

Gratitude, Gratitude Intervention and Well-being in Malaysia

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Gratitude has generally been neglected by psychologists due to the emphasis on the medical model. A dearth of research on gratitude in Malaysia was the main impetus for these studies. Study 1 compared the gratitude scores Malaysian Malays against the US, UK, China and Japan, along an individualist-collective continuum, and results showed Malays had lower gratitude scores than the others, except for the Japanese. To increase their gratitude scores, Study 2 carried out an intervention using ‘the three good things’ exercise on 59 students over a period of 14 days. The intervention increased gratitude and life satisfaction as well as reduced distress. Furthermore, a hierarchical regression examining the effect of gratitude on well-being controlling for measures of affect and religiosity at Time 1, showed that Time-2 gratitude was only predictive of Time-2 distress. The results are discussed with respect to the collectivist culture of the Malays where negative aspects of the self are valued as a form of self-criticism to help one to constantly improve oneself. Two main implications are noted: that there are cross-cultural differences in the way gratitude is understood and expressed in the Malay culture, and that engaging in positive activity may sometimes be counterproductive to well-being.

Keywords: gratitude, three good things exercise, individualist and collective cultures, life satisfaction, distress

Emmons (2004) defines gratitude as “...an emotion, the core of which is pleasant feelings about the benefit received...gratitude is other-directed—its objects include persons, as well as non-human intentional agents (Gods, animals, the cosmos...)...” (p. 5). In other words, gratitude is an interpersonal exchange between people and other non-human intentional agents resulting in a positive feeling in the recipient. There are, however, other definitions. Solomon (2004) considered gratitude as seeing the bigger picture. In this view, being grateful is being aware of one’s life, rather than being grateful toward an individual or God. Sansone and Sansone (2010) suggest that gratitude is an expression of appreciation to the things that are considered meaningful to oneself. Still others, offer other definitions (Cohen, 2006; Naito & Washizo, 2015). Thus, an agreed-upon definition is lacking, but studies in general have indicated that gratitude is beneficial.

Gratitude has generally been neglected by psychologists in the past. One reason for the neglect can be attributed to the general focus on the medical or psychopathological model and a general disregard for research on positive emotions and well-being (Linley et al., 2006). With the advent of positive psychology as a field that emphasizes on elevating one’s well-being through the development of human strengths, gratitude has been shown to be a desirable trait or characteristic with a capacity to make life better for oneself and for others.

Due a dearth of research on gratitude in Malaysia, we carried out two studies. Study 1 compares gratitude scores of Malaysian students with those from known collectivist (China and Japan) and individualist societies (UK and US). In doing so, the present study provides the much-needed data on gratitude in Malaysia along an individualist-collectivist continuum. Most studies on gratitude have been carried out in the West and the Far East, with results indicating

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that the former has higher levels of gratitude than the latter due to some cultural nuances within their respective societies. Malaysia, situated in Southeast Asia, stands at a juncture along this individualist-collectivist continuum with some indications showing that Malaysians have low levels of gratitude, similar to scores of collective societies (e.g., Naito & Washizu, 2015; Yee & Walet, 2013). In addition, if Malaysian's gratitude scores are low, can they be increased?

Thus, Study 2 examines a gratitude intervention—the three good things exercise (see Seligman et al., 2005), carried out over 14 days on a sample of 59 students to ascertain the extent to which gratitude can be increased. Study 2 also examines the effects of this gratitude intervention on two measures of well-being, life satisfaction and symptoms of psychological distress. In doing so, we extend research on gratitude intervention studies to examine its impact in a different socio-cultural context. If the findings are affirmed, then gratitude interventions are generalizable, and they should be recommended as they have been shown to decrease depression and increase social functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman et al., 2005).

Gratitude and Well-being

Research (e.g., Tsang et al., 2014) has shown that gratitude is correlated with various dimensions of well-being such as decreased depression (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 2003; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012), increased positive life appraisals (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003), positive affect (e.g., Froh et al., 2009), perceived meaning in life (e.g., Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009), religiosity and spirituality (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Lambert et al., 2009) as well as life satisfaction (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). Thus, in general, gratitude seems to be beneficial for health and well-being.

