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Gratitude and life satisfaction in early adolescence: The mediating role of social support and emotional difficulties

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction among 877 Korean adolescents, and the mediating effects of social support and emotional difficulties in the relationship. The study's results revealed that those experiencing higher gratitude during early adolescents reported having more feelings of positive life satisfaction. Furthermore, social support and emotional difficulties were found to mediate the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Findings suggested that grateful students perceived that more social support were available and experienced less emotional difficulties, in turn experiencing increased life satisfaction. Gender differences were not found in the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Implications and future directions are also further discussed.

1. Introduction

As modern society enjoys more material affluence, greater significance is put on the value of individual happiness and one's quality of life. Life satisfaction refers to the extent an individual feels satisfied with the diverse aspects of his or her overall life (Huebner, 2004). It is a subjective and complex feeling of happiness that includes a cognitive and emotional evaluation of one's life satisfaction. Lyubomirsky (2001) regarded life satisfaction as the cognitive process of evaluating one's own life satisfaction; comparing what they have wished for and what they actually have achieved.

According to 2014 Korean Child and Adolescents' Well-Being Index, and its international comparison, the Korean subjective well-being index was 74.0, compared to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average of 100. Although the number has steadily increased from 64.3 in 2009, 66.0 in 2011, and 72.5 in 2013, for the past six years Korea has remained one of the lowest among the OECD countries (Yonsei Social Development Institute, 2014). Considering the large burden on Korean adolescents regarding their studies, career, and changing family structure, these results signify the necessity of social attention and research that could ultimately help to increase their life satisfaction.

Gratitude is one's positive emotion that recognizes the efforts and consideration of others toward oneself, and it is acknowledged as being a desirable aspect of the human personality and society (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude has been found to be associated with

happiness and life satisfaction, but negatively related to psychological difficulties like depression, anxiety, and stress (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) claimed that gratitude could help change negative emotions from the past into future feelings of satisfaction. Furthermore, relevant research suggested that gratitude is highly associated with life satisfaction as grateful people are more likely to appreciate and enjoy positive experiences (Baek & Lim, 2013). Numerous studies have shown positive correlations between gratitude and life satisfaction among university students (Kim & Lee, 2012; Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2015; Sun & Kong, 2013; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), as well as among adolescents (Ham, Byeon, & Cheon, 2011; Noh & Shin, 2008).

In order to understand the mechanism that links gratitude and life satisfaction, recent studies examined if other personal and social aspects could mediate the association between the two variables. For example, negative affect and gratitude have been found to be negatively related (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009), which in turn plays an important role in an individual's life satisfaction (Kong et al., 2015). According to Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build theory, people with positive emotions have broad-ranging thoughts and actions, and traits such as creativity that help to develop flexible goals and mindsets, in turn playing an important role in developing life satisfaction. On the other hand, this theory also suggests that negative emotions cause people to visualize fewer opportunities, narrowing their thoughts and actions, thus lacking the

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resources to overcome life challenges and feel satisfied with life.

Furthermore, grateful people have been found to engage in altruistic behaviors that develop and maintain positive relationships with others, increasing the likelihood of receiving social support (McCullough et al., 2002). The Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and the Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998) may explain the link between social support and life satisfaction. These theories suggest that access to resources may help individuals resist negative life choices, decreasing difficulties, and consequently resulting in increased life satisfaction. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between early adolescents' gratitude and life satisfaction, and the mediating effects of social support and emotional difficulties. Gender differences in relationships were also examined.

1.1. Gratitude, social support and life satisfaction

Gratitude helps one appreciate assistance from others (Noh & Shin, 2008) and express feelings of gratefulness which strengthens social unity (Adler & Fagley, 2005). People who feel more gratitude tend to experience greater social support, signifying the importance of gratitude in improving social support. Similarly, programs regarding gratitude improvement were reported to increase social support (Shin & Kim, 2009), and gratitude was shown to improve social support (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009). In particular, school has been considered to be an appropriate place where positive emotions, like gratitude, can be experienced (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004).

