

Exploring the Impact of Gratitude on Subjective Well-Being Among Fatherless: Implications for Counseling Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being among fatherless university students in Solo Raya, Indonesia. With Indonesia's increasing rates of fatherlessness, understanding its psychological impact on young adults is crucial. Through quantitative correlational analysis involving 186 students, the research investigates how gratitude, as a psychological resource, contributes to subjective well-being, encompassing life satisfaction and positive affect. Findings indicate a significant positive correlation between gratitude and subjective well-being, with gratitude accounting for 33.17% of the variance in well-being. This suggests that gratitude fosters emotional resilience, supporting students in coping with the challenges of fatherlessness. Descriptive and regression analyses reveal a medium to high concentration of gratitude and subjective well-being among participants, indicating gratitude's potential as a stabilizing factor in their lives. The study further discusses demographic factors, finding minimal gender differences in gratitude expression, and highlights counseling implications. By integrating gratitude interventions, counselors can aid students in developing emotional stability, enhancing social connections, and potentially improving physical health outcomes. This study underscores the importance of fostering gratitude in educational counseling, contributing to a positive campus culture and emotional support for fatherless students. Future research could explore long-term effects of gratitude practices across diverse demographics to provide deeper insights into enhancing well-being in single-parent households.

Keywords: fatherlessness, gratitude, subjective well-being, university students, emotional resilience



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INTRODUCTION

The absence of a father figure in families is a widespread issue globally, with particular prevalence in regions like South Africa, where approximately 68% of children from all racial backgrounds grow up in fatherless households (Freeks, 2020). This phenomenon is equally concerning in Indonesia, which ranks as the third most "fatherless" country in the world, according to Indonesia's Minister of Social Affairs. This ranking highlights a unique situation where fathers are present but lack active involvement in caregiving roles, marking a "Fatherless Country" not by physical absence but by emotional and relational detachment (Kadri, 2023). Statistical data reveals that between 2017 and 2021, divorce rates in Indonesia escalated by 53%, with 7.04% of children living exclusively with their mothers (Junaidin, 2023). A report from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture reinforces this trend, showing that 66.7% of child-rearing responsibilities fall predominantly on mothers, indicating a prevailing

maternal influence in Indonesian families (Kemendikbud, 2023). This limited paternal involvement has significant implications for children's psychological and emotional development, often leading to a fatherless condition even in households where the father is physically present (Rahayu, 2023).

Fatherlessness is understood not only as physical absence but also as a lack of emotional and spiritual presence in a child's life. Sundari and Herdajani (2013) describe fatherlessness as a situation where a father's presence is missing across physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Smith (in Ashari, 2017) highlights how fatherlessness can arise from factors such as parental divorce or the death of a father, while Soge (2016) identifies lack of quality time and low parental cooperation as contributing causes. This absence of paternal engagement creates a void in the family, often leading individuals to feelings of shame, anger, and low self-esteem. Fatherless individuals are also more susceptible to emotional vulnerabilities such as grief, envy, loneliness, and risk-taking behaviors, which impact their emotional stability and sense of self (Sundari & Herdajani, 2013; Golombok, 2017; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Brown et al., 2021).

The negative emotions associated with fatherlessness can profoundly impact a person's subjective well-being, a measure of their life satisfaction and happiness (Rahayu, 2023). The absence of a father figure often creates a void that places children in difficult situations, hindering their emotional and social development. Research consistently shows that parental interaction—especially in dual-parent households—is a significant factor supporting children's mental health, emphasizing the benefits of two-parent involvement over fatherless environments (Junaidin, 2023; Lamb, 2012; Amato, 2005; Dunn et al., 2004; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Subjective well-being, as described by Tarigan (2018), includes cognitive and affective evaluations of life, encompassing emotions like happiness and positive moods, and the absence of anxiety or depression. Watson, Lee, and Auke (1988) found that individuals experiencing fatherlessness often report high levels of negative affect, such as anger, guilt, and anxiety. In this context, Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2012) explain subjective well-being as a mix of cognitive factors, such as life satisfaction and domain satisfaction, alongside affective elements like positive and negative emotions. Life satisfaction reflects a person's general evaluation of their life based on their expectations, while domain satisfaction is related to specific areas, such as health, relationships, and work. Positive affect relates to joyful moods, while negative affect encompasses unpleasant emotions, all of which combine to form a person's overall life satisfaction (Diener, 2009; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Schimmack, 2008; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). High levels of subjective well-being correlate with optimism, life satisfaction, and positive health outcomes, while low levels can lead to adverse effects such as stress, depression, and social withdrawal (Diener & Chan, 2011; Huppert, 2009; Sativa & Helmi, 2013). For fatherless individuals, the absence of a father figure amplifies feelings of loneliness, loss, and jealousy, which makes decision-making and problem-solving challenging and can result in depressive symptoms (Nindhita, 2023; Aquilino, 2006; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Adams & Bukowski, 2008).

