseph's College, Patchogue, New York during the initial stages of this study.

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and 3-week follow-up. Counting blessings seems to be an effective intervention for well-being enhancement in early adolescents.

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Keywords: Gratitude; Subjective well-being; Adolescence; Positive psychology; Intervention

Introduction

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.

— Cicero

Ingratitude! thou marble-hearted fiend, more hideous when thou show'st thee in a child than the sea-monster!

— Shakespeare's *King Lear*

A class of students was asked to identify the Seven Wonders of the World. With some minor disagreement, the following received the most attention: Egypt's great pyramids, Taj Mahal, Grand Canyon, Panama Canal, Empire State Building, St. Peter's Basilica, and China's Great Wall. However, there was one student who did not complete the assignment in time. When her teacher approached her, she stated that she was having some difficulty because there was so much to be grateful for and she could not decide that easily. Upon further inquiry, the student maintained that the Seven Wonders of the World were: to see, to hear, to touch, to taste, to feel, to laugh, and to love (C. Colligan, personal communication, February 27, 2006).

Gratitude can be conceptualized as a virtue or as an emotional state. From the perspectives of moral philosophy and theology, gratitude is seen as a human strength that enhances one's personal and relational well-being and is beneficial for society as a whole (Simmel, 1950). McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson (2001) theorized that gratitude is a moral affect—that is, one with moral precursors and consequences. They hypothesized that by experiencing gratitude, a person is motivated to carry out prosocial behavior, energized to sustain moral behaviors, and is inhibited from committing destructive interpersonal behaviors. Specifically, they posited that gratitude serves as a *moral barometer*, providing individuals with an affective readout that accompanies the perception that another person has treated them prosocially. Second, they posited that gratitude serves as a *moral motive*, stimulating people to behave prosocially after they have been the beneficiaries of other people's prosocial behavior. Third, they posited that gratitude serves as a *moral reinforcer*, encouraging prosocial behavior by reinforcing people for their previous good deeds. McCullough et al. adduced evidence from a wide variety of studies in personality, social, developmental and evolutionary psychology to support this conceptualization.

As an emotion, gratitude stems from the perception that one has experienced a positive outcome that has been intentionally provided by another person or "moral agent," often but not necessarily a person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The object of gratitude is other-

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