As social beings, people need supportive relationships with others for their physical and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Demaray and Malecki (2002) measured social support as the quality and recognition of one's relationships and interactions with others. Indeed, social support has been reported to enforce individuals' psychological adjustment and problem-solving abilities, and to have a positive influence on stress relief and overall well-being (Cohen, 2004; Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2009). Furthermore, social support is regarded as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction (Fowler & Christakis, 2010). For example, studies have reported that a higher level of teacher support is associated with a higher level of adolescents' life satisfaction (Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). Also, research on adolescents, aged 13–15, reported that adolescents who experienced adequate social support at school showed higher levels of life satisfaction than those who did not (Danielsen et al., 2009).

Recent studies suggested the mediating roles of social support on the link between gratitude and life satisfaction. Kong et al. (2015) conducted a study on 427 Chinese university students showing that social support mediated the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction. Similarly, Noh and Shin's (2008) study on 515 high school students found a significant mediating role of social support between gratitude and psychological well-being.

1.2. Gratitude, emotional difficulties and life satisfaction

Emotional difficulties refer to emotional problems like anxiety, depression and fear, and due to such difficulties one may either overly suppress their own behaviors or not express them at all. Positive emotions help recover and maintain psychological health (Baumgardner & Crothers, 2009), and are related to the improvement of one's well-being (Heo, 2011). In contrast, those who frequently experience negative emotions, like anxiety, often express having low life satisfaction (Koivumaa-Honkanen, Kaprio, Honkanen, Viinamäki, & Koskenvuo, 2004). Gratitude has been found to reduce negative emotions and can alleviate emotional difficulties (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

People with high levels of gratitude have developed a cognitive schema to perceive gratification in diverse environments. They are able to find and reinterpret positive features in seemingly negative situations

being able to better control their own emotions; in addition, they tend to be less defensive and more open in life (Emmons & Shelton, 2005). Moreover, most participants in programs concerning gratitude promotion showed an overall improvement in their positive emotions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). For example, studies on children's emotional difficulties reported that programs concerning gratitude improvement had an effect on their anger control (Seoh & Park, 2009) and were associated with a decrease in negative emotions (Froh, Kashdan, et al., 2009). Based on these results, it is expected that when early adolescents undergo emotional difficulties, gratitude will adaptively regulate and impact their life satisfaction.

Kim and Lee (2012) investigated the mediating role of cognitive emotion regulation strategies between gratitude and psychological well-being with 321 undergraduate students. They reported that gratitude was positively correlated with psychological well-being, with a partial mediation of cognitive emotion regulation strategies. Moreover, Sun and Kong (2013) proved that positive and negative emotions played full mediating roles in the relationship between 354 university students' gratitude and life satisfaction. These results indicate that people with a higher level of gratitude have better emotional adjustment and regulation abilities. That is, gratitude correlates directly with emotional difficulties and can either increase or decrease life satisfaction.

1.3. Gender difference in gratitude, life satisfaction, social support, emotional difficulties

Previous research has shown inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in gratitude and life satisfaction. According to Lim (2012), female students reported higher levels of gratitude than male students. However, Kim (2014) claimed that male high school students showed more gratitude than female high school students. Furthermore, while some studies reported that early adolescent males had increased life satisfaction over females (Kim & Chung, 2008; Park, 2005), others found no significant gender differences (Baek & Lim, 2013; Visani et al., 2011).

Previous studies have claimed that female students tend to have a wider social support network and higher perception of social support than male students (Baek & Lim, 2013; Eom, Kang, & Choi, 2008), while others reported no significant gender difference in perceived social support (Landman-Peeters et al., 2005). Additionally, male and female adolescents reported different types of emotional difficulties. For example, male adolescents showed more rule breaking behaviors such as truancy, lying, and the use of alcohol, while females showed more internalizing problems, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Ko, 2003).

2. The current study

A better understanding of the underlying process from gratitude to adolescents' life satisfaction is needed to help encourage positive growth and development. Nonetheless, little research can be found that examines the mediating effects of social support and emotional difficulties on the relationship between early adolescents' gratitude and life satisfaction. Therefore, the current study aimed to add to extant research by addressing mediators and gender difference issues related to this topic. The following questions guided the study.

1. Does gratitude have a significant direct relationship with student life satisfaction? Does the relationship differ by gender?
2. Do the social support and emotional difficulties of students serve as important mediators between gratitude and life satisfaction? Do these relationships differ by gender?

It is hypothesized that Korean adolescents who report higher levels of gratitude will report higher levels of life satisfaction. We also expect that gratitude will help individuals perceive more social support is

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