Gratitude is a vital factor influencing subjective well-being, with studies illustrating its role in improving life satisfaction and fostering positive emotions. Dewi and Nasywa (2019) identify five main factors affecting subjective well-being: forgiveness, personality, self-esteem, spirituality, and gratitude. Defined by Watkins (2014) as a positive acknowledgment of life's blessings, gratitude shifts focus toward appreciation for what one has rather than what one lacks,

contributing to higher happiness and satisfaction (Unterrainer et al., 2010; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2004). Evidence suggests that individuals who experience gratitude report higher levels of life satisfaction, optimism, and overall mental health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2004) emphasize that those high in gratitude tend to experience joy, satisfaction, and optimism, along with a lower risk of depression and envy. Gratitude fosters appreciation for simple joys, a feeling of abundance, and a deeper appreciation of relationships, leading to a positive view of life even in challenging situations (Park, Christopher, & Martin, 2004; Watkins et al., 2003). Further studies show that gratitude interventions enhance subjective well-being by improving sleep quality, optimism, and even physical health (Jackowska et al., 2015; Alkozei, Smith, & Killgore, 2018).

In cases of fatherlessness, a diminished sense of gratitude often correlates with lower subjective well-being, affecting an individual's perspective and life satisfaction. Conversely, individuals with high gratitude levels demonstrate resilience and tend to experience greater subjective well-being, suggesting that gratitude may buffer against the adverse effects of fatherlessness (Gaoil & Ira, 2022; Prabowo, 2017; Chan, 2013; Datu, Valdez, McInerney, & Cayubit, 2022; Maryana & Prameswari, 2021). This study seeks to examine the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being in fatherless university students, posing the research question: "Is there a significant positive relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being among fatherless university students?" This research carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it aims to contribute to psychological knowledge by exploring the association between gratitude and subjective well-being in individuals experiencing fatherlessness, particularly within clinical and developmental psychology. Practically, the study has several implications: for society, by promoting support for students from single-parent families; for parents, by encouraging separated parents to reflect on the impact of their actions on children's subjective well-being; and for students, by providing insights on the importance of parental roles—especially that of fathers—in enhancing subjective well-being. By exploring these aspects, this study hopes to deepen our understanding of how gratitude might mitigate the negative impact of fatherlessness on subjective well-being.

METHOD

Design

This study examines the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being among university students experiencing fatherlessness, employing a quantitative correlational design. Through numerical data analysis, the research aims to identify patterns and correlations between gratitude (independent variable) and subjective well-being (dependent variable). Gratitude, defined as a positive feeling of appreciation that enhances life satisfaction, is measured using the Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT) by Watkins (2014). GRAT emphasizes three main aspects: a sense of abundance, simple appreciation, and appreciation of others. Higher GRAT scores indicate higher levels of gratitude in individuals.

Variables & Operational Definitions

Subjective well-being, as conceptualized by Diener (2009), includes both cognitive and affective evaluations of life. Cognitive evaluation encompasses life satisfaction, while affective evaluation involves assessing mood and emotional responses to life events. Subjective well-

being is measured using Diener’s Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) for cognitive aspects and the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) for affective aspects. The SWLS consists of five items assessing overall life satisfaction and satisfaction within specific domains such as physical health, relationships, and career. Higher positive affect scores reflect better subjective well-being, while higher negative affect scores suggest lower subjective well-being (Watson, Lee, & Auke, 1988).

Population and Sample

The study population includes active university students who meet the criteria of fatherlessness, defined as those lacking a nurturing father figure due to parental divorce or abandonment and being primarily raised by their mothers. Participants are selected using purposive sampling from various regions of Solo Raya, including Surakarta, Karanganyar, Sragen, Wonogiri, Sukoharjo, Klaten, and Boyolali (Sugiyono, 2017).

Measurement Instruments and Testing

The study uses the SWLS and PANAS for measuring subjective well-being, both translated into Indonesian and adapted for local contexts. The SWLS scale has high reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.887, while the PANAS, consisting of 9 positive affect and 11 negative affect items, reports reliability scores of 0.861 and 0.853, respectively (Saman, 2016; Akhtar, 2019). Gratitude is assessed using the GRAT, adapted and translated by Ramadhani (2020), which includes 40 items with a reliability score of 0.880. Responses are scored on a Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater levels of gratitude and subjective well-being.

