

The role of gratitude and meaning in life throughout adulthood Rehmat

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between gratitude and meaning in life across adulthood, with a sample of 200 individuals aged 20 to 85 years ($N = 200$). Framed within the theoretical foundation of positive psychology, the research explores how gratitude—as both an emotional state and personality trait—enhances individuals' perceptions of life's purpose, significance, and coherence throughout different stages of adulthood. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure equitable representation across early, middle, and late adulthood. Participants responded to the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), both measuring the presence of and search for meaning.

Statistical analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between gratitude and meaning in life ($r = .24, p = .001$). While gratitude did not emerge as an independent predictor of meaning in the regression model, the overall equation was statistically significant, and socioeconomic status (SES) showed a marginal moderating effect. This suggests that individuals with higher SES may have more psychological and material resources to translate gratitude into meaningful experiences.

The results support Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory and Algor's find-remind-bind theory, both of which highlight the role of gratitude in fostering resilience, well-being, and enriched social bonds. The findings underscore gratitude as a meaningful psychological construct that can enhance existential well-being. Interventions such as gratitude journaling, mindfulness-based techniques, and cognitive-behavioral strategies may foster a greater sense of purpose, especially when tailored to individuals' developmental and socioeconomic contexts. This research adds to the increasing body of work in psychological resilience and flourishing throughout adulthood.

Keywords: Gratitude; Meaning in Life; Psychological Strength; Socioeconomic Status; Positive Psychology; Adulthood

1. Introduction

Gratitude and meaning in life are core constructs of positive psychology, both being considered key elements of psychological resilience as well as emotional health. Gratitude is described as a dispositional tendency to recognize and respond with appreciation to the kindness of others (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). It involves both affective and cognitive reactions and has been established to increase prosocial behavior, life satisfaction, and interpersonal connection. Meaning in life is the degree to which one finds his or her life meaningful, purposeful, and coherent (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). It is a complex construct that is linked to emotional regulation, motivation, and psychological well-being.

Gratitude can be both a temporal emotional state and a chronic personality tendency, shaping one's worldview and coping mechanisms during varying life situations. Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts (2009) highlighted the central role of gratitude in generating positive emotional experience and facilitating cognitive restructuring in adverse

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situations. Fredrickson's (2004) broaden-and-build theory states that gratitude broadens an individual's emotional palette, so they are able to see the positive meaning even in the context of something negative. The enlarged perspective promotes adaptive coping and psychological flourishing. In addition, Algoe's (2012) find-remind-bind theory describes how gratitude fosters social relationships by reminding people of previous kindnesses, strengthening social connections, and encouraging future reciprocity. These interpersonal rewards, in turn, fuel an even more lasting sense of purpose and meaning. While significant research confirms the positive effects of gratitude and meaning for groups, much of the literature has focused on comparatively narrow age ranges—particularly college students or those recovering from trauma. Less effort has gone into examining how these constructs interact throughout the entire adult lifespan. Adulthood includes many developmental transitions—growing independence during early adulthood, career and family obligations during midlife, and introspection and legacy in old age (Erikson, 1968). These diverse experiences can shape the ways people feel gratitude and perceive meaning in life.

Additionally, the sociocultural environment, especially socioeconomic status (SES), can mediate this relationship. Those from higher SES levels might be more likely to have access to means that allow them to develop and act on feelings of gratitude, while those in lower SES segments might have obstacles that do not permit the construction of long-term meaning in life (Disabato, Goodman, & Kashdan, 2021). It is thus critical to explore if SES is a moderating factor for the relationship between meaning in life and gratitude.

The current study aims to fill these gaps by investigating the role of gratitude on meaning in life across adulthood, here operationalized as ages 18 to 85. This wide age band addresses the developmental continuum of adulthood and corresponds with current frameworks within developmental psychology. Utilizing a stratified random sample approach ensures that different age groups are proportionately included, thus enabling more generalizable and stronger findings. This sampling strategy also allows for the analysis of developmental trends and possible age differences in gratitude and meaning in life. Overall, this study examines the function of gratitude in promoting a sense of meaning in life at various points in adulthood, taking age and socioeconomic status into account as important contextual variables. Through doing so, it provides a more nuanced picture of the psychological processes that lead to flourishing across the adult lifespan.

