

Daily Gratitude Towards One ' s Parents and Subjective Well-Being

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Daily Gratitude Towards One's Parents and Subjective Well-Being
of Japanese Undergraduate Students

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Author Note

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Abstract

The effect of daily gratitude towards one's parents on various subjective well-being measures was investigated. Sixty native Japanese speakers were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions (five listings of gratitude towards parents, five listings of daily events, and no treatment) for a week. Results indicated that the parental gratitude group significantly increased their life satisfaction and subjective happiness, and the daily events listing group significantly increased their life satisfaction and empathy after the intervention. Conscious recitation of gratitude towards one's parents or daily events may induce positive subjective well-being.

Keywords: gratitude, Japan, positive psychology, parent

In April 1935, Isoroku Yamamoto, a highly-respected Japanese Marshal Admiral who would later become the commander-in-chief of the combined fleet during World War II, addressed the pupils in the elementary school that he had graduated from many years earlier. He stated that there are three major debts of gratitude in Japan. They are debts of gratitude towards the emperor, one's parents, and one's teachers (Yamamoto, 2012). Culturally and historically, Japanese emphasized the importance of gratitude towards their parents. In 710, Empress Genshō indicated that the respect and thanks to one's parents and ancestors (kou in Japanese) has the top priority among a hundred good deeds of humans (Oohata, 1971). One of the most well-known ethics textbooks for Japanese children in the 1800s says, "We have debts of gratitude towards our parents that are as infinitely large as the size of the universe and their love towards us has the same depth and width as the ocean" (Matsudaira, 1984, p. 19). After Japan became an open country to the West in modern times, the Emperor Meiji declared the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890 as a guiding principle of all the educational institutions in Japan. The rescript mentioned the respect and gratitude towards one's parents first among all the virtues (Shintou, 1986). Of course, gratitude towards parents is emphasized not only in Japan but also in other religions and cultures, such as Chinese culture (xiào in Chinese), Judaism and Christianity (i.e., Ten Commandments), Islam, and Buddhism. The chapter of "The Night Journey" (17:23) in the Koran said, "Show kindness to your parents" (Dawood, 1990, p. 198). There is a Buddhist sutra that specifically teaches the importance of respect and gratitude towards one's parents (Matsubara, 2002). Thus, many religions and cultures have claimed the virtue of gratitude towards one's parents. As long as I am aware of, no published studies to date have examined the relationship between gratitude towards one's own parents specifically and its possible positive consequence on psychological well-being. McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) reported that grateful people indicated higher levels of hope, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, empathy, and

optimism, and lower levels of depression and anxiety than their ungrateful counterparts. Yet, their studied gratitude phenomenon included all types of gratitude. Since Emmons and McCullough (2003) pioneered the use of gratitude-listing intervention strategies, many other researchers have utilized similar interventions. Reviewing these intervention studies, Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) recommended including a no-treatment group in a gratitude-listing intervention experiment in order to indicate a clear research question. The present study utilized three groups in order to clarify whether a gratitude-listing intervention is more effective than either listing of daily events or doing nothing. The present study examined the effects of keeping a daily gratitude journal for a week towards one's parents regarding psychological well-being variables (i.e., gratitude, hope, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, empathy, optimism, depression, and anxiety) among three different groups (five listings of gratitude towards parents, five listings of daily events, and no treatment). I hypothesized that the parental gratitude group would significantly increase their hope, life satisfaction, optimism, empathy, and subjective happiness and significantly decrease their depression and anxiety scores after the intervention.

Method

Participants

A total of 60 participants comprised of 14 male students (23.3%) and 46 female students (76.7%) took part in the study at a liberal arts college in Miyazaki, Japan. They were all native Japanese speakers. Participants' mean age was 18.8 (*SD* age =1.1, age range: 18-22).