Emmons (2012) has suggested five ways on how gratitude positively affects well-being. First, gratitude increases spiritual awareness. For those who are more religious or spiritual, by acknowledging that all good emanates from God or a higher power, being grateful and showing gratitude to others are perceived as desirable traits. Second, gratitude promotes physical health by reducing bodily complaints, increasing sleep quality, and promoting exercise. Third, gratitude maximizes pleasure by promoting the savoring of positive life experiences. Fourth, gratitude mitigates against the negative where grateful people are more likely to be satisfied with what they have and less prone to negative emotions like regret, envy or resentment. Finally, gratitude strengthens and expands social relationships, enhancing interconnectedness and fulfilling people's need for belongingness. In other words, gratitude has direct effects on well-being, as in the first three pathways. In the latter two, the effects of gratitude is indirect, acting as either a moderator or a mediator in the stress-strain relationship.

Gratitude in Non-Western Societies

Religious traditions have long emphasized the importance of being grateful in life (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). In these traditions, gratitude is central to the human-divine link, where believers have sought to express gratitude and thanks to God as the Supreme Being and the Ultimate Giver. For example, being grateful and showing gratitude to God are mentioned in the Torah, the Bible and the Quran (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Solomon, 2004). Gratitude is also an important concept in Buddhism as well as Hinduism (Appadurai, 1985; Naito et al. 2010). These traditions suggest that the dynamic relation between giving and receiving can also be transcendent and to some extent, universal. Being grateful to God also implies that one is

obligated to show gratitude to others, based on the understanding that humans and other beings in the cosmos are interdependent. This universal hypothesis of gratitude across cultures has been supported by the few studies carried out in non-Western societies; for example, in Taiwan (Chen & Kee, 2008), Hong Kong (Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2014), and Japan (Naito & Sakata, 2010). In general, the results have supported the findings in Western societies, showing that gratitude has a positive relation with prosocial behaviors, positive aspects of personality, and well-being. But, these studies have also indicated that there may be some cross-cultural differences in the understanding of gratitude, which include the extent to which the community is collectivist or individualist as well as how gratitude is understood and conceptualized, expressed, and associated with other feelings and emotions, like indebtedness. In other words, nuances within the socio-cultural contexts of the society are important. For example, Asian Americans have been found to seek less social support than European Americans because living in a more collectivist culture entails a stronger orientation for social harmony and members avoid directly asking for help from others (Kim et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2004).

Studies on Japanese people have suggested that there are also cultural differences in feelings that are experienced when receiving a favor. Japanese people have been shown to avoid receiving favors because to them, gratitude implies both thankfulness and indebtedness simultaneously (Naito & Sakata, 2010). The researchers found that thankfulness in receiving favors was related to enhancement of prosocial motivation, but indebtedness was related to more obligation to help others and this lowered participants' scores on well-being.

Moreover, a cross-cultural study (Hitokoto, Niiya & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2008) on indebtedness between university students from Japan and the US reported that indebtedness had a stronger relationship with cost to the benefactors among Japanese than US students. The results suggested that compared to other societies, Japanese people were thankful for the help rendered by a person but at the same time felt guilty for creating a problem to the person, intermingled with feelings of indebtedness. The authors attributed the findings to Confucian ethics and Buddhism prevalent in East Asian cultures that place indebtedness close to gratitude. These results seem to imply that gratitude may be lower in collectivist, compared to individualist cultures.

In Malaysia, there is a dearth of research on gratitude. The only study by Yee and Walet (2013) on gratitude and materialism in Asia comparing Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia had a number of methodological problems, including small sample sizes, large age range of participants, and other sampling issues (e.g., no mention was made of the make-up of the ethnic groups in the different samples, their cultural heritage, etc.). However, the results seemed to suggest that Malaysians had low gratitude scores compared to the other nationalities, which the authors attributed to their unhealthy and stressful lifestyles, without further elaboration.

Thus, the present research was carried out to fill this scarcity of research on gratitude by comparing the gratitude scores of Malaysians with those from known collectivist (China, Japan) and individualist cultures (UK and US). Though Malaysia stands at a crossroads along this individualist-collectivist continuum, based on the limited findings indicated thus far, we hypothesized that the culture would be more similar to the collective cultures of China and Japan rather than the UK and US.

Gratitude Intervention

Among the positive psychology interventions to increase well-being, gratitude intervention has shown the largest effect in enhancing well-being (Froh et al., 2009). There are many ways to express gratitude. However, gratitude listings has become one of the most well-known method used in inducing gratefulness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Rash, Matsuba & Prkachin, 2011; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008).

