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Research Article

# Qualitatively Exploring the Relationship among Gratitude, Spirituality and Life Satisfaction in Turkish-Muslim Children

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study what children are grateful for in daily life and to reveal the relationship among gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction. This study investigates gratitude by qualitatively analyzing children's gratitude diaries. Convenience sampling has been used in the research. Children from lower and middle socio-economic levels studying in a school located in a developing neighborhood were chosen. The sample of the study consisted of 70 children between the ages of 11 and 12 years old (SD = .25). After the aim of the study was explained to the children, they were asked to voluntarily keep a gratitude diary. The participants recorded their daily experiences in written diaries at the end of each day for three weeks. The data was collected by the author in 2012. Content and frequency analyses were used. According to the results of the study, the most common themes in the children's gratitude were having a family and being able to meet their basic needs. Their own happiness emerged third. Also, expressions and drawings that were in their diaries show that gratitude is linked with their spirituality and life satisfaction. According to this, as gratitude increased, spirituality increased, too.

## Keywords

Gratitude • Spirituality • Turkish-Muslim children • Gratitude diaries • Life satisfaction

## Türk-Müslüman Çocuklarında Minnettarlık, Maneviyat ve Yaşam Memnuniyeti arasındaki İlişkilerin Nitel olarak İncelenmesi

## Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, günlük yaşamda çocukların neler için minnettar oldukları ve şükrettiklerini incelemek ve minnettarlık, maneviyat ve yaşam memnuniyeti arasındaki ilişkileri nitel olarak açıklamaktır. Çalışmada çocukların minnettarlık günlükleri analiz edilerek inceleme yapılmıştır. Araştırmada uygun örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Gelişmekte olan bir bölgedeki bir okulda okuyan alt ve orta sosyoekonomik düzeyden ailelerin çocukları araştırma grubu olarak belirlenmiştir. Araştırmanın örneklemini 11 ve 12 yaş yaş arasındaki (SS = .25) 70 çocuk oluşturmuştur. Çocuklara araştırmanın amaçları açıklanmış, ve gönüllü olarak bir minnettarlık günlüğü tutmaları istenmiştir. Çocuklar üç hafta boyunca her gün günlüklerine deneyimlerini yazmışlardır. Veriler yazar tarafından 2012 yılında toplanmıştır. İçerik ve frekans analizleri yapılmıştır. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre çocukların minnettarlık ve şükür davranışları ile ilgili en sık rastlanan temaların bir aileye sahip olma ve temel ihtiyaçlarını karşılayabilme olduğu görülmüştür. Kendilerinin mutlu olması ise üçüncü bir tema olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca günlüklerindeki ifadeler ve çizimler incelendiğinde, minnettarlığın maneviyat ve yaşam doyumu ile ilişkili olduğu görülmektedir. Buna göre minnettarlığın artması maneviyatın da artması ile ilişkilidir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Minnettarlık • Maneviyat • Türk-Müslüman çocukları • Minnettarlık günlüğü • Yaşam doyumu

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Dear gratitude diary, this is the end of our 20 days together. Over that time you have been very helpful to me. I'm happy. Thank you. Because of you, I remembered that I have lots of things to thank God for. (Girl #5)

Different approaches have been utilized in attempting to describe gratitude. Gratitude has been conceptualized as the origin of human strength (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), a virtue or emotional state (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), the recognition and appreciation of an altruistic gift (Emmons, 2004), a character strength belonging to *transcendental virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2003), and a moral barometer, reinforcer, and motivator (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Emmons and McCullough (2003, pp. 377–378) have also described it as a typical emotional response “when one receives a personal gift or benefit that was not earned, deserved, or expected, but instead due to the good intentions of another person.”

There are a number of distinct concepts used in English to express gratitude, including terms such as appreciation, gratefulness, and thankfulness (Emmons, 2009; Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Correspondingly, gratitude may be characterized or expressed in a variety of ways depending on its cultural context (Bahrapoura & Yazdkhast, 2014; Gocen, 2014). In Turkish-Muslim culture, for example, there are a variety of words expressing gratitude, including *hamd*, *kanaat*, *şükür*, *zikir*, *kadirşinashlık*, and *minnet*. It is possible to say that a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving and praising somebody's benefit are both used to express gratitude in relation to God (Gocen, 2015). Gratitude is essentially God-centered in Islamic thought, feelings, and experiences. Being grateful to God (*şükür*) is separate from being grateful to people (*teşekkür*). At this point, it is necessary to understand the religious nature of gratitude in the Turkish-Muslim mind.

