

# The Gratitude of Underprivileged Young People in Hong Kong: The Potential Role of Religious Mentors

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The factors that contribute to the development of gratitude in children and adolescents have yet to be determined fully; however, religion/spirituality are promising areas of investigation in the gratitude intervention research. In this study, 101 young people were recruited from a three-year faith-based mentorship program for a follow-up survey to investigate how adolescents' gratitude is related to their interaction with Christian mentors. Path analysis not only showed the importance of mentors sharing their religious faith and personal life lessons in the development of gratitude, but also demonstrated that religious mentors' influence on gratitude was entirely mediated through adolescents' self-esteem, spirituality, and understanding of Christianity. The findings not only support that spiritual realm matters in gratitude development but also provide us with further insight into how gratitude emerges.

Gratitude has often been mentioned in sacred texts or religious scripture, but empirical research connecting the two has only recently been conducted and is still rare (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). In the literature of gratitude, there is a critical debate over whether gratitude is better represented as a dispositional trait or a transitory state and over the nature of the relationship between state and trait gratitude (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Although Wood et al. found that both state gratitude and trait gratitude are related, they also discovered that state gratitude is more strongly predicted by situational factors (e.g., benefit appraisals). Nevertheless, they also recognize that trait gratitude is still of underlying importance and exerts subtle effects on people's behavior that accounts for individual differences. Thus, the aim of our study is to investigate what factors may facilitate the development of (trait) gratitude in children and adolescents (Lambert & Veldorale-Brogan, 2013).

## Gratitude

While some scholars recently have argued that gratitude can be an intra-individual experience that does not require others (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), the majority of the literature portrays gratitude as interpersonal in nature (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; Emmons & Shelton, 2002). For example, Emmons and his team view gratitude as an emotional response to human reciprocal exchanges in the interpersonal context. As a relational virtue, gratitude involves "strong feelings

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of appreciation toward significant others" (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000, p. 58), which can act as a "moral barometer [of] the perception that another person has treated them prosocially" (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005, p. 141). From a theological point of view, gratitude can also be understood as a human response to receiving divine grace. Among non-religious people, gratitude can fulfill a social function by strengthening the interconnectedness of human life and the responsibility of commitment to others (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Taken together, a normative way to conceptualize gratitude is to understand it as a dispositional trait developed through interpersonal exchange.

Studies show that gratitude can be cultivated by gratitude intervention (Lambert & Veldorale-Brogan, 2013). As a characterological disposition, Emmons and Shelton (2002) argued that gratitude does not emerge spontaneously but is acquired through sustained focus and effort. Their study also demonstrated that gratitude can be nurtured through the exercise of daily counting one's blessings (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). Following their logic, we also argue that gratitude, as a moral virtue developed through interpersonal exchange, is not developed in a vacuum. Instead, it is expected to be developed through continuous (or even day-to-day) interaction with those who provide necessary support and beneficiary care or those who are more adept and seasoned in displaying gratitude. The literature also suggests two directions for future research on gratitude. The first is to examine the context in which gratitude occurs; the second is to examine promising strategies for inculcating an attitude of gratitude (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

### **The Religious and Psychological Pathways of Gratitude**

While research indicates that gratitude may not require a spiritual/religious framework, the relationship between religion/spirituality and gratitude also consistently appears in the literature (Emmons & Mishra, 2012). Previous research on psychology of religion often conceptualize religion/spirituality as individual assets, related to things such as higher level of religious experience or religious practices. For example, prayer and frequency of attendance at religious activities have been shown to be related to gratitude (Wirtz, Gordon, & Stalls, 2014). Furthermore, Emmons & Kneezel (2005) speculate that religiously inclined individuals may have more resources in their repertoire to foster grateful thinking.

Despite these research findings, few studies have examined the impact of the religious context in which one is embedded on the development of gratitude. However, it is our contention that research on religion that neglects the religious context will be limited because religiously inclined individuals, most often, are affiliated with a religious community through which they perceive themselves and the world. Lambert & Veldorale-Brogan (2013) also noted that the spiritual realm was an important area for future research on gratitude interventions, and suggested that exploring how gratitude might be promoted in a church setting or investigating potential mediators in the relationship between spirituality and gratitude might be promising directions of study. Thus, examining the impact of people's religious context on their gratitude may help us understand whether or not the spiritual realm matters in gratitude development and provide us with further insight into how gratitude emerges.