Table 1. Blueprint of Subjective Well-Being Scale - SWLS

Aspect	Indicator
Cognitive	1. Evaluation of overall life satisfaction, an individual’s process of assessing life quality.
	2. Evaluation of dominant satisfaction, including physical health, mental health, work, recreation,
	3. Social relationships, partner relationships, and family life.

Table 2. Blueprint of Subjective Well-Being Scale - PANAS

Aspect	Item Number
Positive Affect	1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 14, 16, 17, 19
Negative Affect	2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 20

Tabel 3. Blueprint of Gratitude Scale

Aspect	Indicator
Sense of Abundance	• Feeling satisfied with life.
	• Feeling happy with one’s own condition.
Sense Appreciation of Others	• Recognizing simple pleasures from God and life.
	• Acknowledging the role of others in one’s well-being.
Simple Appreciation	• Performing worship as a form of gratitude to God.
	• Helping others as an expression of appreciation.

Table 4. Reliability Test

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
SWLS Scale	0.901	5
PANAS Scale	0.934	19
GRAT Scale	0.941	33

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis is conducted using SPSS software, starting with reliability testing for all scales. Normality and linearity assumptions are tested before proceeding with hypothesis testing using Pearson's correlation, assuming a normal distribution. The reliability results of the SWLS, PANAS, and GRAT indicate strong internal consistency, supporting their validity for this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Field Orientation and Data Collection

Data for this study was collected using scales distributed to active university students experiencing fatherlessness. The scales were shared via social media (Instagram and TikTok) targeting active students studying in the Solo Raya region (Surakarta, Karanganyar, Sragen, Wonogiri, Sukoharjo, Klaten, and Boyolali) who met the study's criteria. Respondents completed the scales via a Google Form questionnaire distributed between August 2-24, 2024, with a total of 186 responses obtained. Some challenges in data collection included prolonged completion times and uncertainty regarding respondents' adherence to instructions, given the online nature of the form.

Research Participants

The study involved 186 active university students experiencing fatherlessness in Solo Raya.

Table 5. Respondent Demographic

Gender	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Male	98	52.7%
Female	88	47.3%
Region		
Surakarta	49	20.3%
Sukoharjo	31	18%
Klaten	26	15.1%
Boyolali	22	12.8%
Karanganyar	20	11.6%
Wonogiri	20	11.6%
Sragen	18	10.5%

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on the gratitude and subjective well-being (SWB) variables to examine general data distribution, including mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. The descriptive analysis results show that the gratitude scale had a minimum score of 87, a maximum score of 197, a mean of 140.8, and a standard deviation of 23.77. For subjective well-being, the minimum score was 42, the maximum 87, the mean 50.49, and the standard deviation 16.35. Gratitude was categorized across five levels, revealing that the majority of respondents (35%) scored in the "Medium" category.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
GRAT	186	87	197	140.8	23.77
SWB	186	42	87	50.49	16.35

Table 7. Gratitude Categorization

Gratitude Score Interval	Category	Frequency	Percentage
$X \leq 106$	Very Low	11	2%
$106 < X \leq 129$	Low	44	24%
$129 < X \leq 152$	Medium	65	35%
$152 < X \leq 176$	High	62	33%
$X > 176$	Very High	4	2%
Total		186	100%

Table 8. Subjective Well-Being Categorization

SWB Score Interval	Category	Frequency	Percentage
$X \leq 26$	Very Low	5	3%
$26 < X \leq 42$	Low	50	27%
$42 < X \leq 59$	Medium	81	43%
$59 < X \leq 75$	High	31	17%
$X > 75$	Very High	19	10%
Total		186	100%

Subjective well-being also showed a concentration in the "Medium" category, with 43% of respondents falling within this range. Regression analysis results indicate an effective contribution (SE) of gratitude (X) to subjective well-being (Y) at 33.17%. This suggests that while gratitude has a significant effect on subjective well-being, the remaining 66.83% is influenced by other factors.

Assumption Testing

The significance level for GRAT was 0.021 and for SWB 0.318. Since the significance is greater than $p > 0.05$, the data is normally distributed. The deviation from linearity is less than $p < 0.05$, indicating no linear relationship between the variables.

Table 9. Normality Test

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
GRAT	186	140.87	23.177	1.509	0.021
SWB	186	50.49	1.635	0.959	0.318

Table 10. Linearity Test

Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
GRAT	25906.399	70	370.091	1.805	0.002
SWB	23574.080	115	204.992	-	-
Total	49480.478	185			

Hypothesis Testing

The significance level between GRAT and SWB is $r = 0.148$, indicating a positive correlation between the two variables. With a Sig. 2-tailed result of 0.044, this finding is statistically significant ($p > 0.05$), supporting the hypothesis that gratitude positively influences subjective well-being.