All holy books, moral thoughts, and philosophies regard gratitude as a fundamental virtue (Bahrapoura & Yazdkhast, 2014; Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Krause et al., 2014). For this reason, the most magnificent gratitude is that expressed to God by believers. Especially in Islamic culture, gratitude is described as an attribute of God (Qur'an, 4:147; 16:14; 23:78), as the sentiment most deserving of a response, and as the reason for an increase in blessings (Bahrapoura & Yazdkhast, 2014; Gocen, 2015). This is because God is the endower of all gifts and the ultimate source of thankfulness (Emmons & Hill, 2001). Islam instructs that one should praise and be thankful to God in all circumstances (Mobin-Uddin, 2002). Thus as a holy feeling, awareness, and view, as well as a religious life style, behavior, custom, culture, habit, and way, gratitude correlates positively with intrinsic religiousness, spirituality, and inner peace. This subject should therefore not be overlooked when children's understandings of gratitude are reviewed, as it likely affects their family, living, and faith environments.

Gratitude is also one of the central positive structures in psychology (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Previous research has demonstrated that grateful thoughts and feelings are an efficient process for activating happiness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) and an important factor in contributing to mental health. According to Emmons and Shelton (2002), grateful responses to life can instill peace of mind, happiness, physical health, and more satisfying personal associations. Similarly, McCullough et al. (2002) have also found that gratitude is related to an increase in assistive behavior, high positive emotion, life satisfaction, and hope, as well as lower feelings of depression, anxiety, and envy in addition to selfish attitudes. Thus there is a great deal of research that has examined the relationship of gratitude with happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being.

Many studies conducted on this topic have focused on adults (Emmons, 2007; Emmons & McCullough, 2004), meaning that the development and manifestations of gratitude in childhood remain under-examined (Akamatsu, 2010; Chan, 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Research on gratitude in children is bound to be different from that for adults. Therefore, this study discusses the subject of gratitude in children as some of the themes and factors are more prominent. For example, it is considered to be a part of cognitive and social development. Gratitude has been ignored as a positive emotional structure. However, some researchers have argued that as children become less egocentric and more grateful, the capability to empathize grows more (Diebel, 2014). On the other hand, gratitude in children is handled in different ways developmentally. Some research has shown that gratitude comprehension in children is a process that develops over several years (Bono & Froh, 2009; Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Froh & Bono, 2008; Froh, Miller, & Snyder, 2007). The greatest shortcoming of research dealing with gratitude in children is the lack of empirical, qualitative, and longitudinal studies. Data on children's gratitude has been obtained quantitatively mostly using surveys. In particular, experimental evidence would be helpful in determining causality of gratitude in children because many studies have not discovered any effective factor on the relationship of gratitude with wellbeing and spirituality. Also, studies based on comparison would contribute to the aspect of gratitude development.

Considered as a main virtue for psychological and social functioning, gratitude is an emotion that instills a sense of meaning and connection to other people, communities, nature, and God (Emmons, 2004). On the other hand gratitude is strongly linked to spirituality and religiousness in school-aged children for reasons similar to those that promote it in adults and adolescents (Holder et al., 2010). Therefore, Emmons and Crumpler (2000, p. 468) have described the need for research on gratitude in children as a significant priority. Experimental studies have been performed on people who kept a regular gratitude diary, compared to those who have recorded problems or neutral life events. In such cases, the act of counting one's blessings has corresponded to a higher level of well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In addition, gratitude



is the second most common emotion after compassion experienced in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks of 2001. Also, children who were asked to keep gratitude diaries were found to be more thankful than those who did not, and there has been a clear increase in the themes of gratitude for basic human needs (e.g., family, friends, and teachers) since 9/11 (Gordon et al., 2004).

Consequently, research on gratitude in children shows great potential for helping to understand and promote the full field of child development. In the present study, gratitude has been addressed in a manner identical to that pursued by Emmons and McCullough (2003) in their gratitude intervention studies. Specifically, school-aged children have been examined with a focus on the things in their lives for which they are grateful, and an effort has been made to assess the relationship among their levels of gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction.