Materials

Gratitude. The GQ in Japanese (GQJ) was made from the original Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002) by Kobayashi (2013). Although there were six items and each was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) in a Likert-type scale in the GQ, it was recommended that the sixth item be omitted from the GQJ due to its extremely low factor loading. GQJ also demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .70$) and sound construct validity in a Japanese undergraduate sample (Kobayashi, 2013).

Life Satisfaction. Sumino (1994) made a Japanese version from an original Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The Japanese Satisfaction With Life Scale (JSWLS) had five items that were supposed to measure cognitive aspects of subjective well-being, and each item was rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) in a Likert-type scale. Sumino tested its psychometric properties in five different studies with Japanese samples. JSWLS demonstrated appropriate factor loadings, satisfactory levels of construct validity, internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$), and a test-retest correlation coefficient of .80 with a 4-week interval. JSWLS also exhibited satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$) and sound construct validity in a Japanese undergraduate sample (Kobayashi, 2013).

Hope. Shinohara and Katsumata (2000, 2001) translated the Hope Scale (Snyder, et al., 1991) that contains eight items to measure two dimensions of hope: agency and passways, and the four remaining items to be fillers. Four agency items in the scale were supposed to measure one's estimated ability to accomplish one's goals and the other four passways items were supposed to measure one's estimated ability to make plans for achieving the goals. Each item was rated from 1 (*definitely false*) to 4 (*definitely true*) in a Likert-type scale. Shinohara and Katsumata (2000, 2001) demonstrated that their Hope Scale in Japanese indicated two

latent factors from factor analysis and acceptable reliability and validity. The Hope Scale in Japanese also exhibited satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .68$ for passways & $\alpha = .77$ for agency) and sound construct validity in a Japanese undergraduate sample (Kobayashi, 2013).

Depression and Anxiety. Fukui (1997) created the Depression and Anxiety Mood Scale (DAMS) that consists of nine adjectives to assess an individual's current depressive and anxious moods. Each item was rated from 1 (*does not apply to me at all*) to 7 (*applies to me extremely well*) in a Likert-type scale. From the results of three different studies with 1,452 college-aged Japanese participants, DAMS demonstrated high convergent and discriminant validity and test-retest reliability (Fukui, 1997).

Subjective Happiness. Shimai, Ootake, Utsuki, Ikemi, and Lyubomirsky (2004) developed a Japanese Subjective Happiness Scale (JSHS). There were four items and each was rated as a 7-point Likert-type scale in the JSHS. From the data of 364 Japanese undergraduate students, JSHS demonstrated appropriate levels of reliability and construct validity. In addition, JSHS also evidenced satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .81$) and construct validity in a Japanese undergraduate sample (Kobayashi, 2013).

Empathy. Tobar (2003) created the multidimensional empathy scale for Japanese that contains 30 items. It consisted of four subscales: empathic concern, personal distress, fantasy, and cognitive empathy. Each item was rated from 1 (*does not apply to me at all*) to 5 (*applies to me extremely well*) in a Likert-type scale. Each scale exhibited satisfactory internal consistency and significant correlations with other empathy scales and scales of prosocial behavior. For the present study, participants responded only to the Empathic Concern subscale that contains 13 items with adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$).

Optimism. Sakamoto and Tanaka (2002) developed a Japanese version from an original Life Orientation Test-Revised (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and tested its psychometric properties using 668 Japanese undergraduate students. Each item on the

Japanese Life Orientation Test-Revised (JLOT-R) was rated from 1 (*do not think so at all*) to 5 (*strongly think so*) in a Likert-type scale. There were four filler items in the total of ten items. JLOT-R exhibited a coefficient alpha of .62 and a test-retest correlation coefficient of .84 with a 3-week interval. Although the JLOT-R indicated low Cronbach's alpha coefficients, it demonstrated sound construct validity (Hashimoto & Koyasu, 2011; Kawahito & Otsuka, 2010). Recently, the JLOT-R exhibited better internal consistency ($\alpha = .69$) and appropriate construct validity in a Japanese undergraduate sample (Kobayashi, 2013).

