

**A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
GRATITUDE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

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**A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
GRATITUDE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

GTEQ	Gratitude-triggering Events Questionnaire
GQ-6	The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ICH-GCP	International Conference on Harmonization—Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice
SPANE	Scale of Positive and Negative Experience
SWLS	The Satisfaction with Life Scale
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia

**SATU KAJIAN MENGENAI HUBUNGAN ANTARA
RASA BERSYUKUR DAN KESEJAHTERAAN SUBJEKTIF**

ABSTRAK

Rasa bersyukur merupakan sebahagian daripada kekuatan manusia yang dapat memampakan tekanan dan mengekalkan kesejahteraan subjektif individu. Ia boleh menjadi satu pilihan pendekatan bantu-diri untuk pelajar-pelajar universiti dalam menangani tekanan harian mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, pendekatan mengkaji rasa bersyukur yang ada adalah terlalu umum dan tidak memberi tumpuan terperinci pada sumber timbulnya perasaan bersyukur. Kajian ini meneroka peristiwa yang boleh mencetuskan rasa bersyukur dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Kajian turut menilai sifat bersyukur dan kesejahteraan subjektif. Selain itu, kajian ini meneliti hubungan antara sifat bersyukur, kekerapan dan keamatan peristiwa yang mencetuskan rasa bersyukur, dan kesejahteraan subjektif. Kajian ini dijalankan dalam dua fasa: Kaedah penyelidikan Fasa 1 berbentuk kualitatif, Fasa 2 berbentuk kuantitatif. Pendekatan persampelan yang digunakan ialah persampelan bertujuan. Dalam Fasa 1, temu bual separa berstruktur dijalankan dengan 30 pelajar ijazah sarjana muda dari sebuah universiti awam. Fasa ini digunakan untuk meneroka peristiwa yang dapat mencetuskan perasaan bersyukur. Dalam Fasa 2, kertas soal selidik diedarkan kepada 837 pelajar ijazah pertama dari sebuah universiti awam dan universiti swasta. Soal selidik tersebut digunakan untuk mengukur kekerapan dan keamatan peristiwa yang mencetuskan rasa bersyukur, sifat bersyukur, emosi positif dan negatif, dan kepuasan hidup responden. Fasa ini digunakan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara pembolehubah dalam kajian ini. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa peristiwa yang boleh mencetuskan rasa bersyukur seseorang adalah berkaitan dengan hubungan dengan seseorang dan peristiwa berkaitan dengan kesihatan,

kebebasan, dan pencapaian. Peristiwa yang paling kerap berlaku adalah yang berkaitan dengan kesihatan, dan peristiwa yang mencetuskan keamatan bersyukur yang tertinggi adalah yang berkaitan dengan keluarga. Pencetus rasa bersyukur yang paling berpengaruh adalah peristiwa dari faktor "keluarga". Hasil kajian menunjukkan korelasi positif yang signifikan di antara sifat bersyukur dan kesejahteraan subjektif. Secara umumnya, sifat bersyukur juga dapat menyumbang kepada kekerapan dan keamatan pencetus rasa bersyukur. Selain itu, kekerapan peristiwa yang berkaitan dengan rakan-rakan, serta keamatan rasa bersyukur terhadap kebebasan dan keselesaan menjadi peramal emosi positif yang paling kuat. Untuk emosi negatif, peramal yang paling kuat adalah ketidak-kemungkinan untuk peristiwa tersebut untuk berlaku—peristiwa yang berkaitan dengan kebebasan dan sesuatu yang diperlukan, dan juga keamatan rasa bersyukur terhadap pencapaian dan keupayaan diri sendiri. Untuk kepuasan hidup, peramal yang paling kuat adalah kekerapan dan keamatan rasa bersyukur terhadap peristiwa yang berkaitan dengan keluarga. Secara keseluruhan, kajian ini bukan sahaja memperkayakan pendekatan semasa untuk mengkaji rasa bersyukur, sumbangan teori kajian ini juga telah memberi kesan yang besar kepada implikasi praktikal intervensi psikologi positif, seperti pendekatan bantu-diri dan strategi untuk meningkatkan rasa bersyukur. Akhir sekali, kelemahan kajian ini dan cadangan dibincangkan.