Another direction for research on the emergence of gratitude may be to examine the relationship between gratitude and self-esteem (Emmons & Mishra, 2012). Gratitude is highly associated with self-esteem (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008) and can be cultivated by a cognitive-behavioral approach, which focuses on self-awareness, self-talk, self-understanding, and self-examination (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). There are also consistent findings of a positive association between spirituality and self-esteem (Benson & Spilka, 1973; Commerford & Reznikoff, 1996). Thus, it is worthy to examine whether self-esteem is one of the potential pathways through which spirituality facilitates the development of gratitude.

Additionally, most of the past research on gratitude has focused on undergraduate or adult populations, while research on children and youth (see Froh & Bono, 2008; Froh et al., 2008, for exceptions) and underprivileged populations is still lacking. Furthermore, empirical study of gratitude is mainly conducted in the United States, but in the Chinese context (such as Hong Kong), it is minimal. These gaps in the literature motivated the present study.

### **Goal and Purpose of the Present Study**

In the present study, we investigated whether adolescents' gratitude could be derived from interactions with religious mentors and explored potential mechanisms by which religious mentors could facilitate the development of gratitude. In particular, we tested three predictions. First, we predicted that adolescents' degree of spirituality and self-esteem would be posi-



tively associated with higher levels of gratitude. Second, we predicted that adolescents' interactions with religious mentors would be positively associated with higher levels of self-esteem and spirituality. Third, we predicted that the association between levels of gratitude and interactions with religious mentors would be, partially or wholly, mediated by self-esteem, spirituality, and understanding of Christian faith.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Two projects (hereafter referred to as "the project") were originally implemented from 2008 to 2012. The researchers sought to recruit a total of 220 adolescents (ages 10–16) for the project, and participants were drawn from two faith-based mentoring projects.<sup>1</sup> To be eligible for the project, the youths had to be from a disadvantaged family background, which means either they (a) were receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance/full grants from student finance schemes or (b) had a household income less than 75% of the Median Monthly Domestic Household income.

The present study was a follow-up survey conducted from August to October of 2013. The follow-up study primarily focused on understanding the religious components of the faith-based mentoring programs and the mechanisms of the faith-based approach.<sup>2</sup> Questionnaires were sent to participants' addresses (which were provided by the two mentoring service agencies), and follow-up telephone calls were made to each non-responding student at least three times. Through this process, 101 adolescents (39 male, 62 female, ages 15–21,  $M_{age} = 18.1$ ) were successfully recruited. Of these participants, 38 identified as Christian and 5 identified with other religions, including various Chinese religions such as Buddhism. The others were identified as non-religious.

## Measures

**Gratitude Questionnaire-6.** Gratitude was measured by the six-item Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002), a measure of the disposition to experience gratitude. Previous studies show that GQ-6 is psychometrically sound and has been validated with Chinese populations (Chen, Chen, Kee, & Tsai, 2009). Participants rated agreement with items such as "I have so much in life to be thankful for." on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha was .83 in the present sample.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.** Self-esteem was measured by the widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) which contains 10 self-report items. The RSES has been validated in previous Chinese studies (Li, Chan, Chung, & Chui, 2010). While some may argue that self-esteem may not present the same in Chinese samples as compared to American samples, other studies seem to support that the RSES can be used in both populations with appropriate adaptations (Farruggia, Chen, Greenberger, Dmitrieva, & Macek, 2004). Participants rated agreement with items such as "I am able to do things as good as most other people." on a 4-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha was .79 in the present sample.

**Understanding of Christian faith.** Participants' understanding of the Christian faith was measured by a single item: "After participating in the project, have you had more opportunity to know the Christian faith?" The dichotomous response of "No" or "Yes" was recorded as "0" and "1," respectively.

**Social Axioms Survey.** Spirituality was measured by using the five-item spirituality subscale of the Social Axioms Survey (SAS; Leung et al., 2002), which refers to the "belief in the existence of supernatural factors and in the impact of religion on people's lives" (p. 295). An example of the items is "Religious faith contributes to good mental health." The Cronbach's alpha was .78 in the present sample.

**Sharing religious faith.** Mentors' sharing their religious faith was measured by a single item: "In the project, has your mentor shared his religious faith with you?" The dichotomous response of "No" or "Yes" was recorded as "0" and "1," respectively.

<sup>1</sup> The two mentoring projects were part of a larger territory-wide child development program in Hong Kong, namely Child Development Fund (CDF), which targets intergenerational poverty alleviation. The program not only educates underprivileged children and families about financial literacy and goal planning, but also helps develop their non-financial assets through mentorship opportunities (see Chan, Lai, Ng, & Lau, 2013 for details).

<sup>2</sup> A key characteristic of the faith-based practice and approach is the primary recruitment of mentors from church settings.