This gratitude intervention has been carried out in several target groups, including college/university students (Emmons & McCullough (2003), adults (Gander et al. 2013; Seligman et al., 2005), elderly (Ramirez et al., 2014; Killen & Macaskill, 2015) as well as children and adolescents (Froh et al., 2009). These gratitude interventions have been shown to enhance happiness and decrease participants' depressive symptoms, suggesting the beneficial effect of the interventions.

The “three good things” exercise is the most frequently utilized gratitude listings intervention reported by past studies. The exercise is simple and can easily be integrated into the daily schedule of individuals. It involves asking individuals to write down three things that happen to them each day and their causes every night before they go to sleep for one to two weeks (Gander et al. 2013; Seligman et al., 2005). The intervention works by arousing gratitude in individuals when they are asked to focus on the positive events and their causes. As such, in the present study, we used this intervention to examine the extent to which gratitude can be increased. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that the intervention would be beneficial in increasing life satisfaction and in decreasing symptoms of distress (e.g., Chan, 2010; Seligman et al., 2005; Toepfer & Walker, 2009).

To recap, because of the dearth of studies examining gratitude among Malaysians coupled with a tendency for Malaysians to report low levels of gratitude, in Study 1, we compared gratitude scores of Malaysian university students with those from known collectivist and individualistic societies. In Study 2, we used “the three good things exercise” over a period of 14 days to examine the extent to which gratitude can be increased. Study 2 also examined the effects of this gratitude intervention on two measures of well-being, life satisfaction and symptoms of distress.

I. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 was to compare gratitude scores of Malaysians with those from known collectivist (China and Japan) and individualistic cultures (UK and US). We hypothesized that Malaysians' gratitude scores would tend to lie between these two continua.

Method

Participants

The Malaysian sample consisted only of Malaysian Malays, the main ethnic group in the country. Malaysia is a multicultural and multi-religious country comprised of three main ethnic groups: 54.7% Malay, 23.2% Chinese, 7.0% Indian, 14.1% indigenous groups, and 1.0% others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016-2017). The reason for selecting only the Malay

group rather than a Malaysian sample consisting of all the groups was because the different groups professed different cultures and religions which may confound the results obtained. This was also done to prevent confounding between the scores of the Malaysian Chinese with those from China.

The sample was made up of undergraduate students from the various disciplines within the Human Sciences faculty of the university. Participation was entirely voluntary, and data collection was carried out in the month of January 2017.

The gratitude scores for samples from China, Japan, UK and US were taken from the studies of Kong, Ding and Zhou (2015), Naito and Sakata (2010), Wood, Joseph and Maltby (2008), and Kashdan and Breen (2007), respectively. As in the Malaysian sample, all used undergraduate students. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics of the groups.

Measure

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6, McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002) was the measure of gratitude used in all the studies. The GQ-6 has six items scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1= “Strongly Disagree” to 7= “Strongly Agree.” Items 3 and 6 are negatively worded and these were reverse-scored before summing up the total score. Higher scores on the scale indicated higher levels of gratitude.

Table 1

Some demographic characteristics of the samples

	<i>N</i>	Gender		Age	
		Male	Female	Range	<i>Mean (SD)</i>
Malaysia	177	35	142	19-27	21.89 (1.50)
China*	427	159	267	18-27	21.01 (1.42)
Japan	164	0	164	NA	19.18 (2.02)
UK	87	12	75	18-30	NA
US	144	31	113	NA	23.78 (7.62)

Note: The information of the samples were taken the following studies; Chinese sample from Kong, Ding and Zhou (2015), Japanese sample from Naito and Sakata (2010), UK sample from Wood et al., (2008), and US sample from Kashdan and Breen (2007). One student did not indicate his/her gender; NA=Not available

Results

We first carried out an item analysis on the gratitude measure on the Malaysian Malay sample because a Taiwanese study (Chen et al., 2009) showed that a one-factor model with five items was a better fit than the original six items. Our item analysis results showed that item 6 was problematic, with very low mean compared to the other items and that it also had low item-total statistics (see Tables 2 and 3). Table 3 also showed that the internal reliability of the scale would be much higher if item 6 was deleted. Thus, similar to the Taiwanese study, item 6 was dropped from the gratitude measure. In the present study, the coefficient alpha value for this 5-item gratitude measure was 0.71. This 5-item scale was used as the measure of gratitude in subsequent analyses.