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRATITUDE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

ABSTRACT

Gratitude is a part of human strengths that buffer stress and prolong subjective well-being. It can be an option for self-help approach to assist university students in coping with their daily stressors. Nevertheless, current approach to studying gratitude is too general and has not looked into sources of gratitude in detail. The present study examined events that can trigger gratitude among university students in Malaysia. This study also assessed dispositional gratitude and subjective well-being. Furthermore, this study investigated the relationship between gratitude disposition, frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events, and subjective well-being. The study was conducted in two phases: Phase 1 was qualitative in design, Phase 2 was quantitative in design. The sampling approach used was purposive sampling. In Phase 1, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 undergraduate students from a public university. This phase was utilised to explore the gratitude-triggering events. In Phase 2, questionnaires were distributed to 837 undergraduate students from a public university and private university. The questionnaire was used to measure participants' frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events, gratitude disposition, positive and negative affects, and life satisfaction. This phase was utilised to examine the relationships between the variables. Findings showed that the events that can trigger one's gratitude are related to relationships with someone and also related to one's health, freedom, and accomplishment. Most frequent events were those related to health, and events that triggered highest intensity of gratitude were related to family. Most powerful gratitude-triggering events were from the "family" factor. Results showed a

significant positive correlation between gratitude disposition and subjective well-being. The dispositional gratitude also significantly contributed to the frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events in general. Moreover, the strongest predictors of positive emotion were frequency of events related to friends, as well as intensity of gratitude towards freedom and comfort-related events. For negative emotion, the strongest predictors were the unlikelihood in occurrence of the events related to freedom and needs, as well as one's deficiency in the intensity of gratefulness towards own accomplishment and ability. For life satisfaction, the strongest predictors are frequency and intensity of gratitude towards the events related to family. Overall, the present study does not only enrich the current approaches to study gratitude, its theoretical contributions have also give a vast impact to the practical implication of positive psychology intervention like the self-help approach and gratitude-boosting strategies. Lastly, the limitations and suggestions are discussed.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

There are some studies that showed an increase in the prevalence of psychological distresses among university students in Malaysia (e.g., Gan, Nasir, Zalilah, & Hazizi, 2011; Shamsuddin et al., 2013). This issue is particularly challenging when it combines with the hesitation of university students to seek help from counsellors, even when they need it (Salim, 2010). These phenomena highlight a need for researchers to look into positive elements that can help to design the screening and intervention program to handle this issue (Shamsuddin et al., 2013). Furthermore, a self-help approach that develops from psychological research is vital for university students. This is because it can help them cope with their life hassles even when they are not yet ready to seek professional help.

Psychology always gives people the impression that it is the study of weakness and damage (Seligman, 1998), like abnormalities and mental illness of human. However, Seligman (1998) argued that “psychology is not just the study of weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best within ourselves” (p. 2). It is very important for psychologists to move beyond studying negative aspects of human experience and begin to focus more on the positive side. Positive psychology is part of the respond to investigate the positive aspects of human life by focusing on optimal human functioning, strengths and virtues.

Gratitude can be considered as part of human strengths that help individuals to balance the negative within them (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

Numerous findings have proven that experiencing and expressing gratitude are beneficial to individuals and society (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004). For instance, the study of Watkins and colleagues (2003) revealed that gratitude demonstrates negative relationship with depression and narcissism. Furthermore, gratitude is positively related with prosocial behaviour (Froh et al., 2009) and subjective well-being (Watkins et al., 2003).