**Sharing personal life lessons.** Mentors' sharing personal life lessons was measured by a single item: "In the project, has your mentor shared his outlook on life with you and/or taught you some valuable life lessons?" The dichotomous response of "No" or "Yes" was recorded as "0" and "1," respectively.

**Data Analysis**

To test the research hypotheses, a path model was proposed using structural equation modeling (SEM). Compared to multiple regression, SEM can examine a more complex model, including several dependent variables and mediating variables. Thus, it is regarded as full, rather than partial, informational analysis (Kline, 2005). The six cases with missing values (5%) in key variables were deleted from further investigation.

**Results**

The means, standard deviations and correlations for all measures can be found in Table 1. Both spirituality ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ) and self-esteem ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ) were positively correlated with gratitude, confirming our first hypothesis. While interactions with mentors (either sharing a personal life lesson or religious faith) were also positively related to understanding Christianity, neither measure was associated with spirituality, and only sharing personal life lessons was associated with self-esteem.

To investigate whether interactions with religious mentors predicts gratitude, the proposed path model (Figure 1) was evaluated via observed variable path analysis using maximum likelihood parameter estima-

tion (AMOS 22.0). Since the goodness of fit index ( $\chi^2$ ) is sensitive to the sample size, three other fit indexes were also used to determine the adequacy of fit of the model, as suggested by Meyers, Gamst, and Guarino (2006). These additional indexes include the normed fit index (NFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The proposed model provides a good fit of the model to the data,  $\chi^2(7) = 8.00, p = .33, NFI = .93, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04$ . Nevertheless, the path relating self-esteem with the mentors' sharing of religious faith was not statistically significant. Thus, a revised model (eliminating the insignificant path) was evaluated again, and the model better fit the data,  $\chi^2(8) = 8.00, p = .43, NFI = .93, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA < .001$ . The final model with standardized coefficients is shown in Figure 2. The indirect effect from mentors sharing religious faith to gratitude was statistically significant (with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of .01 to .09) and that from mentors sharing life experience to gratitude was also statistically significant (with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of .05 to .22) Thus, the religious mentors' influence on gratitude was entirely mediated through the psychological (i.e., self-esteem) and religious (i.e., understanding of Christianity and spirituality) routes.

**Discussion**

Our findings demonstrate that spirituality and self-esteem are associated with gratitude in this underprivileged population. This not only aligns with previous findings that the emergence of gratitude has both

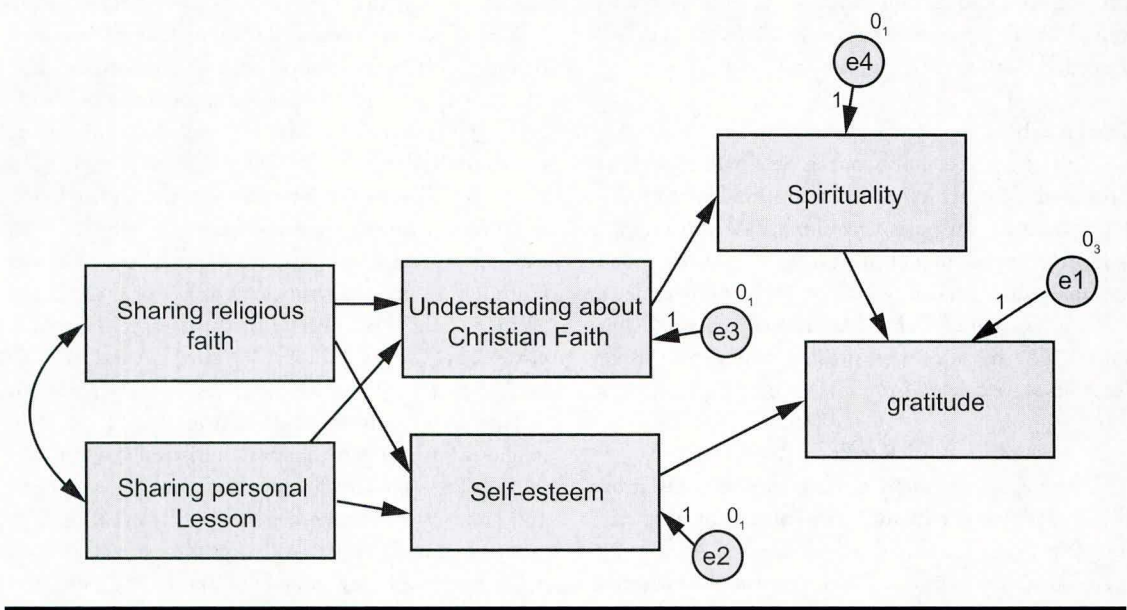
**TABLE 1**  
*Intercorrelations Among the Variables with Means and Standard Deviations*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sharing personal life lesson						
2. Sharing religious faith	.49**					
3. Self-esteem	.32**	.15				
4. Spirituality	-.01	.01	.16			
5. Understanding Christian Faith	.38**	.45**	.27**	.27**		
6. Gratitude	.13	.05	.35**	.48**	.27**	
M	0.79	0.73	27.58	17.21	1.52	24.42
SD	0.41	0.45	3.73	3.25	0.5	4.75