Table 2

Item statistics of the Malaysian Malay sample

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.	6.54	1.02
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.	6.34	1.23
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.	6.18	1.27
4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.	5.86	1.27
5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.	6.39	1.12
6. Long periods of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.	3.18	1.57

Table 3

Item-total statistics of the Malaysian Malay sample

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Squared Multiple Correlation	Cronbach Alpha if Item Deleted
1. I have so much in life to be thankful for.	27.94	12.45	.56	.55	.40
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.	28.14	11.58	.53	.60	.39
3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for.	28.31	14.45	.15	.03	.57
4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people.	28.62	12.83	.33	.26	.48
5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.	28.09	11.83	.57	.49	.38
6. Long periods of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone.	31.31	16.33	-.10	.03	.71

Table 4

Means, standard deviations and independent samples t-tests comparing Malaysian Malays with the other national groups on their gratitude scores

	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-tests</i>			
				1&2	1&3	1&4	1&5
1. Malay students (Malaysia)	177	31.31	4.04				
2. Chinese students (China)	427	33.02	5.27	-3.87**			
3. Japanese students (Japan)	164	31.10	4.87		.43		
4. US students (US)	144	36.68	5.13			-10.49**	
5. British students (UK)	87	35.13	4.40				-7.01**

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations of the five samples on their gratitude scores. The table shows that the US students had the highest gratitude mean, followed by the UK, Chinese, Malaysian Malay and Japanese samples. The mean gratitude scores of the Malaysian Malays were comparable to the Japanese students. The table also shows the results of the independent *t*-tests between these gratitude means. Significant mean differences were

observed between Malaysian Malay students with Chinese, $t(602)=-3.87, p<.01$), US, $t(319) = -10.49, p<.01$) and UK students $t(262) = -7.01, p<.01$), but not with Japanese students.

Discussion

We hypothesized that Malaysians' gratitude scores would be more similar to known collectivist (China and Japan) rather than individualist cultures (UK and US). The results, however, only partially supported the prediction. While the mean gratitude score of Malaysian Malays was lower than the US and the UK samples, it was also lower than the Chinese but similar to the Japanese. The t -test results showed significant differences between the mean of the Malaysian-Malays with the samples, except for the non-significant difference between the Malaysian-Malays and the Japanese. However, the results do indicate that the two individualist cultures had higher gratitude scores than the others.

We posit a possible explanation to the findings. The US and UK are highly individualistic societies, where the promotion of individual goals, initiatives and achievement are encouraged over group ones. The fact that people in these societies have been encouraged to develop an independent view of themselves—to be unique, expressive, and to realize their own thoughts, feelings, and capacities—could be the reason why their gratitude score is higher than in collectivist societies. In other words, this “independent self-construal” is in contrast to the “interdependent self-construal” that tend to see the self as more relational and contextual as found in most collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), Malaysian Malay culture included. Thus, when being grateful, people in individualist cultures are able to list more positive things that happened to them than those in collectivist cultures who must think in terms of maintaining harmony in their relationships with others (Kanagawa, Cross & Markus, 2001). Furthermore, the concurrence of gratitude and indebtedness in cultures that are more collective may also be a contributing factor in lowering the gratitude scores compared to cultures that are more individualist.

Our results showed that the mean gratitude score of the Chinese was significantly different from the Malaysian Malay and Japanese samples, despite all three being considered as collective cultures. Again, using the individualist-collectivist continuum, our findings showed that the Chinese scores lie in-between the US-UK and Japanese-Malaysian Malays. In other words, Chinese scores are leaning towards the individualistic spectrum. According to Kwon (2012), this should not come as a surprise considering China's fast pace economic development. This is further supported by Steele and Lynch (2013) who showed in their analysis that Chinese are prioritizing individualist factors in their assessments of their own happiness and life satisfaction, hence the increasing individualism in their society.

Furthermore, Zou and Cai (2016) documented China's rising individualism in names, songs and attitudes on work and leisure. Most notable was their data on attitudes toward work and leisure, drawn from the World Values Survey. As leisure time was found to be an important indicator of individualistic values, their analyses revealed that over time Chinese participants rated leisure time as increasingly important, while the importance of work has decreased. The results were compared to Japan and United States and the findings demonstrated that even though China and Japan are typically perceived as model collectivist cultures, there are differences in the emphasis over which domain is more important. But, more importantly, there is an increasing convergence between Chinese and American preferences in these two domains

of leisure time and work, which could explain for the higher gratitude scores of China compared to Malaysia and Japan.

II. Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to carry out a gratitude intervention to examine if gratitude can be increased using the three good things exercise. Study 2 also considered the effects of this gratitude intervention on well-being; a global cognitive judgement of satisfaction with one's life, and a measure of distress symptoms.

Method

Participants

Participants were 59 undergraduate students from a local university, the majority of who were females ($N=50$) and the rest males ($N=9$). Their age ranged from 22 to 29 years old ($M = 23.80$; $SD = 1.30$). Except for two students, all were in their final year of study. Participants received 5% bonus marks for their participation in the study, which was carried as a class assignment in March of 2017. The study was approved by the university's Research and Ethics Committee, and followed the Malaysian National Committee for Clinical Research Code of Ethics and Conducts (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2006).

Procedure

As part of a class assignment involving the first author, students were informed that they would be doing an experiment. They were asked to write down three good things that happened to them every night before they go to sleep for 14 days, and to ponder on why those things happened. No specific criteria were given to the students regarding the nature of the three 'things,' but it could be anything that meant something to them.

Measures

Gratitude. As in Study 1, the 5-item gratitude measure was used. The Cronbach alpha value for this study was 0.75.

Positive and negative affect. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) was used to measure affect. The measure consists of two 10-item scales describing different feelings and emotions. Participants were asked to rate each particular emotion on a 5-point Likert scale response (1= "Very slightly or not at all" to 5= "Extremely"), with higher scores indicating higher positive and negative affect. The Cronbach alpha values for the positive affect and negative affect scores were 0.84 and 0.82, respectively.

Religiosity. Religiosity was measured by the 10-item scale developed by Mohd Mahudin et al. (2016). The items were designed to measure religiosity among Muslims and were rated on a 4-point Likert response format (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating higher religiosity. Cronbach alpha coefficient in the present study was 0.76.

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was assessed by the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). The scale consists of 5 items that evaluate cognitive elements of subjective well-being. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale response (1= “Strongly disagree” to 7= “Strongly agree”), with higher scores indicating higher satisfaction with life. In the present study, the coefficient alpha value of the scale was 0.83.

Psychological Distress. The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) of Goldberg (1978) was used to measure symptoms of psychological distress. Items were scored using a 4-point Likert scale response, with higher scores indicating higher psychological distress. In the present study, Cronbach alpha for the scale was 0.86.

Demographic variables. Information on students’ age, gender and year of study was collected.

Data Analyses

To test if gratitude could be increased using the three good things exercise, we used a paired-samples *t*-test to examine the mean difference in gratitude scores before and after the exercise. We also used similar *t*-tests to see if there were differences in the measures of life satisfaction and distress symptoms before and after the gratitude exercise.

In addition, to examine the effects of this gratitude intervention on life satisfaction and symptoms of distress, we used a hierarchical regression analysis with controls for demographic variables, affect and religiosity. We controlled for affect before considering gratitude because the study by Froh et al. (2009) argued that not all people would benefit equally from gratitude interventions. According to them, people who are already high in positive affect may have reached an ‘emotional ceiling’ and, thus, would be less susceptible to experience further gains in their well-being. The reverse, however, would be observed for those lower in positive affect, who may need more positive events to ‘be at par’ with their peers. Their results supported these predictions; they found that youth low in positive affect at baseline reported greater gratitude and positive affect at post-test after the intervention. The study by Chan (2010) among school teachers in Hong Kong also showed that the effects of the gratitude intervention on life satisfaction and positive affect was more salient among those who initially scored low on their grateful disposition. In addition, we controlled for religiosity because all participants were Muslims, and social desirability would be high. Therefore, the regression analysis is more rigorous because it controlled for initial differences in the scores of these variables—*affect and religiosity*—before considering the effect of gratitude on well-being.

Of the three demographic variables, we only controlled for gender (males=9, females=50) because all the students were in their final year of study, with similar age. In the hierarchical regression analysis, gender hardly contributed to any variance in the well-being measures, thus, this variable was not included in the subsequent analyses. Students were informed of the nature of the exercise only after the second administration of the measures.