### **Purpose**

The main goal of this paper is to shed light on the role of gratitude in children as a source of human strength, spirituality, and life satisfaction. This study has been performed on children with a focus on the things in their lives for which they are thankful. In this study, the relationship among gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction in children was qualitatively evaluated using gratitude diaries, as the study first aimed to identify the major themes of children's gratitude. After determining the things or events deemed valuable or beautiful in their daily lives, the next step was to explore whether these (i.e., being happy, playing with friends, and liking being healthy) were associated with a greater degree of spirituality and life satisfaction in children, specifically in terms of positive experiences (i.e., motivation, recognition, and behavior). Thus, the study was designed to examine the relationship between children's levels of spirituality with their gratitude and life satisfaction. For this reason, the study will focus on the following essential questions. (a) What are Turkish-Muslim children grateful for? (b) What is the relationship between gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction in children?

While numerous studies related to the association between gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction have been performed in the West, little research has been performed in particular on Muslim or Turkish populations or on children. Data obtained from these communities would contribute to understanding how gratitude works and to explaining whether it is an effective factor in Muslim and Turkish contexts.

As such, there is a need for research in this context to allow for a better understanding of the role that positive feelings play. Children's gratitude is discussed in the context of what they wrote about their daily experiences.

## Method

This research is based on the qualitative research approach using the case study model. Case studies are widely used in organizational studies across the social sciences (Kohlbacher, 2006). According to Starman (2013), a case study can be helpful when one is eager to answer the questions of how and why, when the behavior of those involved in a study cannot be influenced, and when it is desirable to cover contextual conditions.

### Study Group

Because the study method was designed as a qualitative case study research model, the study group was determined through convenience sampling. The convenience-sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used while defining the working group. The non-probability sampling technique was used, where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. In all forms of research, it would be best to test the whole population, but in most cases the population is just too great, making it impossible to include every person. This is why most researchers rely on sampling techniques like convenience sampling, the most common of all sampling techniques. It is frequently used by numerous survey researchers because of its low-cost and simplicity (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

The school was determined according to the easily accessible case-sampling method, a kind of intentional sampling method. There were two reasons for choosing this school. First, the selected school teaches children from lower and middle socio-economic levels and is located in a developing neighborhood in Istanbul. Second, the researcher worked as a teacher at the school at the same time. This was done in consideration of regularly keeping the gratitude diaries. Seventy volunteer children in the 5th grade were determined for the study. Children needed to write continuously for 21 days, and volunteering was an important criterion for including children in the sampling. In accordance with this method, the sample group of children who would describe what they were grateful for consisted of 33 boys and 37 girls ( $N = 70$ ) from a middle school. Approximately half of the respondents were female and half were male. Their ages ranged from 11-12 years old, with a mean age of 11 years and 5 months ( $SD = .25$ ).

### Data Collection Tool

A gratitude journal is a diary of things for which one is grateful. Gratitude journals are used by individuals who wish to focus their attention on the positive things in their lives. Gratitude has been examined in various ways by researchers, but this method was first used by McCullough and Emmons (2002). They revealed that gratitude diaries are a more helpful focus for illustrating the emotional experience of gratitude.



These journals were used as the source of the data in the research. These diaries were written by volunteer children from randomly assigned classes. Children regularly wrote a diary of things for which they were grateful over a period of three weeks. Children who recorded journals each wrote daily five things they were grateful for. Some children listed five things; others wrote as a story. They were excited about it. As the children's mother tongue is Turkish, diaries were written in Turkish. These diaries were then translated into English by the author for this article.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data for the study was collected by the researcher in 2012 in Istanbul. Prior to the start of the study, official permission was received from the school principal. Simultaneously, written consent was obtained from each child's legal guardian for the research. After that, the aim of the study was explained to the children and they were asked to voluntarily keep a gratitude diary. The process of writing the gratitude diary took three weeks for the participants. During this period, weekly basis checks were made by the researcher to ensure the diaries were kept regularly. Initially, the sample of the study included 158 students in 5th grade. Later, 63 children who could not submit their diaries and 25 children who could not complete the three weeks were excluded from the study.

After 21 days, they were asked to write comments related to this process at the end of their diaries. The gratitude diaries were received for examination. At the same time, the children drew pictures of things for which they were grateful, despite not having been instructed to do so. These pictures can be seen as a distinct indicator reflecting the inner world related to their gratitude and happiness. Moreover, drawings can provide valuable data about how children see cases and phenomena. Therefore, this article has also included these pictures.