Conceptually, gratitude can be viewed as “an emotion, an attitude, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response” (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, p. 377). As emotion, gratefulness can be triggered by the things that are happening around an individual (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008), such as receiving help (Okamoto & Robinson, 1997; Tesser, Gatewood & Driver, 1968; Watkins et al., 2003) or when attributing one’s accomplishment to external sources (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979; Zaleski, 1988). As a trait, it is known as gratitude disposition, which can be defined as “a generalised tendency to recognise and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains” (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002, p. 112). In other words, it is individuals’ tendency to be grateful for people around them or for things that happened to them.

Emmons and McCullough’s (2003) study proposed that people with higher gratitude reported higher overall well-being and scored significantly higher in subjective well-being as compared to their hassles counterpart. The relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being will also be investigated in the present study.

Shamsuddin and colleagues (2013) have stressed the importance of the researchers to help in designing appropriate intervention program to prevent mental

health problem in young adults' population in Malaysia. However, most of the studies related to gratitude are from western background. Studies from eastern background, especially Malaysia, are indeed scarce. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, so far there is only one study that was conducted in Malaysia among the studies of gratitude that have been reviewed in the thesis (i.e., Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012). The insufficiency of gratitude research in Malaysia is indeed impeding the practical implication of strategies related to gratitude. To overcome the abovementioned issue, the present study focuses on the undergraduate students as part of an attempt to provide scientific findings that can help in designing effective intervention programs for young adults in Malaysia.

In addition, current approach to studying gratitude is too general and has not looked onto sources of gratitude in detail. To address this issue, the present study sets to identify the events or situations that can trigger one's gratitude. This study also aims to assess the level of dispositional gratitude and subjective well-being, and the relationship between them. In addition, the contribution of dispositional gratitude towards the frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events are examined. Lastly, this study aims to examine the contribution of frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events toward one's subjective well-being.

1.2 Problem Statement

The problem statements related to this study can be divided into two sections, one is more practical in nature, and another one is related to research gap in this area. Focusing on the practical problems, currently, there is a high prevalence of stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms among university students (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). According to Gan and colleagues (2011), the prevalence of stress, depression, and anxiety in the level of moderate severity or above in the university students in

Malaysia were 21.6%, 29.3%, and 55.0% respectively. In addition, the study of Shamsuddin and colleagues in 2013 revealed an increase in the prevalence of psychological distresses among university students in Malaysia. Shamsuddin and colleagues showed that the prevalence of stress, depression, and anxiety of moderate severity or above were 23.7%, 37.2%, and 63.0% respectively. This highlights that stress and psychological distresses should be one of the major concerns for researchers, social workers, counsellors, and psychologists in our country. Looking at the problem from another perspective, it is important to explore human strengths that can act as a buffer against stress and distress. Gratitude has a negative relationship with depression (Watkins et al., 2003). According to Demirbatir (2012), depression, anxiety, and stress are correlated with each other. This implies that the prevention of any one of the psychological distresses can be applied to the other two as well. For this reason, study on gratitude as part of human strength that helps individuals cope with stress and distress can help to address this problem to a certain extent.

Despite high prevalence of stress, depression, and anxiety symptoms among university students, they usually will not seek help from professional, such as counsellor (Salim, 2010). According to Salim (2010), about half of the students in his study were reluctant to seek professional help, either for themselves or their friends. In addition, there were only 9.3% of his 2508 participants expressing willingness to look for and use professional help. This indicates that there are not even 10 in 100 people who will search for professional help when needed. One of the reasons is because of the stigma of public toward counselling (Salim, 2010). They have a myth that counselling is provided for the people with problems, and it is hard for them to accept the facts that they have a problem. This phenomenon highlights the need for

more general self-help approach that can ensure people to still get help even when they are not ready to seek professional help. Exploring gratitude as part of a self-help approach may help address this problem.

According to law of habituation, one's happiness or satisfaction will be habituated with time (Frijda, 1988). Over time, individual will be habituated to their favourable circumstances and might not feel the same level of life satisfaction that they had previously experienced (Frijda, 1988). This means individuals will be gradually immune to their present life circumstances and this can decrease their degree of satisfaction towards life over a certain period of time. Thus, it is essential for researchers to study how individuals' subjective well-being can be sustained without constantly upgrading one's life conditions (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Being grateful may be the answer to this (Frijda, 1988). Watkins and colleagues' study (2003) revealed that simply engaging in grateful thinking can enhance one's positive affect. A study on gratitude is extremely significant in the field of positive psychology as it can potentially provide a lasting happiness and well-being.