Procedure

After obtaining the institutional review board's approval, I invited undergraduate students by e-mail to participate in the research. Interested students came to my office and read an informed consent form that explained the study itself, their rights, and that 1,000 yen (approximately US\$10 in April 2013) would be given as an appreciation of research participation. Those agreeing to participate signed on the informed consent form and were randomly assigned to Group 1 (20 students), who wrote five things for which they were grateful toward their parents every day for a week, or to Group 2 (20 students), who wrote every day five things that happened (or they did) in their life on that day for a week, or to Group 3 (20 students), who did nothing for a week. First, all the participants anonymously answered the surveys of (a) gratitude, (b) life satisfaction, (c) hope, (d) depression and anxiety, (e) happiness, (f) empathy, and (g) optimism. Then, notebooks were given to all the participants of Groups 1 and 2 and they started writing their daily journal for seven days for several minutes every night before going to bed. The participants in Group 3 did nothing special during that time. In order to protect their privacy, they wrote their randomly assigned identification number instead of writing their names or any other identifiable information on

their notebooks. A week later I collected their notebooks and all the participants of all groups anonymously answered the same survey again. Then, I gave 1,000 yen to each of them.

Results

In order to check the validity of random assignment before the intervention, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on nine target variables (gratitude, life satisfaction, hope-agency, hope-pathways, depression, anxiety, subjective happiness, empathy, and optimism) was conducted by group. There were no significant group differences regarding these variables, $F(18, 100) = 1.0, ns$. Thus, all three groups demonstrated equivalency regarding these target variables before intervention.

Next, a 2 (time: before and after intervention) X 3 (group: Groups 1, 2, and 3) repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to test intervention effect on these nine target variables. The results showed that there were significant differences among these three groups on these variables, $V = .518, F(18, 98) = 1.90, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .26$. Univariate tests also revealed significant intervention effects on subjective happiness, $F(2, 56) = 4.19, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .13$, on empathy, $F(2, 56) = 3.46, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .11$, and on life satisfaction, $F(2, 56) = 5.91, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .17$.

Regarding subjective happiness, post-hoc tests (Bonferroni) revealed that Group 1, who wrote five daily gratitude listings about their parents significantly increased their scores after intervention ($p < .05$), as Figure 1 shows.

Regarding empathy, post-hoc tests (Bonferroni) revealed that Group 2, who wrote five daily events significantly increased their scores after intervention ($p < .05$), as Figure 2 shows.

Regarding life satisfaction, post-hoc tests (Bonferroni) revealed that both Group 1 and 2 significantly increased their scores after intervention ($ps < .05$), as Figure 3 shows.

Regarding the other six variables (i.e., gratitude, hope-agency, hope-pathways, depression, anxiety, and optimism), there were no significant intervention effects.

Discussion

Although I hypothesized that the parental gratitude group would significantly increase their hope, life satisfaction, optimism, empathy, and subjective happiness and significantly decrease their depression and anxiety scores after the intervention, I could only detect such significant intervention effects on two variables among the nine. Throughout the present study, only three variables among the nine indicated significant intervention effects. The remaining six variables did not indicate any significant effects. Mayers (2013) stated that dependent variables in MANOVA should exhibit some correlation, with positive $.30 < r < .90$ and negative $-.40 < r < 0$. Several correlations among these nine variables did not satisfy these conditions. Thus, it appears that I chose too many dependent variables at the initial research design stage. Future research in this line of investigation should utilize fewer dependent variables in MANOVA.