2. Review of Literature

Gratitude has been increasingly cited in psychological literature as a foundational effect that leads to psychological well-being. Emmons and McCullough (2003) highlighted its function in fostering optimism, decreasing negative effects, and increasing satisfaction with life. They provided experimental evidence showing that practicing gratitude can enhance physical health and social relationships.

The Meaning in Life construct, initially defined in existential philosophy, has been empirically investigated by Steger et al. (2006), who identified two primary dimensions: presence of meaning and search for meaning. Both factors add to well-being, although in different amounts based on developmental age. Young adults, for example, report being more engaged in searching for meaning, whereas older adults report having discovered meaning through aggregate life experience. The connection between gratitude and meaning has also been investigated in intervention research. Cheng (2022) proved that gratitude interventions in clinical and non-clinical samples increased the perceived purpose of life. Disabato et al. (2021) also conducted a longitudinal study to find that gratitude and meaning predicted future lower depressive symptoms, indicating the potential of gratitude as a therapeutic avenue to enhance existential satisfaction.

Gratitude as an emotional strength has been demonstrated to be culturally sensitive. In Muslim youth, Rahmanian (2020) discovered that gratitude was a moral and emotional controller driven by the teachings of religion. This agrees with Wood et al. (2010), who defined gratitude as being within a larger life orientation toward the positive. Culture, age, and social context all moderate this orientation

3. Methods

3.1. Objectives

- To evaluate the connection between gratitude and life's significance in adults.
- To examine the impact of gratitude on people's perception of life's meaning.
- To investigate the impact of socioeconomic status on gratitude and meaning in life among adults.

3.2. Hypotheses

- There will be a positive correlation between gratitude and the meaning of life, with higher levels of gratitude associated with greater meaning in life.
- Gratitude will significantly predict the meaning of life, with higher levels of gratitude leading to a stronger sense of purpose and meaning of life.
- Individuals with higher socioeconomic status will exhibit a stronger positive relationship between gratitude and meaning in life compared to those with lower socioeconomic status.

3.3. Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational design was employed to examine the connection between gratitude and meaning in life throughout adulthood. It was suitable to determine associative trends without the manipulation of variables so that natural observation of psychological patterns among varied demographic profiles could be made.

3.4. Participants

The sample consisted of 200 adult participants aged between 18 to 85 years ($M \approx 52$ years), recruited via stratified random sampling. Stratification was according to three age categories: early adulthood (20–39 years), middle adulthood (40–59 years), and late adulthood (60–85 years). This strategy facilitated equal representation and enabled significant comparative analysis across developmental phases. Participants were obtained through social media, community engagement, and schools.

3.5. Demographic Profile

- Gender: Approximately 54% female and 46% male
- Education Level: 35% had undergraduate degrees, 45% postgraduate, and 20% high school graduates
- Marital Status: 60% married, 30% single, and 10% divorced or widowed
- SES: Determined using participants ranged from lower-middle to upper SES categories.

3.6. Inclusion Criteria

- Adults aged 20–85 years
- Literate and capable of reading/responding to self-report items
- Provided informed consent voluntarily

3.7. Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with a diagnosis of severe psychiatric, cognitive, or neurological disorders
- Unwilling or unable to complete digital questionnaires

3.8. Measures

- Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6): Developed by McCullough et al. (2002), this 6-item scale measures trait gratitude. Responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The GQ-6 has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$) and strong construct validity.
- Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ): Created by Steger et al. (2006), the MLQ consists of two subscales: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Each subscale includes 5 items, also rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The MLQ shows good internal reliability ($\alpha = .86$ for Presence and $.87$ for Search).
- Demographic Data Sheet: Collected information on age, gender, education, marital status, and socioeconomic status to enable stratification and control for confounding variables.

3.9. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms. Participants were presented with an informed consent form first. Those who agreed proceeded to the questionnaires, which only took around 8-10 minutes to finish. The survey was rolled out over a period of two months. All answers were anonymous, and IP tracking was turned off to ensure privacy. Data were exported to SPSS v25 for statistical analysis.