Research can indeed serve as a way to resolve the abovementioned practical issues. However, there are some limitations in the past research, which contributes to the research gap. For instance, although many researchers have investigated the benefits of gratitude, there are only a few researchers that have looked into the determinants of gratitude (e.g., Bar-Tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg, & Hermon, 1977; Tesser et al., 1968; Okamoto & Robinson, 1997). In addition, most of these studies tend to focus on recipients' gratitude towards the benefactor's help rather than individual gratitude in a more comprehensive manner (i.e., the gratitude towards God's love, nature, fate, or other nonhuman objects). This conception fails to capture

wider aspects of life that is supposed to be the sources of gratitude (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

Furthermore, the previous studies—that focused on the grateful feeling as prompted by receiving help—had some limitations in explaining the frequency of receiving help. The nature of their finding also indicates individuals as experiencing gratitude in a passive manner. Yet, can the feeling of gratitude be triggered without receiving help from others? Is there any other possibility to experience gratitude other than receiving help from others? These questions remained unanswered. To address this issue and answer the questions, it is vital for the researchers to study events or experiences that can prompt one's gratitude, including the frequency of these events or experiences and the intensity of gratitude they can elicit.

Watkins, Grimm, and Kolts (2004) asked participants to recall the positive and negative events from their past and measured the participants' trait gratitude. In their study, they found that grateful participants recalled relatively more positive events compared to their less grateful counterparts. However, this does not necessarily indicate that the more grateful individuals would constantly recalled more positive events if they were not instructed to do so. Thus, Watkins and colleagues suggested that “it would be informative to know if grateful individuals really are more likely to count their blessings even if not instructed to do so” (p. 65).

Furthermore, previous studies on gratitude have not identified which factor that contributes most to one's subjective well-being. There are researchers who investigated on the strategies to improve one's gratitude and subjective well-being (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012; Toepfer & Walker, 2009; Watkins et al., 2003). However, without knowing the factors that elicit most gratitude and subjective well-being in the person, the

strategies seem to be over generalised. The above discussion highlights specific issues that should be addressed by researchers in this area.

Across all the studies of gratitude that have been reviewed in the thesis and to the best knowledge of the present researcher, so far there is only one gratitude research that was conducted in Malaysia (e.g., Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012). One of the reasons might be most of the psychology researchers in Malaysia focus much on psychological distress rather than positive psychology or even gratitude (e.g., Elias, Wong, & Abdullah, 2011; Faleel, Tam, Lee, Har, & Foo, 2012; Gan et al., 2011; Salim, 2010; Shamsuddin et al., 2013). Hence, it is important for more research to be conducted in the area of gratitude in Malaysia. This is because the cross-cultural study is useful to explore the different ways of how gratitude is being experiencing in different cultures (Bono et al., 2004). “It would be surprising if the major attributional processes involved in the production of gratitude were to differ across cultures, but people from various cultures may be grateful for different reasons, depending on the concerns that are most central to them” (Bono et al., 2004, p. 476). A study on gratitude in Malaysia can provide a wider knowledge to the other researchers about gratitude and subjective well-being in Malaysia context. This can allow for cross-cultural comparison.

1.3 Research Questions

The above discussion highlights the prominent issues in term of practical and research gaps that lead to the following research questions:

- 1) What are the events that can potentially trigger gratitude?
- 2) What are the frequency and intensity of various gratitude-triggering events?
- 3) What are the most powerful gratitude-triggering events?
- 4) What are the levels of gratitude disposition and subjective well-being?

- 5) How is gratitude disposition related to subjective well-being?
- 6) Can gratitude disposition predict the frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events?
- 7) Which factor of gratitude-triggering events can predict subjective well-being?