However, the present study did obtain interesting results. First, only those who wrote five daily gratitude listings about their parents significantly increased their subjective happiness after a seven-day intervention; such a phenomenon did not appear in the other two groups. This finding may be the first empirical support for the psychological benefits of thanking our parents, even though many religions and cultures have taught the virtue of gratitude towards one's parents for centuries. Second, those who wrote five daily events significantly increased their empathy after a seven-day intervention, but such a phenomenon did not appear in other two groups. Maybe those who wrote five daily events gained insights on the perspectives of others because they objectively described incidents as they had happened. But those who wrote five daily gratitude listings about their parents focused on

their relationships with their parents and did not pay attention to other issues. Thus, their empathy might not have changed. Third, both those who wrote five daily gratitude listings about their parents and those who wrote five daily events significantly increased their life satisfaction after a seven-day intervention but such a phenomenon did not appear in the no treatment group. Maybe writing something daily to review one's life is rewarding, and thus increases one's life satisfaction.

In conclusion, this study could empirically demonstrate that experiencing daily gratitude towards one's parents for a week increased subjective happiness, and future research in this line of investigation should utilize more focused dependent variables in MANOVA analyses.

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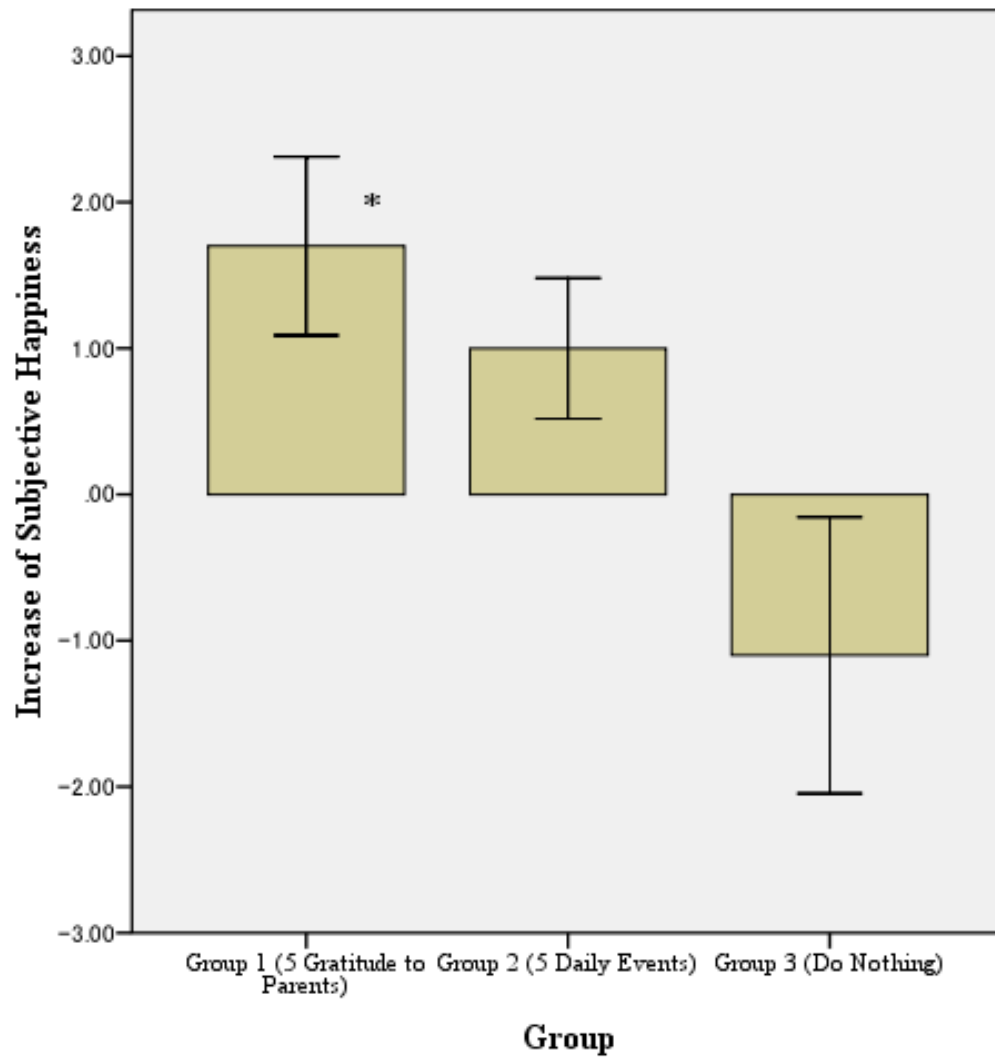


Figure 1. The bar graphs show mean increase of subjective happiness after intervention as a function of group. Error bars indicate standard errors of the means. The asterisk indicates a significant increase after intervention ($p < .05$).