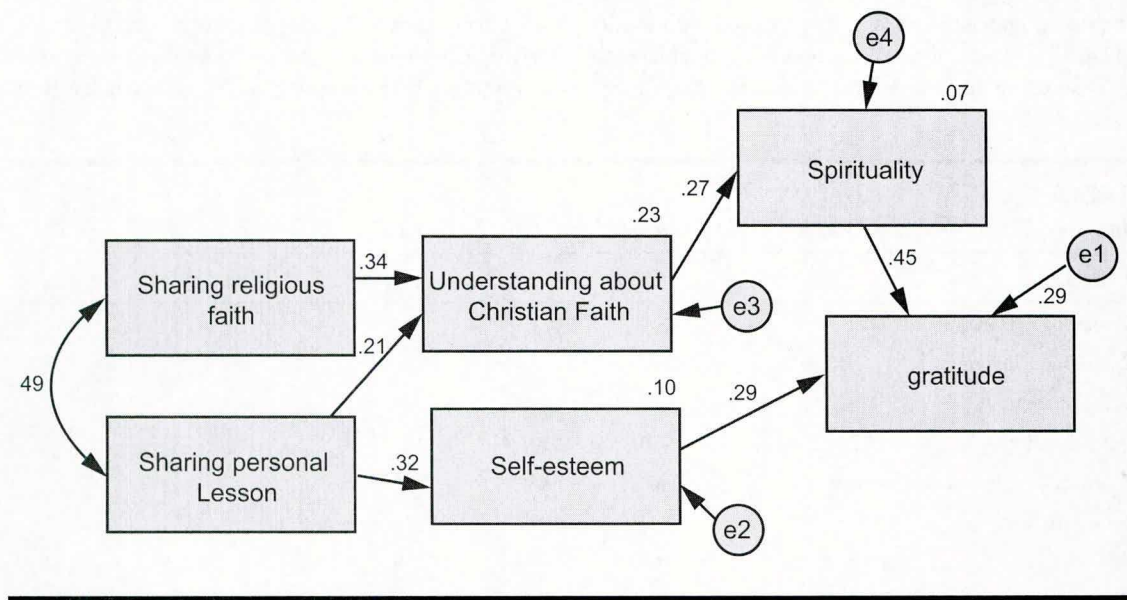
Note. N = 95.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**FIGURE 1**  
Originally proposed model



**FIGURE 2**  
Final revised model



religious and psychological roots, but also shows that the relationships among these variables among individuals in Hong Kong parallel those in the U.S. (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005).

Our path models further demonstrate more clearly the influence of spiritual mentors on adolescents' gratitude through the religious and psychological pathways. Interaction with religious mentors (either sharing of religious faith or personal life lessons) is associated with participants' understanding of Christianity, which is closely related to spirituality. Furthermore, sharing personal life lessons is associated with self-esteem. As a result, both the spiritual and psychological pathways fully account for the relationship between the interaction with mentors and gratitude. Thus, our results suggest a mechanism in which adolescents whose mentors shared both religious faith and personal life lessons tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and spirituality as well as a deepened understanding of Christianity, which combine to contribute to the development of gratitude.

The significance of the spiritual pathway may be due to the heightened awareness of divine power and transcendent grace, fostered through the mentors' witness, sharing, and support. Wirtz et al. (2014) also made a similar point that being spiritual may promote *noticing* and *appreciating*, which are two fundamental processes for developing gratitude. Although not all of the adolescents were committed to the Christian faith, their heightened awareness of Christian faith and the spiritual realm may have already prepared them to engage in more grateful thinking.