1.4 Research Objectives

The research questions highlight the importance to examine gratitude further and lead to the following research objectives:

- 1) To identify the events that can potentially trigger gratitude.
- 2) To identify the frequency and intensity of various gratitude-triggering events.
- 3) To identify the most powerful gratitude-triggering events.
- 4) To examine the levels of gratitude disposition and subjective well-being.
- 5) To examine the relationship between gratitude disposition and subjective well-being.
- 6) To examine whether gratitude disposition can predict the frequency and intensity of gratitude-triggering events.
- 7) To examine which factor of gratitude-triggering events can predict subjective well-being.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important in a number of ways. First, it can help to address the issue of high stress and distress among university students by exploring human strengths that can buffer stress. The study of gratitude, like the present study, can serve as a pathway for the researchers to explore factors that able to elicit one's gratefulness. Furthermore, the present study provides information about the most powerful gratitude-triggering events that being rated as happening very frequently and triggering intense level of gratitude. By knowing the factors that contributing in

triggering gratitude and the events that giving the highest impact on a person's gratefulness; counsellors can highlight some influential factors to their client to boost their gratitude and hence lowering their stress and depression.

Second, the present study provides scientific evidence for future researchers to develop self-help approaches to the public. By introducing the strategies that are developed based on scientific studies, this strategies may be more convincing and effective. Therefore study of gratitude and subjective well-being such as the present study is significant and noteworthy.

Third, the present study provides insights for future researchers to minimize the risk of individuals' happiness and life satisfaction being habituated with time. Gratitude is found to be the element that can prolong one's subjective well-being (e.g., Frijda, 1988; Watkins et al., 2003). By identifying the events that can trigger individuals' gratitude, people can fruitfully apply gratitude exercise and stay happy and satisfied with their life, without a need to constantly upgrading their life condition. In addition, the findings in the present study about level of gratitude disposition and subjective well-being as well as their relationship can enrich the information of gratitude and subjective well-being research in Malaysia.

Fourth, the present study fulfils the research gap from the previous findings. For example, the present study allows the participants to answer the question subjectively by asking an open ended question. This covers a wide range of possible answers that are able to capture the bigger picture of events or situations that can trigger one's gratefulness.

In accordance with the limitation in Watkins and colleagues' (2004) study, they suggested the future researchers to explore the likelihood of individuals to count their blessing when they are not instructed. Therefore, the present study employs this

suggestion by asking the participants to rate the frequency of the particular gratitude-triggering event that happened in the past, rather than instruct them to count their blessing on the spot. Moreover, the intensity of gratefulness towards the particular event is asked. Consequently, the researchers can gain a better insight regarding the events that can make one having intense gratefulness and the possible frequency of the events happen in one's life.

Fifth, the present study presents the findings of possible factors that can trigger one's gratefulness and identify the factors that can contribute to one's subjective well-being. By doing so, future researchers can get a more precise answer of what can really contribute to high incidence of gratitude as well as its' contribution to subjective well-being. This will allow future researchers to come out with the strategies that can be tailored to every individual, and hence increase their effectiveness.

Sixth, the findings in the present study can serve as a tool for Malaysian and other researchers to gain more ideas on factors and benefit of gratitude (i.e., subjective well-being) in Malaysia context. The findings can be very useful in designing strategies or interventions to prompt gratitude that are more culturally appropriate.

In short, this study can contribute to more information on factors that elicit one's gratitude in general. The present study can also address some of the current research gaps and unanswered questions. Furthermore, the scientific findings in this study can serve as an evidence for the public to encourage them in applying gratitude-boosting strategy in their daily life. The present study also provide information for future research about the factors of gratitude that are most related to one's subjective well-being, so that they can come out with a better strategy to