### **Data Analysis**

The content of children's gratitude journals was analyzed to discover the most prominent themes of children's gratitude, as well as differences in the themes. In this research, content analysis was used in analyzing the gratitude diary. Categories obtained from research data are required to be suited to the purpose, homogeneous, distinctive, objective, meaningful, and complete (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

*Counting one's blessing* is an intervention in positive psychology related to gratitude. Gratitude diaries were constituted in this way. Therefore, for the assessment of research findings, frequency analysis was used for content analysis. Frequency analysis quantitatively (as a percentage and proportion) reveals the prevalence of the item (Berg & Lune, 2015). This type of analysis provides an understanding of the

importance and intensity of a particular item. Frequency analysis can insert elements in order of importance, and a classification can be made based on frequency.

In order to code the data obtained from the gratitude diaries in the study, words, sentences, and paragraphs were considered, and conceptualizations were made. Codes that shared similarities were gathered, leading to the making of a thematic coding system and formation of a draft of themes. Data obtained were gathered under themes.

Data were coded by another academician who had performed related studies and is an expert on qualitative research. To increase the reliability and validity of the findings, a comparison of similar research-data analyses from the literature were carried out by two academics, one of whom is a psychologist. First, the two authors sampled the gratitude diaries and identified commonly occurring themes in order to derive coding categories. This procedure continued until new themes stopped emerging. Finally, themes that were determined to be similar to one another were merged, and effort was made to examine scattered data as a meaningful whole. To provide reliability and validity of the findings, references from the children's views were frequently shown. As the research findings were presented, the names of the children who participated in the research were changed. The children's drawings from their journals were also used in this research. Findings were tested, connecting theories for compatibility. To ensure reliability of the research, gratitude diaries have been archived.

## Findings

The codes were classified under 14 themes (e.g., basic needs, family, and school success/teachers/school) based on compatibility. A total of 1,535 codes were counted.

Table 1

*Overall Prevalence of Gratitude Themes and Codes*

<i>Gratitude Themes</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Gratitude Themes</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>%</i>
1. Basic Needs	288	18	8- Social Activities/Fun/Vacation/Play	91	5.9
2. Family	232	15	9- Friends/Social Environment	57	3.9
3. Life Satisfaction/Happiness	225	14.6	10- Love of Nature/Animals/World	47	3.6
4. School Success/Teachers/School	170	11	11- Money	44	3.2
5. Being Muslim/Holy Book/Prophet	107	7	12- Personal Abilities	36	2.3
6- Being Healthy	103	6.7	13- Gratitude Diary	17	1.1
7- Having Belongings	102	6.7	14- Love of Country/Peace	16	1.1
	<i>Total</i>			1535	100

The study's findings were handled under the following themes. According to Table 1, the four most frequent themes of children's gratitude were *basic needs*, *family*, *life-satisfaction/happiness*, and *school-success/teachers/school*. In particular, life satisfaction (14.6%) was mentioned in approximately a quarter of the accounts, and school success/teachers/school (11%) and being Muslim/Holy Book/Prophet appeared in almost 7% of the accounts.



According to the data in Table 1, being healthy, having personal belongings for daily life (e.g., computer, bicycle, mobile phone), taking part in social activities/vacation (e.g., theater, sports), friends/social environment (e.g., neighbors, plumber), and love of nature/animals are in the middle of the list. Among the least-mentioned themes were love of country, personal abilities, and gratitude journals, interestingly.

As seen in Table 1, basic needs emerged as the most common theme in the children's accounts. Two-thirds of the children expressed gratitude for their basic needs at least once in their journal (18% = 288 codes). Basic needs refer to requirements vital to sustain daily life and include food, clothing, shelter, and protection from accidents and trouble. For example, in their gratitude diaries, children said:

I took a shower and prayed. I am grateful for having water to get clean, even just water, which is one of the greatest blessings in our lives... (Boy #23)

I am grateful for not being hungry. (Girl #17)

I am grateful for having a place to live, even if we don't own it. (Boy #6)

The second-most frequently mentioned theme (15% = 232 codes) is family. In children's diaries they were grateful for their families, as they provide care, nutrition, sanitation, and housing, and they sacrifice to deliver them their basic needs, such as sense of confidence and pure love. For example, in the gratitude diaries:

Today I'm grateful for having a mother who got up at 5 a.m. to prepare my meal for school. (Girl #3)

Today I thanked God for my brother having kissable cheeks. (Girl #52)

Although my brother does not speak yet I know he loves me (because he laughs at me more than anybody else) and I am thankful for that. (Girl #44)

In content analysis, although children did not use the term *life satisfaction* directly (14.5% = 225 codes), they expressed joy of life and happiness in their diaries many times; for example, starting a new day, breathing again, waking up, and more. This is not a coincidence. Being thankful is linked with life satisfaction. For instance, in their gratitude diaries they said:

I'm grateful for opening my eyes and being able to say, "Good morning." (Girl #67)

I'm grateful for being able to laugh. (Boy #46)

I'm thankful to God for having inner peace. (Boy #58)

Accordingly, the most frequently mentioned themes collectively totaling 47.6% (the codes related to basic needs, family, and life satisfaction) were life-sustaining necessities, families that provide these necessities, and joy at life. For example, one child allows us to see clearly the natural connection between these three themes by using them in a sentence in her gratitude diary.