Furthermore, the significance of the psychological pathway seems to suggest that mentors sharing personal life lessons may not only help build up youths' self-esteem but may also create a basis for reciprocal exchange and an opportunity for youths to perceive being treated prosocially. It may be that young people's experiences are normalized as mentors genuinely share their life lessons, which may contribute to the youths' sense of external support and self-compassion. In other words, these young people may discover their self-worth through the genuine encounter, or "I-Thou relationship," with their mentors (Buber, 1970), which in turn, may promote gratitude.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the path analysis of the present study demonstrates the complex relationship between interacting with religious mentors and gratitude, there are

several limitations worthy of being addressed in future research. First, assessments were only based on the adolescents' self-report and perceptions. While participants' reports may yield a stronger correlation with their attitudes and behaviors, it would be useful to include other stakeholders' (such as mentors) perspectives in future studies. Second, the cross-sectional data could not provide a definitive answer on the causal relationship between gratitude and interactions with religious mentors. Future research should include a longitudinal study in order to clarify this relationship.

A third limitation was the forced-choice measures in three variables (sharing religious faith, sharing personal life lesson, and understanding about Christian faith) and the small, though adequate, sample size, both of which may invite criticism about the robustness of the findings. Thus, precise measures or finer understanding of interaction with mentors along with a larger sample may provide stronger evidence for the relationship. Fourth, because this study targeted youth from an underprivileged background, the generalizability of the results has yet to be verified.

Lastly, as with most studies on gratitude, this study focused on trait, rather than state, gratitude. Some may criticize the potential religion-gratitude discrepancy, which represents a tendency for religious individuals to identify themselves as grateful people who value gratitude but to not actually demonstrate greater gratitude when given the opportunity (Tsang, Schulwitz, & Carlisle, 2012). Nevertheless, as Wood et al. (2008) noticed, although state gratitude is determined more by situational factors, dispositional trait gratitude still matters and implicitly influences people's behavior.

Despite these limitations, the present study has some unique strengths. First, it adds to the empirical literature on religion and virtue, an area of emerging importance. While the relationship between religion and virtue (and gratitude in particular) has been discussed for many years (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), empirical analysis of the relationship is still limited (see Emmons & Kneezel, 2005; McCullough et al., 2002 for example). This is particularly true in the Chinese context. Second, this study supplements the previous research by taking the religious context in which one is embedded more seriously. In addition to demonstrating the link between spirituality and gratitude, our study also suggests that the influence of religion on gratitude may be through the religious context in which one is embedded (i.e., through interacting with a religious mentor).



A third contribution of the present study is that it strengthens our understanding of the spiritual and psychological mechanisms of gratitude development. Religious mentors, through either sharing their religious faith or personal life lessons, help build up mentees' self-esteem and deepen their understanding of the Christian faith (and subsequently their spirituality), which fosters grateful thinking. These mechanisms may have an important training implication. Since facilitating both spiritual and psychological pathways (instead of one over the other) may be a better strategy to promote gratitude in children and adolescents, it may be appropriate for the organizations that operate the mentoring programs to structure trainings for mentors that facilitate skills such as building rapport; communicating empathically; or sharing faith in a humanized, rather than dogmatic, way.

Lastly, the present study provides initial evidence for the benefit of a faith-based mentoring approach in the development of gratitude within an underprivileged population. Nevertheless, it should be noted that religious mentors merely sharing their faith (especially from the more dogmatic approach) may not be the most appropriate way to facilitate positive youth development, despite the role that spirituality may play in the development of gratitude. Balancing both the psychological and spiritual needs of children and adolescents seems to be a more effective way to promote personal growth.

Building on the strengths of this study, future research could further investigate the spirituality-gratitude linkage and examine the various ways religious mentors help develop adolescents' gratitude. For instance, is it possible that religious mentors, in addition to nurturing spirituality and self-esteem, could help adolescents cultivate gratitude by modeling how to practice gratefulness and live a life of gratitude? Or as Wirtz et al. (2014) suggested, could religious mentors promote adolescents' noticing and appreciating abilities? Furthermore, deeper understanding of the role of faith-based organizations in the gratitude development process may provide valuable knowledge about the third pillar (i.e., positive institution) of positive psychology.

Pargament, Mahoney, Shafranske, Exline, and Jones (2013) highlight people's current interests in an applied psychology of religion and spiritually and in integrated approaches to improving the human condition. Nevertheless, they also note that most of the current research focuses on the benefits of spirituality in clinical settings. More empirical work is needed to understand the effects of spirituality in non-clinical

settings, such as the community-based mentoring programs discussed in the present study.

While some preliminary studies show that faith-based mentoring programs appear to facilitate some positive psychosocial outcomes (e.g., self-confidence and a future orientation; Maton, Domingo, & Westin, 2013), not much is known about the process by which these kinds of community-based programs are effective. The present study is an initial attempt to provide empirical evidence regarding "whether" and "how" faith-based mentoring approaches may be working and to solicit more finely-tuned research in this valuable and important area.

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