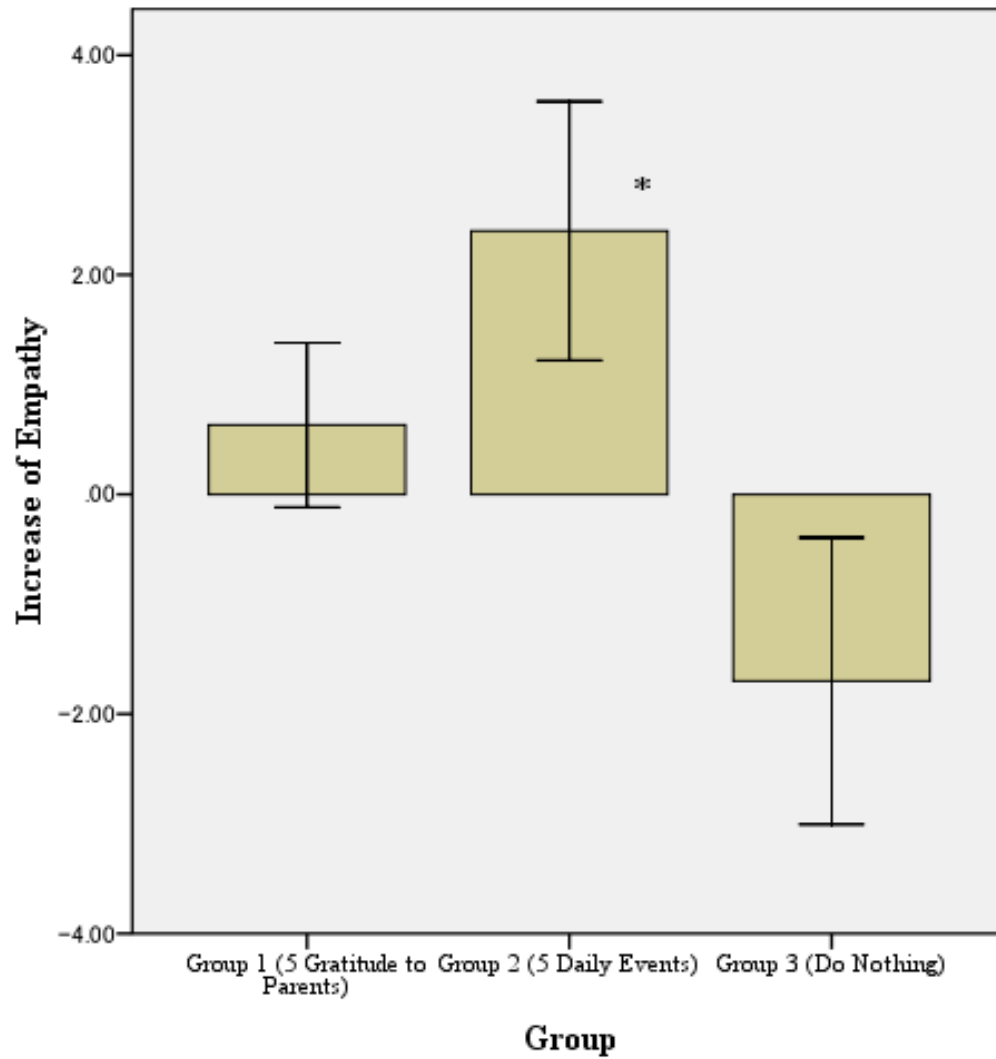


Figure 2. The bar graphs show mean increase of empathy after intervention as a function of group. Error bars indicate standard errors of the means. The asterisk indicates a significant increase after intervention ($p < .05$).