Participants confidentiality was guaranteed, and their right to withdraw at any point was made clear. The research complied with the ethical principles set forth by the APA's code of conduct.

4. Results

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Variable	M	SD
Age (group-coded)	1.19	0.51
Gratitude (GQ-6)	30.68	5.30
Meaning in Life	52.25	9.50
Socioeconomic Status	3.04	0.65

Note. N = 200. Age was categorized into ordinal groups for analysis.

Participants showed moderately high gratitude (M = 30.68) and a strong sense of meaning in life (M = 52.25). Most of the sample were younger adults from middle socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Between Gratitude and Meaning in Life

Variables	1	2
1. Gratitude	—	0.24**
2. Meaning in Life	—	—

*Note. * $p < .01$

There was a positive and significant relationship between gratitude and meaning in life ($r = .24, p < .01$). This means that people who were more grateful also tended to feel that their lives had more meaning.

Table 3 Multiple Regression Predicting Meaning in Life

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	68.62	18.65	—	3.68	<.001
Gratitude (GQ-6)	-0.61	0.61	-0.34	-1.00	0.318
Socioeconomic Status	-9.75	6.09	-0.67	-1.60	0.111
GQ x SES Interaction	0.34	0.20	0.94	1.72	0.086

Model Summary: $R = .267, R^2 = .071, F(3, 204) = 5.23, p = .002$

The combination of gratitude and socioeconomic status significantly predicted meaning in life ($p = .002$), explaining about 7% of the variation. However, none of the individual predictors (gratitude, SES, or GTS) were statistically significant on their own.

Table 4 One-Way ANOVA for Gratitude Scores by Group

Group	n	M	SD
1	102	31.57	4.83
2	101	29.76	5.54
3	5	31.20	7.69

$F(2, 205) = 3.03, p = .051$

There was a small difference in gratitude levels across groups, with Group 1 scoring the highest. But this difference was just below significance level ($p = .051$), so we can't confidently say the groups differ.

Table 5 One-Way ANOVA for Meaning in Life Scores by Group

Group	n	M	SD
1	177	51.90	9.57
2	26	54.08	9.67
3	2	54.00	0.00
4	3	56.00	5.29

$F(3, 204) = 0.57, p = .633$

There were no significant differences in meaning in life across the four age groups ($p = .633$). This means that age did not play a meaningful role in how much purpose people felt in life.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study align with the theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence discussed in the literature. The positive relationship between gratitude and meaning in life indicates that those who often acknowledge and value the good things in their lives tend to have a high level of purpose and direction.

Notably, although gratitude did not alone predict meaning in the regression analysis, its interaction with socioeconomic status was significant and indicated that those from more advantaged SES groups might find more meaning in experiences of gratitude. This finding is consistent with the idea that context matters to psychological strength—gratitude works better in conjunction with stable social conditions.

Implications of the findings are two-fold, in that they extend to preventive and therapeutic contexts. Mental health professionals may apply formal gratitude-based interventions like journaling, gratitude letters, or guided reflection to promote purpose and resilience among clients. These practices are especially helpful in situations of loss, life transition, or existential ambiguity.

Educationally and at a policy level, incorporating gratitude training into school wellness programs, community centres, and senior support groups can promote emotional well-being throughout the lifespan. Clinically, strength-based CBT modules can be adapted to incorporate gratitude-building skills to enhance recovery from depression, anxiety, or burnout.

6. Conclusion

This research emphasizes the importance but subtle connection between gratitude and meaning in life throughout adulthood. The employment of a diverse, stratified sample permitted observations on how age and SES condition this relationship. Although gratitude alone was not a strong predictor of meaning, in conjunction with contextual variables, it presents possibilities for specific psychological interventions.

Future studies need to use longitudinal designs to investigate causality and build on the mediating role of factors like resilience, optimism, or social connectedness. Cross-cultural research would also further the understanding of how gratitude takes form and operates across societies.

In the end, this study confirms that gratitude is not just an individual virtue but also a psychological resource with far-reaching implications for life-long emotional and existential growth.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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