enhance people's gratitude and subjective well-being. Finally, this study can enrich the findings in gratitude and subjective well-being in the research field of positive psychology, particularly in Malaysia.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the gratitude and subjective well-being of university students in public and private universities in Peninsular Malaysia. It was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 was utilised to discover the gratitude-triggering events and Phase 2 was utilised to test the relationships among the variables. In Phase 1, qualitative research method was utilised in which semi-structured interview was conducted. Participants were instructed to list the events that elicit their gratefulness in the past 12 months. The participants were expected to answer subjectively without any restriction as open-ended question was utilised in this phase. In Phase 2, quantitative research method was applied and questionnaires were distributed to the participants. Four questionnaires were utilised in Phase 2. One of the questionnaires was Gratitude-triggering Events Questionnaire (GTEQ). This questionnaire was constructed based on the gratitude-triggering events listed in Phase 1 and its reliability was tested during pilot study. The other three questionnaires were well-established questionnaires adopted from previous studies. Last, the statistical tests were run to examine the relationships of the variables in this study—gratitude-triggering events, gratitude disposition, and subjective well-being.

1.7 Definition of Concepts

1.7.1 Gratitude. According to Emmons and McCullough (2003), the word gratitude is derived from the Latin's root word *gratia*, means grace, gratefulness, or graciousness. Hence, the present study uses the term *gratitude*, *grateful(ness)*, and *thankful(ness)* interchangeably. In the present study, gratitude is conceptualised as

both emotion and trait. As an emotion, the feeling of gratitude can be triggered by the events or situations happening around an individual (Froh et al., 2008). This conceptualisation is applied in Phase 1 and 2 of the present study where gratitude is expected to be triggered by the events or situations happened to a person. In the present study, the events or situations that potentially trigger one's gratitude are called as *gratitude-triggering events* (which is defined in the next section).

Viewing gratitude as a trait, it is viewed as a lasting characteristic of gratefulness that can be maintained overtime and across most of the situations (McCullough et al., 2002). Therefore, McCullough and colleagues (2002) called gratitude as gratitude disposition or disposition toward gratitude. They defined it as individuals' tendency to experience grateful emotion for the positive experiences in their life. In addition, Wood and colleagues (2010) defined gratitude as a disposition that serves as "a part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world" (p. 891). These conceptualisations are applied only in Phase 2 of the present study. The operational definition of gratitude in Phase 2 of the present study is the participant's total score in The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) that measure one's gratitude disposition. Thus, the terms *gratitude disposition*, *gratitude trait*, *dispositional gratitude*, or *disposition toward gratitude* are used (interchangeably) in the present study to indicate the gratitude that measured by GQ-6; and the term gratitude (or gratefulness and thankfulness) is used to indicate a feeling of gratitude in general.

1.7.2 Gratitude-triggering events. This term is used in the present study to describe the events or situations that are able to trigger one's gratitude. The word *trigger* is used interchangeably with the word *elicit* and *evoke*. The gratitude-triggering events are explored in Phase 1 of the present study. Moreover, these events

are compiled to construct GTEQ for usage in Phase 2. In these cases, gratitude is conceptually defined as an emotion state that can be triggered by the things happen around someone (Froh et al., 2008). The operational definition of gratitude-triggering events in the present study is the events or situations that are reported as triggering the participants' gratefulness in Phase 1. Moreover, the gratitude-triggering events also refer to the items left after running the exploratory factor analysis in Phase 2.

1.7.3 Most powerful gratitude-triggering events. This term is used only in the present study to explain the events that can trigger the most intense of participants' gratitude and very frequently happened in their past. Hence, there is no clear-cut conceptualised definition from previous study to apply in the present study. However, there are several studies that found some events that can trigger one's gratitude. The details are discussed in Literature Review.

In the present study, the most powerful gratitude-triggering events are referring to the participants' ratings of frequency and intensity in GTEQ (in Phase 2). According to McCullough and colleagues (2002), frequency and intensity are co-occurring and they are not independent. Thus, it is justified to believe that if one event can trigger extreme gratefulness in individuals and it occurs very frequently in their life, the event is powerful that it can elicit intense gratitude frequently. For that reason, the most powerful gratitude-triggering events are calculated by multiplying the ratings of frequency and intensity for every item (or event).