Table 11. Hypothesis Correlation Test

Variable	GRAT	SWB
GRAT	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-
	N	186
SWB	Pearson Correlation	0.148
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.044
	N	186

This study aimed to examine the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being in university students who are fatherless, focusing on students in Solo Raya (Surakarta, Karanganyar, Sragen, Wonogiri, Sukoharjo, Klaten, and Boyolali). The findings indicate a correlation coefficient of 0.148, with a significance level of 0.044 ($p > 0.05$), confirming a positive relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being among the participants. In other words, students with higher levels of gratitude reported greater subjective well-being, highlighting gratitude’s potential to serve as a psychological resource that positively influences emotional health and resilience. These findings align with existing literature underscoring the beneficial effects of gratitude on psychological well-being. For instance, Alkozei, Smith, and Killgore (2018) found that gratitude directly enhances subjective well-being, fostering positive mental and emotional environments. Furthermore, gratitude has been shown to positively influence personal and interpersonal factors such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and emotional stability (Watkins et al., 2003; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Broader psychological theories also support this, suggesting gratitude enables individuals to focus on positive aspects

of life, counteracting negative emotions associated with stress and adversity (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being Across Demographics

The influence of gratitude on subjective well-being spans various demographic factors, as demonstrated by Jans-Beken et al. (2018) and Froh et al. (2011). In these studies, gratitude was found to positively impact subjective well-being across gender, age, and educational levels, highlighting its broad applicability. In this study, gender analysis showed that 52.7% of fatherless participants were male, while 47.3% were female, indicating a balanced sample. This result aligns with findings by Jans-Beken et al. (2018), who argue that gratitude's impact on well-being transcends gender boundaries, providing a universally beneficial psychological resource. However, subtle gender differences in gratitude expression and experiences are worth noting, as they may influence specific well-being outcomes (Kashdan et al., 2009; Hill & Allemand, 2011). For instance, Kashdan et al. (2009) suggested that women may express gratitude more openly and frequently than men, potentially experiencing different emotional benefits as a result. Age and educational level are other significant demographic factors affecting the gratitude-well-being relationship. Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) argued that as individuals mature, they gain a deeper understanding of gratitude and its implications for well-being, which may be particularly impactful in the university context. Froh et al. (2011) found that younger individuals benefit from gratitude in ways that foster self-esteem and resilience, particularly in adverse situations, such as those faced by fatherless students. This suggests that gratitude interventions may be particularly beneficial for young adults, who are transitioning into independence and often need coping mechanisms for family and academic challenges (Seligman et al., 2005).

Contribution of Gratitude to Subjective Well-Being

In this study, gratitude contributed effectively to subjective well-being, with an effective contribution (SE) of 33.17%. This suggests that gratitude is a significant contributor to subjective well-being but is not the sole factor. As Diener, Oishi, and Lucas (2012) explain, subjective well-being is multifaceted, comprising cognitive evaluations (life satisfaction) and affective components (positive and negative emotions). Gratitude primarily affects the positive affect dimension, including emotions such as happiness, contentment, and optimism (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). While gratitude substantially contributes to subjective well-being, additional factors like social support, coping skills, and psychological resilience are also necessary for a holistic sense of well-being (Fredrickson, 2004; Diener et al., 2009). This finding aligns with the broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions, like gratitude, broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, encouraging flexible thinking, creativity, and effective problem-solving (Fredrickson, 2001). This process enables individuals to build psychological resources that support resilience and coping in times of adversity, such as the experience of fatherlessness. The theory suggests that gratitude enhances subjective well-being momentarily and builds long-term resources for well-being, particularly relevant for

fatherless individuals facing unique challenges (Cohn et al., 2009; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

Gender Differences and the Role of Social Context

An interesting dimension observed in this study was the gender composition of participants, with 52.7% male and 47.3% female participants. Gender differences in gratitude expression have been observed in prior studies, where women tend to express gratitude more frequently and openly than men (Kashdan et al., 2009). Future research could delve into these gender-specific variations, examining how men and women experience and benefit from gratitude differently, especially within the context of fatherlessness (Froh et al., 2009; Hill & Allemand, 2011). Additionally, exploring the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping gratitude and subjective well-being could provide a nuanced perspective on how societal expectations and support systems influence individuals' emotional experiences (Lambert et al., 2009; Triandis, 1995).