Therefore, in the present study, we carried out the analysis of the effect of gratitude on well-being by controlling for positive and negative emotions as well as religiosity at Time 1 before examining the effect of gratitude at Time 2 in the prediction of well-being at Time 2, using a hierarchical regression analysis.

Results

Table 5 shows the intercorrelations between the measures at Time 1 and Time 2. T1 gratitude was correlated only with T1 life satisfaction, $r=.34$, $p<.01$. T1 PANAS-positive and PANAS-negative were negatively correlated with one another ($r=-.43$, $p<.01$) as well as with both T1 life satisfaction ($r=.52$, $p<.01$ for PANAS-Positive and $r=-.60$, $p<.01$ for PANAS-Negative) and GHQ ($r=-.61$, $p<.01$ for PANAS-Positive and $r=.60$, $p<.01$ for PANAS-Negative). T2 gratitude was correlated only with T1 gratitude ($r=.64$, $p<.01$).

Table 5

Intercorrelations of the variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<i>Time 1</i>								
1. Gratitude								
2. PANAS-Positive	.17							
3. PANAS-Negative	-.13	-.43**						
4. Religiosity	.17	.50**	-.34**					
5. Life satisfaction	.34**	.52**	-.60**	.69**				
6. GHQ	-.23	-.61**	.60**	-.45**	-.53**			
<i>Time 2</i>								
7. Gratitude	.64**	.25	.06	.06	.06	-.26*		
8. Life satisfaction	.23	.43**	-.45**	.53**	.71**	-.49**	.20	
9. GHQ	-.18	-.18	.33*	-.05	-.15	.44**	-.25	-.12

Note: ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$

Results of the paired-samples t -tests in Table 6 show a significant increase in gratitude scores from Time 1 to Time 2, after the three good things exercise, $t(58)=2.31$, $p<.025$. The exercise also revealed a significant increase in the means of the life satisfaction scores [$t(58)=4.61$, $p<.0001$], and a decrease in GHQ scores [$t(58)=4.73$, $p<.0001$] from Time 1 to Time 2.

Table 6

Paired-samples t-tests of gratitude and well-being measures

	Time 1		Time 2		<i>t-tests</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Gratitude ($\alpha = .75$)	31.27	2.99	31.98	2.46	2.31	.025
Life satisfaction ($\alpha = .83$)	22.32	5.33	24.68	4.83	4.61	.0001
GHQ ($\alpha = .86$)	23.58	5.80	20.14	4.50	4.73	.0001

To examine the effect of gratitude on well-being, the hierarchical regression analyses in Table 7 is referred to. This analysis predicting well-being at Time 2 showed that at Step 1 of the equation, only T1 PANAS Negative predicted distress symptoms. At Step 2, T2 gratitude was negatively and significantly predictive of T2 distress (Table 7, right-hand side). This final model was significant, $F(4,54)=3.17$, $p<.02$, accounting for 19.0% of the variance in distress symptoms.

In contrast, T2 gratitude was not related to T2 life satisfaction after T1 religiosity and the two PANAS measures were taken into account (Table 7, left-hand side). Only PANAS-

Negative and religiosity measures at Time 1 were predictive of life satisfaction at Time 2. This model was significant, $F(3,55)=11.06$, $p<.0001$, explaining for 37.6% of the variance in life satisfaction.

Table 7

Prediction of Time 2 well-being from Time 1 PANAS and Time 2 gratitude

	Life satisfaction				Distress symptoms			
	ΔR^2	B	SE B	Beta	ΔR^2	B	SE B	Beta
Step 1	.376***				.120			
Time I PANAS-Positive		.103	.102	.131		-.075	.113	.000
Time I PANAS-Negative		-.182*	.081	-.270*		.205*	.089	.379**
Time 1 Religiosity		.533**	.179	.373**		.152	.198	.097
Step 2					.070*			
Time 2 Gratitude						-.510*	.236	-.279*
Cumulative R^2	.376				.190			

Note: Beta values are the standardized regression coefficients from the final stage of the regression analysis. *** $p<.0001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$.

Discussion

The three good things exercise, carried out over 14 days, increases not only gratitude but also life satisfaction. At the same time, the exercise also decreases symptoms of psychological distress. This is consistent with many past studies which showed that being appreciative and thankful increases life satisfaction and decreases symptoms of distress, (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Rash, Matsuba, & Prkachin, 2011; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008).