The lowest rating of frequency and intensity is zero; the highest rating of frequency is 5 (i.e., the events happened very often in past 12 months), and highest rating of intensity is 5 (i.e., the events evoked extreme gratefulness of the person in past 12 months). This means the multiplication range is 0 to 25. Thus, the operational definition of the most powerful gratitude-triggering events is the events that obtained

more than 50% of highest score—score 25. This implies the most powerful gratitude-triggering events are those that are reported by more than half of the sample as happening very often and triggered extreme gratefulness in the past 12 months. 50% is used as the benchmark as more than 50% is indicating majority.

1.7.4 Subjective well-being. According to Synder and colleagues (2011), subjective well-being is the subjective evaluation of individuals' current status in their life. In this study, subjective well-being can be conceptually defined as a combination of general life satisfaction and positive affect, as well as absence of or low in negative affect (Diener, 1984, 2000). The operational definition of subjective well-being in the present study is the total score of participant in Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE), and The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). As suggested by Diener and Seligman (2004), different components of subjective well-being (i.e., positive emotion, negative emotion, and life satisfaction) are assessed separately in the present study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

This chapter consists of eight sections. The first reviews different conceptualisations and measurements of gratitude. The second section discusses components of gratitude; and the third section focuses on events that potentially trigger one's gratitude. Moreover, the fourth section reviews conceptualisations and measurements of subjective well-being. The fifth section discusses the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being. Furthermore, the sixth section focuses on cultural aspects of gratitude and subjective well-being. The seventh section explains conceptual framework of the present study. Research hypotheses are stated in the last section of this chapter.

2.2 What is Gratitude?

Numerous studies of gratitude have been conducted in the past. This section was written based on an extensive review, including the classical studies in this area (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Froh et al., 2009; McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004; McCullough et al., 2001; Toepfer et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2010). The original conceptualisation of gratitude can be traced back to Emmons and McCullough (2003) as well as McCullough et al. (2001), in which the conceptualisation of gratitude was based on the perception that gratefulness can be elicited from a positive gain due to good deeds performed by of another person. However, other psychologists and researchers later hold different and broader views of gratitude. For instance, they conceptualised gratitude as a moral affect, affective trait, attitude, emotion, mood, and life orientation (e.g., Chan, 2013; Chen et al., 2012;

Froh et al., 2008; Froh et al., 2009; McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Toepfer et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2004; Watkins et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2010).

Specifically, McCullough and colleagues (2001) reviewed the perspective from various fields of psychology (e.g., personality, developmental, social, and evolutionary psychology) to conceptualise gratitude as a *moral affect*. They theorised that gratitude serves as a response to moral behaviors as well as motivator for moral behaviors. Particularly, they posited that gratitude has three moral functions. First, as a moral barometer, gratitude serves as a response to other's benevolence. For example, when we are getting help from someone, we will feel grateful to that person. Second, moral motive can stimulate individuals to behave generously after others have behaved prosocially towards them. For example, after we are getting help from someone, we will be more likely to help that person or even another person in future. Third, gratitude can act as a moral reinforcer when expressing gratitude for the benefactors' good deed encourages more prosocial behavior in the future. For example, when we are getting help from someone, we will thank that person, and this in turn reinforces the person to help others again. The expressed gratefulness can reinforce that person to behave prosocially in future.

On the other hand, some researchers viewed gratitude as an *affective trait* (e.g., Chan, 2013; Chen et al., 2012; McCullough et al., 2002). It has been referred to as gratitude disposition and has been defined as individuals' inclination to express grateful emotions to those who have performed a good act toward them. In relation to this, people with high grateful trait have a lower gratitude threshold and they are more likely to experience (McCullough et al., 2002) and express gratitude in their daily life (Chen et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2004). Similarly, Watkins and colleagues

(2003) conceptualised gratitude as affective trait of gratitude, which is a predisposition to experience grateful affect. However, they mainly focus on gratitude in relation to a sense of abundance (i.e., individuals' perception of what they have), simple appreciation (i.e., appreciation of things surrounding the individual), and appreciation for others' contribution. Moreover, Watkins and colleagues (2004) also held the same belief as Watkins et al. (2003), but they viewed gratitude as an *attitude*. Watkins and colleagues (2004) defined gratitude as the attitude that appreciates life as a gift and the ability to express that appreciation.