I thank you that I can talk and laugh with my family when I get up out of my bed in the morning. In short, I thank you that I can live, breathe, and see my family today. (Girl #13)

The fourth theme in the children's gratitude diaries is the theme of *School Success/Teacher/School* (11% = 170 codes), as they are school-aged children. Sense of accomplishment is an important feeling that makes them happy and is both an individual and social force and motivation in their lives.

I'm thankful for school. (Girl #29)

I'm thankful for my teachers because they give me a great education. (Boy #33)

I'm thankful that I got a good grade on my science exam. (Girl #69)

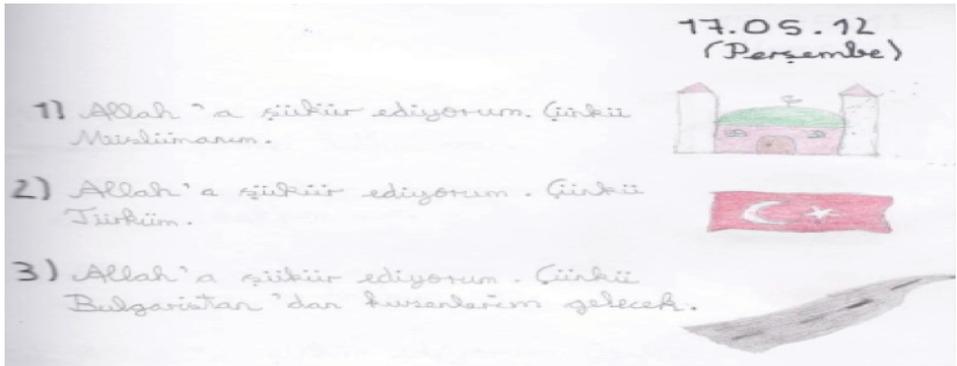


Figure 1. A picture taken from the diary of a child (Boy #42).

When examining the gratitude diaries, religion and religious experiences could be seen to have a significant impact on children of this age. Their religious and spiritual experiences in society, and their families most importantly, together with their personal relationship with God, all fall under the heading *Being Muslim/Holy Book/Prophet* (6.9% = 107 codes). This is the fifth gratitude theme in the diaries. In this theme, one can see being present at religious rituals and days, such as going to the mosque, knowing the Prophet, and reading the Holy Book.

I'm grateful that I can read the holy Qur'an... (Boy #18)

God, I thank you for letting us hear the sound of the Athan. (Girl #11)

I'm grateful that my prophet is Muhammad. (Girl #52)

Children also emphasized *Physical and Mental Health* (6.7% = 103 codes). Particularly, they gave space to having a sound body and healthy mind in their gratitude diaries. In this theme, children are thankful that they are not sick and that they are healthy.

Today I was thankful because I'm healthy and not disabled. (Girl #59)

I am grateful to be able to see, hear, and talk. (Girl #3)

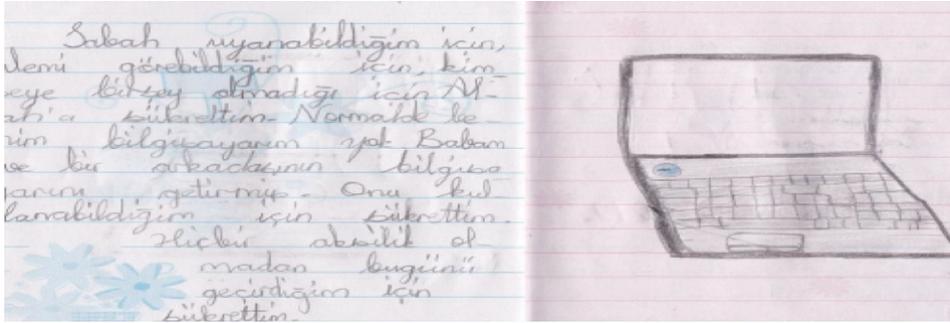


Figure 2. A picture taken from the diary of a child (Girl #59). "I thank God because I have a computer."