Though the results (see Table 6) indicated an increase in gratitude scores from Time 1 to Time 2 after the three good things exercise which was statistically significant, the actual gratitude scores did not seem to have changed much (means of 31.27 and 31.98 for Times 1 and 2, respectively). It is precisely for this reason that in the hierarchical regression analyses we controlled for affect before considering the effect of gratitude on well-being because baseline affective states has been found to differ among people (Froh et al., 2009). After all, a person who is already relatively high in positive affect may not have much room for improvement; conversely, a person experiencing too much distress may experience limited improvement in well-being—suggesting that baseline affective state may be a confound (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Indeed, after controlling for Time 1 positive and negative affect as well as religiosity, T2 gratitude was only predictive of T2 distress symptoms; higher gratitude scores were related with lower symptoms of distress. Thus, past studies that have documented positive associations between gratitude and positive well-being outcomes such as life satisfaction could have been confounded by the presence of affect.

General Discussion

We carried out two studies on gratitude in the Malaysian context. The first was aimed at providing information on the gratitude scores of Malaysian Malays by comparing their scores

with more established studies from the West and the Far East, along a collectivist-individualist continuum. Results showed that the gratitude scores of Malaysian Malays were similar to the Japanese, but lower than the scores of the Chinese, UK and US students. The second study was aimed to increase the levels of gratitude in another sample of Malaysian Malays using the three good things exercise, carried out over 14 days.

The results revealed that the intervention was generally beneficial, and gratitude scores increased over time. However, when positive and negative emotions as well as religiosity were controlled at baseline, gratitude was found to be negatively related only with symptoms of distress, but not with life satisfaction. Why? One plausible explanation is due to cross-cultural differences in how gratitude is understood within the Malay culture, in line with more recent cross-cultural work that suggests intervention effects to differ based on participants' culture (e.g., Layous et al., 2013; Fritz & Lyubomirsky, 2018). Within a collectivist society that is defined by interdependence between its members with the goal of maintaining harmony in one's relationships, a Malay is socialized to be attentive to negative information about oneself as a way to improve oneself to meet the expectations of a situation or a relationship as well as to fulfil one's proper place. Put another way, negative aspects of the self are valued within the Malay culture as a form of self-criticism. Indeed, when describing oneself, Malay tend to incline more on the negative—never promoting oneself but to show deference and humility. Thus, it is not surprising that the three good things exercise (or gratitude activity) is related only to distress in this sample.

The Malaysian Malay culture is a high-context culture. Here, communication or message is considered to be already "...in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message..." (Hall, 1998). Thus, in these high-context societies, communication entails emotions and close relationships which is indirect. In these societies, making an outright request is deemed impolite. Malaysian Malays for example, would talk around what they intend to convey in the hope that their message is understood by others. When a Malay receives something good, he does not say "thank you" because the culture rely on inferred understandings of his social rights and duties to mutual assistance and collaboration. This is so because people are not just motivated to help or 'do favours' for others, but they have been socialized to participate in shared activities that involve expected obligations, and to fulfil the commitments implied by these social roles. Put another way, they are expected to take and share in responsibility, and thus, it is not necessary to explicitly express gratitude each time help is given (Zinken, 2016). This experience of gratitude is very similar to what is observed in different cultures when the emotion of gratitude is not conflated with the expression of gratitude. The recent cross-cultural study by Floyd et al. (2018) across eight cultures focusing on episodes of daily social reciprocity found only the English speakers to say 'thank you' (politeness as an important aspect of their cultural value); in all the other cultures gratitude was left implicit and to be tacitly managed through the reciprocal fulfilment of social rights and duties.

The Malay culture, together with the Japanese and Chinese are more collectivist than the UK and US. Not only are they high-context cultures, they are also more hierarchical than the latter two. In the hierarchical Malaysian Malay society, social relationships is defined through highly codified notions of responsibility and obligations. Gratitude is culturally constructed as forms of return, rather than as an inner state. Thus, it is the duty of people to give things or do favors for others as part of a communal relationship. This is why expressions of gratitude are seldom explicitly stated. What is more important in the society is maintaining

relationship and knowing one's place which entail the reciprocal fulfilment of needs and responsibilities.