Implications for Guidance and Counseling

The positive association between gratitude and subjective well-being observed in this study has meaningful implications for guidance and counseling, particularly for university students experiencing fatherlessness. This demographic often faces unique challenges, such as increased emotional vulnerability and social adjustment difficulties (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, counselors can play a crucial role in fostering gratitude as a coping resource, which has been shown to improve resilience and emotional stability (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude-focused interventions, such as gratitude journaling and reflective exercises, can help students reframe their experiences, thus promoting a positive outlook and enhancing their overall subjective well-being (Froh et al., 2011; Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010). Integrating gratitude exercises into counseling sessions can also encourage students to develop supportive social relationships, which are essential for their emotional health. Research suggests that gratitude enhances interpersonal relationships by promoting empathy, trust, and relational satisfaction (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008). This could be especially beneficial for students dealing with fatherlessness, as such relationships may fulfill the emotional support often lacking due to parental absence (Hill & Allemand, 2011). Encouraging gratitude in counseling can, therefore, foster a supportive peer network, enhancing students' resilience and well-being in the face of personal challenges (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). Gratitude interventions are further supported by positive psychology frameworks, such as Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions like gratitude broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and build enduring psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). For fatherless students, cultivating gratitude can provide mental clarity and creativity, empowering them to cope more effectively with academic and personal challenges (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). Counselors can apply this theory by encouraging students to reflect on positive experiences and personal strengths, helping them build the psychological resources necessary for resilience (Cohn et al., 2009).

The gender differences observed in gratitude expression also suggest that guidance counselors should consider tailoring gratitude interventions to better meet the unique needs of male and female students. Research indicates that women may benefit more readily from gratitude practices due to their tendency to express and experience gratitude more openly (Kashdan et al., 2009). Counselors could therefore encourage male students to explore gratitude in ways that feel authentic and comfortable to them, potentially through mindfulness or individual reflective practices (Jans-Beken et al., 2018). This tailored approach could help male students to derive similar emotional benefits, thereby promoting well-being across gender lines. Cultural sensitivity in gratitude-based counseling is also essential, as cultural values can shape how gratitude is expressed and experienced (Triandis, 1995). Lambert et al. (2009) emphasize that cultural norms influence gratitude practices, which can affect subjective well-being. Counselors working with diverse student populations should be aware of these cultural nuances, adapting gratitude interventions to align with students' cultural contexts and beliefs to maximize effectiveness (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). For instance, students from collectivistic cultures may benefit more from group gratitude activities, while individualistic students may prefer personalized gratitude practices. Furthermore, the implications of gratitude on physical health should not be overlooked in counseling practices. Research by Jackowska et al. (2016) found that gratitude interventions improved sleep quality, reduced blood pressure, and enhanced overall physical health. This aligns with Wood et al. (2010), who found that gratitude contributes to greater psychological and physiological resilience. Counselors may thus incorporate discussions on physical health benefits to motivate students to engage with gratitude practices consistently, as these interventions can holistically enhance both mental and physical well-being. Lastly, given the positive correlation between gratitude and subjective well-being, educational institutions may consider incorporating gratitude training into their counseling programs. Implementing gratitude workshops or group counseling sessions focused on gratitude can create an environment where students feel encouraged and supported, enhancing the overall campus atmosphere (Emmons & Stern, 2013). Regularly engaging students in gratitude practices could promote a culture of well-being, helping students manage the pressures of academic and personal life (Froh et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

This study provides evidence of a positive relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being among university students experiencing fatherlessness in Solo Raya. Findings indicate that students with higher levels of gratitude report greater subjective well-being, suggesting that gratitude can serve as a valuable psychological resource for emotional resilience. Regression analysis revealed that gratitude contributes 33.17% to the variance in subjective well-being, underscoring its significant, though partial, influence. These results align with existing literature, which emphasizes gratitude's role in enhancing psychological health by fostering positive emotional states and mitigating negative affective responses to adversity. The implications for guidance and counseling are profound; fostering gratitude in counseling sessions could support the emotional stability and social adjustment of students facing fatherlessness. Encouraging gratitude expression, tailored interventions by gender and culture, and emphasizing physical health benefits further enhance counseling approaches.

Therefore, incorporating gratitude practices in educational counseling may be a feasible, cost-effective method to promote well-being and resilience among students, contributing to a supportive and positive campus environment. This study lays a foundation for future research to explore more nuanced dynamics of gratitude, subjective well-being, and demographic variables, as well as the effectiveness of gratitude interventions across diverse populations.

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