As a gratitude theme, children also mentioned *Personal Belongings* (6.7% = 102 codes) used in daily life (e.g., computer and bicycle). Children are happy and thankful for being able to enjoy their material belongings.

I'm grateful for my computer and for gaining two levels in my computer game today.  
(Boy #9)

I'm grateful because I have a pen to write. (Girl #35)

*Social Activities/Fun/Vacation/Play* (5.9% = 91 codes) is a gratitude theme involving happiness and enjoyment of having their own time and spending time with their families. In this theme, one can see social activities both in and out of school (folklore, dance, and courses), as well as on vacation and at play (games, football, etc).

I'm grateful for going on a picnic with the whole family. (Girl #13)

I'm grateful because I went to a basketball course. (Boy #46)

In children's gratitude diaries, *Friends/Social Environment* (3.7% = 57 codes) is a theme in which they are aware that people apart from their family contribute to their life. Children understand that they are not only individuals, but also social beings.

A friend of mine gave me a book. I'm grateful that I have a place in my friend's heart.  
(Girl #3)

I'm thankful that we have neighbors and people to whom we can go in hard times. (Boy #70)

Although *Love of Nature/Animals/World* (3.06% = 47 codes) occurred little as a theme in the gratitude diaries, one can see that children are thankful for the universe, the world, other creatures, the sun, and the moon.

I'm grateful that I see the sun. (Girl #66)

I'm grateful for the spring, as trees bloom and birds sing out. (Boy #30)

Thank you God for giving us pepper and the lemon with vitamin C... (Boy #61)

*Money* (2.08% = 44 codes) is also seen in the themes from children's gratitude diaries, indicating that they are thankful for having money.

I'm grateful because I have money enough to buy ice cream. (Girl #29)

I thank God my family's income is good... (Girl #48)

Although the theme *Personal Abilities* (2.3% = 36 codes) occurred infrequently in the gratitude diaries, it includes children's perception of self and self-confidence, which can be defined as their potential, abilities, and skills.

I'm grateful that I can break eggs on my own. (Girl #2)

I'm grateful because I know the meaning of gratitude... (Girl #10)

One of the most enjoyable themes is the *Gratitude Diary* (1.1% = 17 codes) itself. This finding shows that gratitude psychology has a positive contribution on people and not only teaches kindness but also contributes toward making it a more permanent part of their lives. Children are thankful for being able to be thankful. For example, in the gratitude diary:

My gratitude diary helped me to get into the habit of being grateful. Thank God that I have been grateful for 20 days, and I will continue to be so. (Boy #4)

*Love of Country/Peace* (1.1% = 17 codes) ranks at the bottom of theme in children's gratitude diaries, as they gave less space to such general and social issues.

I'm grateful that war does not break out in my country... (Boy #19)

I'm grateful because my country is very nice. (Girl #36)

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research is the first study known to examine the properties of gratitude in terms of implementation on children. Also, it is the first research in terms of gratitude diaries used in Turkey. Children's gratitude diaries allowed for an objective examination of gratitude in children and provided an opportunity to inspect the different variables potentially influencing children's conceptions of gratitude. This study demonstrated that children's gratitude diaries are primary sources for understanding their inner world. The themes expressed in gratitude diaries reflect the things which are precious to them. According to the results of the study, the most frequently occurring themes in the children's accounts were their basic needs (e.g. food, clothes, shelter); family

members; their school, teachers and friends; being alive (e.g. happiness, peace, waking up to a good day); being Muslim (e.g. being present at religious rituals and holidays, going to mosques, knowing the Prophet, reading the Holy Book); and being healthy (e.g., having hands, eyes, feet, and not being disabled or suffering from any disorders or illnesses). Likewise, the results of this study indicate that children are mostly grateful for their family, friends, and basic needs (see Table 1).



Figure 3. A picture taken from the diary of a child (Girl #5). "I am grateful to God that my mother and father loves each other."