Limitations

Several limitations are highlighted. First, the three good things exercise was meant to increase gratitude, but the actual gratitude scores, though found to be significant over time, did not seem to have changed much. While we have already attributed this to differences in participants' baseline affective scores, another reason may be due to the fact that gratitude is a dispositional measure, and as such, only small increases are expected over time. Furthermore, what the numerical change or scores over time actually meant with respect to participants' experiential difference, remains unclear. Having a more qualitative understanding that complements this quantitative change would have been helpful, especially considering that the Malaysian Malay culture is a high-context one. This may be something that future studies in the Malay context can undertake to do.

Second, the study used only one population—student population—undergoing a particular life transition over a relatively brief time period. However, college/university students adapting to university are arguably an important population in their own right within the developmental life span. Whether the findings are generalizable to other diverse populations, however, remain to be seen. In addition, the use of student sample is convenient but one should be cautious in making generalizations. Furthermore, the majority of participants were female students. Females have been found to be more expressive in gratitude as compared to males. A study by Kashdan, Mishra, Breen and Froh (2009) found that females express gratitude more than males. The same may hold within the Malaysian Malay culture. This is a frequent criticism of psychological studies using student samples within a narrowly defined context of controlled environment. Indeed there are hardly any empirical studies of gratitude in the natural contexts of everyday life.

Third, the Malaysian sample consisted only of Malaysian Malays who may be culturally different to the other racial groups in the country like Malaysian Chinese or Malaysian Indian. Had we used a Malaysian sample, comprised of participants from the all the groups, differences in their cultures might have confounded our results. As an example, Malaysian Chinese may share more similarities to Chinese from China, again bearing questions of generalizability.

Finally, the present study examined the effects of the three good things exercise on gratitude and other measures that are based only on self-reports, opening the results to problems of method variance. Future research on gratitude should also rely on other more assessment methods such as peer-reports, interviews as well as “objective” outcomes.

Implications

The three good things exercise is easy to use as indicated in past studies. It is also self-reinforcing because doing so not only makes one more appreciative and mindful of events in daily life though they may be unspoken. Furthermore, experiencing gratitude may be particularly important for youth who are in the midst of seeking to find an identity in a world that is becoming more consumerist by the day. Promoting this exercise early may also aid them in coping with challenges related to this period of life, and protecting them from stress and depression (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008). Indeed the results of the present study showed

that the gratitude exercise acts as an antidote to stress rather than directly promoting life satisfaction, in line with how people in collective cultures react (Kanagawa, Cross & Markus, 2001).

However, while in general research has suggested that positive activity interventions (like the three good things exercise) can increase well-being, the reverse is also possible. Fritz and Lyubomirsky (2018), based on their positive activity model highlighted a number of pathways by which these positive activities might undermine well-being rather than lifting it, such as when there is an overdose of activity, a person-activity misfit, when positive activities are performed under conditions of low or no autonomy, when the social cost of positive activity is high, etc. Thus, knowing the conditions of when, why, and how some positive activities may be counterproductive to well-being is important to understand when such practices will “work.”

Another implication to note is that there are cross-cultural differences in the way gratitude is understood and expressed. And, using a Western norm as a guide may undermine the nuances that the expressions of gratitude may have in other cultures. As shown by the study of Floyd et al. (2018), social reciprocity or mutual assistance and collaboration in everyday life is dependent on one’s implicit understandings of one’s roles within a specified culture.

Concluding Remarks

We carried these two studies mainly because of the dearth of work on gratitude in the Malaysian Malay context. The findings from Study 1 showed that their mean gratitude scores are lower than the mean scores of the two individualist societies (the US and UK) as well as the Chinese, but they are similar to the Japanese. The case with China is most interesting because while the country is still looked upon as having a collective culture, evidence seems to show that it is changing very rapidly towards individualism. In three studies, Zou and Xi (2016) documented the cultural changes within the last five decades with respect to (i) babies’ names—parents now are more likely to use atypical and obscure characters to name their babies rather than using Chinese characters as in the past; (ii) lyrics of popular songs—singular pronouns are more frequently used over the last four decades while plural pronouns are decreasing; and (iii) work is now rated as less important while leisure time is becoming more important.

Study 2 showed that the three good things intervention was able to increase not only gratitude scores but also scores on well-being. In addition, when a hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to examine the effect of gratitude on well-being controlling for measures of affect and religiosity at Time 1, gratitude at Time 2 was only predictive of distress symptoms at Time 2, implying that relations between gratitude and well-being in past cross-sectional studies might well have been the result of confounding. Thus, these two studies have provided some insight into how Malaysian Malays perceive and understand gratitude.

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