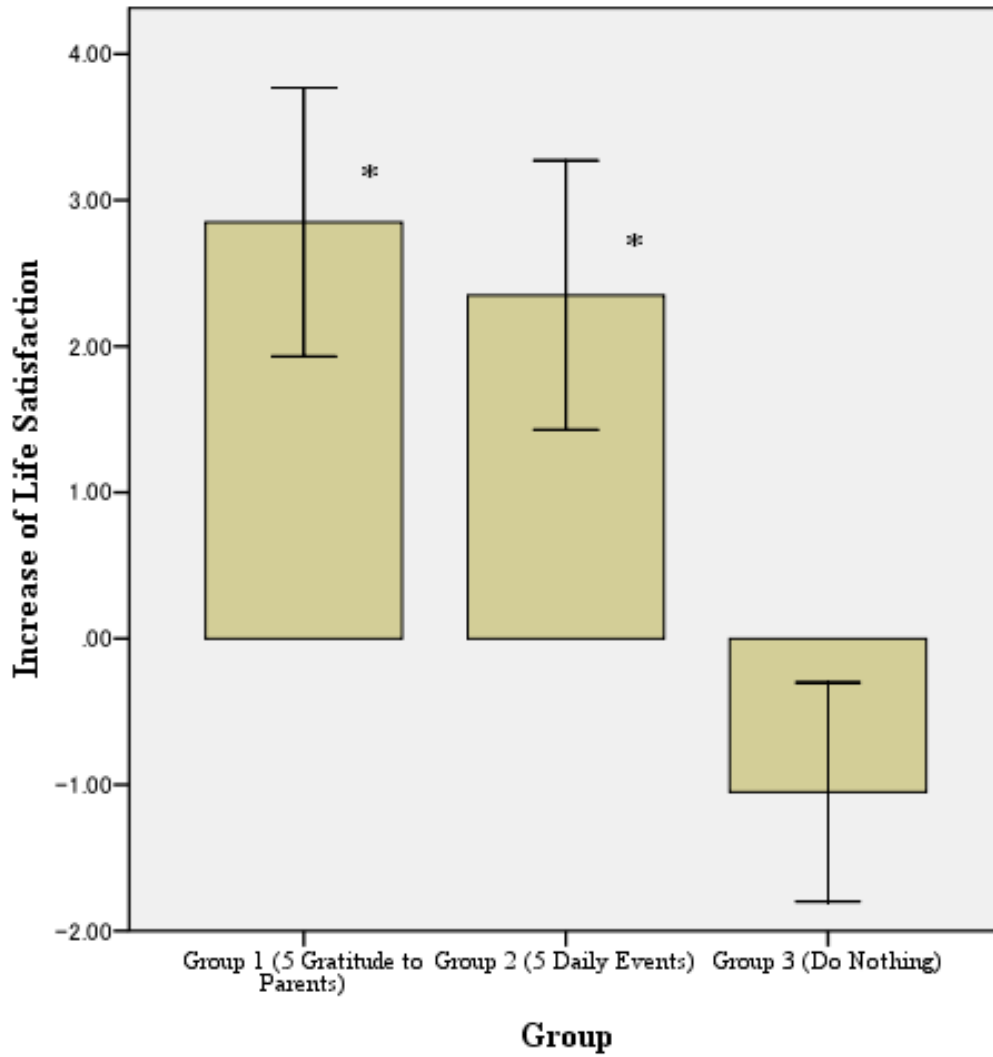


Figure 3. The bar graphs show mean increase of life satisfaction after intervention as a function of group. Error bars indicate standard errors of the means. The asterisks indicate significant increases after intervention ($ps < .05$).