Children's gratitude diaries provide evidence for their gratitude. It is not surprising that family members and basic needs constituted the most dominant objects of children's gratitude. They provide for children's growth and safety, teaching all sorts of things. At the most basic level, parents ensure children's survival by providing attachment, food, drinks, and safety (Buss, 2004). The consistency of these themes over the years provides evidence for their very important function in children's continued existence and well-being in both peaceful and uncertain times. Gratitude journals included such entries as:

My grandma is in good health. My family is still together. My family still loves each other. (Girl #40)

My brothers are healthy and we have fun every day. (Boy #67)

There is a pro-social aspect to gratitude. Also, there is a characteristic, emotionally reflective aspect of gratitude. It is earned thanks to the good intentions of another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Grant & Gino, 2010; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Friends and teachers/school are important to children, as well (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Children are grateful if they are aware of and

thankful for the good things that happen to them, and if they express thanks to those responsible (e.g., mother, father, friends, teacher; [Emmons & McCullough, 2004](#)). When considering children were the ones keeping the gratitude diaries, at this point in their lives, their values, habits, and social behavior are affected mostly by their school and family lives. When looking at the themes in the gratitude diaries associated with school life (personal abilities, school success/teacher/school, friends/social environment, social activities/fun/vacation/play), we see that these fields were considerably represented, making up 23% of the total responses. Therefore, the gratitude diaries show that school life has an important effect on children.

Children might be expected to always keep kindness in mind because everything they have has come from the care and protection of others. However, that global issues like war and peace occupy only a small place in the gratitude diaries is interesting. In the period in which the gratitude diaries were written, it should be noted that their country, Turkey, was not under the threat of war; this likely contributed to the low occurrence of war as a topic in their diaries. However, ignoring war and peace in a globalized world dominated by high speed communication is difficult. This result shows that children of this particular age group are far removed from social issues.

Gratitude as a moral value is often linked to spirituality and religion ([McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001](#)). The link of gratitude to spirituality and religion is one of the major themes of spirituality and religious thought ([Emmons & Crumpler, 2000](#)). For example, according to the results, gratitude was typically seen as a religious concept, and considering it in connection to spirituality and religion is important for Turkish-Muslim children. As a result of the study, gratitude was found to have a strong relation with the spiritual and religious orientations of children. For example, in their gratitude diaries they say:

The gratitude diary has given me many things. For example, I felt that I was getting closer to God. (Girl #53)

This diary showed me that being grateful every day is very nice. I understood that giving thanks to God is one of the most beautiful ways of communicating with God. (Boy #7)



Figure 4. A picture taken from the diary of a child. (Boy #46).

While writing this diary, I realized that God loves me very much because I thought and realized that God has given us very many blessings. I love God veeerrry much... (Boy #1)

God has given us so many blessings. When I wrote in this diary every day, I realized what a beautiful thing gratitude is. While reading and writing this book, I felt close to God. (Girl #20)

The significant relationship of gratitude with religion and spirituality in this research is consistent with previous research (McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Adler and Fagley (2005) not only found culturally specific features to gratitude, but also argued that it has multiple dimensions. In other words, the research carried out across different cultural and religious contexts reveals that these contexts do have an effect on gratitude.

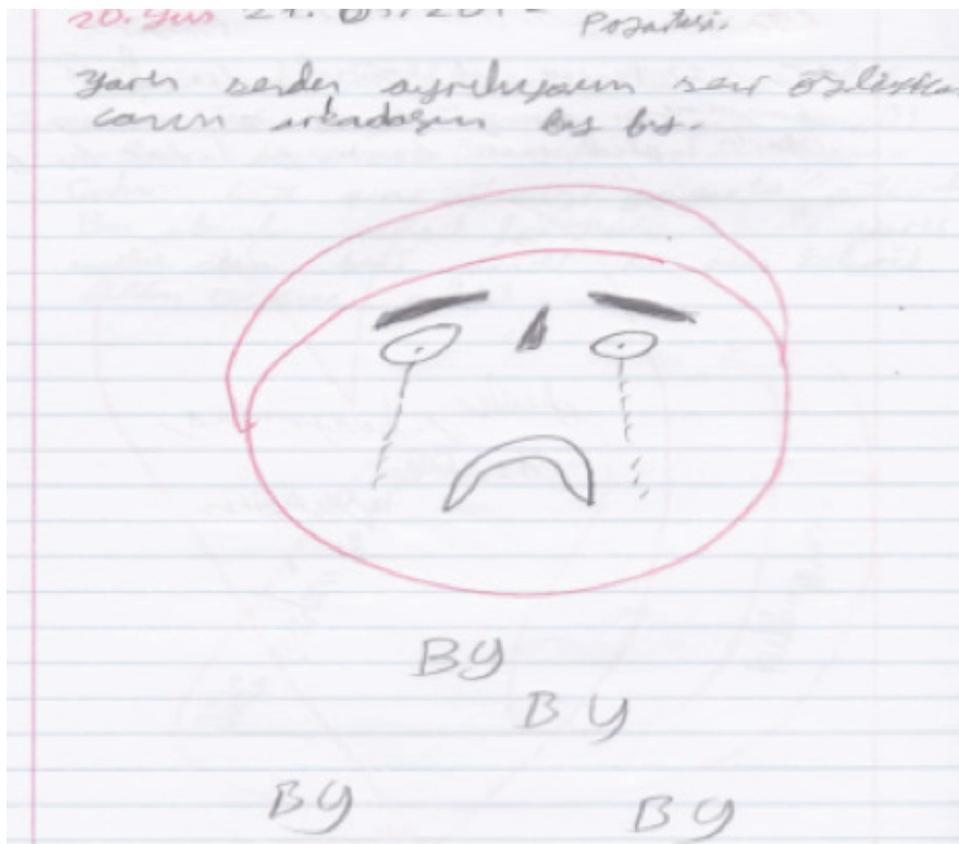


Figure 5. A picture taken from the diary of a child (Boy #46).

Having children write for 20 days about the many things in their daily lives for which they are thankful forced them to focus on the positive things in their lives and increase their awareness of the things for which they are grateful. This awareness reflected their overall life satisfaction. The following sentences in the children's gratitude diaries confirm this situation:

Since I began writing this diary, I feel happy. I have gotten to know myself and what I have... (Boy #24)

I'm grateful for getting into the habit of being thankful. (Boy #26)

I loved my gratitude diary very much; I opened my heart to this diary as a friend. Bye bye my gratitude diary. (Boy, 46)

The findings indicate that children's life satisfaction increased due to the diaries they kept. Like previous research, the results of this study also showed that gratitude is connected with life satisfaction (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; McCullough et al., 2002; Watkins, 2004). Gratitude is one of the most fundamental



and complex virtues. Therefore, gratitude is associated with a variety of positive psychological outcomes. Counting blessings was related to more gratitude, optimism, and life satisfaction (Watkins, Uher, & Pichinevskiy, 2015). Like other positive aspects of human behavior, cognition and feelings of gratitude might be impacted by negative life events. While children's lives are not always perfect, the persistent acknowledgment of what is working in their lives can help them not only survive, but also overcome their difficulties.

The findings of previous studies reveal that gratitude can better children's well-being (e.g., Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; Froh et al., 2009; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Being positive was found to be related with familial social support, hopefulness, and providing emotional support, as well as satisfaction with school, family, friends, and well-being. On the other hand, gratitude was found quite clearly to negatively relate with physical symptoms (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009).

In conclusion, gratitude is associated with spirituality and life satisfaction. However, this study has shown that the relationships among gratitude, spirituality, and life satisfaction are partly shaped through culture. Cross-cultural data would be valuable for assessing the universality of these themes in children's reports of gratitude. Hopefully, future studies will address these areas and improve the field's understanding of the role of positive emotions, behavior, and attitudes such as gratitude, happiness, spirituality, and health.

### **Limitations and Directions Future Research**

Of course, there are a few limitations to this study as well. One of these limitations is the sample of school-aged children, which restricts generalizability of the findings to more diverse populations. Another limitation is the small sample size. Future research can be carried out with larger sample sizes, on more diverse age groups, and on more varied sample groups. Also, the understanding of gratitude this study contributes to is limited to Muslim children living in Turkey. Because there may be a great diversity of denominations or cultures within the same religion (for example Arab, Persian, or African Muslims), this study's findings related to religion may well not hold across all groups.

Another limitation is children's comprehension ability. According to Froh et al. (2011), inconsistent findings for 10- to 13-year-olds may be due to developmental differences. This is because gratitude likely emerges between the ages of 7-10 (Emmons & Shelton, 2002); it is also possible that gratitude has developed but not stabilized in children of this age group. Thus, another recommendation of this study

is that more research is needed to examine how different age groups experience gratitude. In addition, coders of each frequency in this study noted the presence or absence of each theme by counting. However, aside from these frequencies, different frequency types and different themes can be considered in future studies.

For subsequent research, recommendations and additional directions can be suggested, particularly for researchers interested in studying gratitude in children. First, it would be interesting to examine whether children's gratitude for religious and spiritual themes remains stable across time. Second, cross-sectional or longitudinal studies also can and should be conducted to further validate the contents and nature of children's gratitude. Furthermore, the relation of children's gratitude with outcomes of interest, such as psychological well-being, materialistic attitudes, narcissism, and many other issues should be further explored. This study did not measure psychological adjustment or coping, but these may well be fruitful areas for future research.

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