Related to affective trait but focussing more on the state, some researchers conceptualised gratitude as an *emotion* (e.g., Chan, 2013; Froh et al., 2008; Froh et al., 2009; Toepfer et al., 2012). They described that gratitude is an attribution-dependent state that can recognise how an individual has gained a benefit and believes that there is an external source for this good outcome. In other words, the receivers believed that the advantage gained is due to other's kindness (Chan, 2013) and this elicits the feeling of gratefulness.

For McCullough and colleagues (2004), gratitude is viewed as *mood* rather than emotion. They held that the relatively long duration of moods (compared to emotion) allows gratitude to influence information processing, physiological reactivity, and other psychological phenomena over a longer period of time. They argued that the social effects (e.g., helpfulness and supportiveness) and psychological effects (e.g., stress coping) of gratitude are caused by gratitude as mood, but not emotion, because the duration of emotion is too short as compared to mood.

Lastly, Wood and colleagues (2010) had a wider conceptualisation of gratitude. They suggested that at disposition level, gratitude is part of the *life orientation* that is related to the awareness of the positive things around the

individuals and their ability to appreciate and value them. In this regard, the individuals with high gratitude will recognise plenty sources of gratitude (Chen et al., 2012), like deity, nature, animal, world events, and so on.

It is important to note that the benefit or personal gain can be material or nonmaterial such as emotional and spiritual (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). In addition, Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined gratitude as “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (p. 554). From the reviews above, it is clear that the object of gratitude is not only restricted to human or person, it can also be impersonal (nature), non-human sources like God, animals, cosmos (Froh et al., 2008), fate, as well as counterfactual thinking (e.g., when the things could easily have been worse than expected; McCullough et al., 2001).

For the measurements of gratitude, currently there are three scales of gratitude measurement that have been developed in these few years (Wood et al., 2010). There are Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) by McCullough et al. (2002); Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test (GRAT) by Watkins et al. (2003); and Appreciation Scale (AS) by Adler and Fagley (2005). Although AS is not specially constructed to measure gratitude; relatively, gratitude is viewed as one of the aspects of appreciation and therefore this measurement is included in this review. Their explanation of appreciation is useful in the present study as it is closely related to this study.

Wood and colleagues (2010) carried out a review and theoretical integration of gratitude based on these three measurements and summaries them here. They pointed that there are eight different aspects of gratitude: (1) individual differences in

experiencing grateful affect, (2) appreciation of others, (3) focus on what one has, (4) feeling of awe when come across beauty, (5) capable in expressing gratitude, (6) focus on the positive in present moment, (7) appreciation of life, that rise from understanding life is short, and (8) positive social comparisons.

In the present study, gratitude is conceptualised as both emotion (Froh et al., 2008; Froh et al., 2009) and trait (McCullough et al., 2002; Watkins et al., 2003). As an emotion, the feeling of gratitude is a result from attributing the positive outcomes gained to the external sources (Froh et al., 2008). These external sources are explored in the present study. In other words, gratitude is a state that viewed as emotional respond to some circumstances and it is temporary. As a trait, gratitude is viewed as a long-lasting characteristic of gratefulness (i.e., gratitude disposition) that can be maintained overtime and across various situations (McCullough et al., 2002). McCullough and colleagues (2002) termed it as gratitude disposition. Gratitude disposition is defined as a tendency to respond to benefits gained by gratitude. This is also investigated in the present study.

Moreover, the definition of gratitude by Wood and colleagues (2010) was applied in the present study as well. At the dispositional level, gratitude is viewed as a life orientation to observe and value the good things around the world (Wood et al., 2010). This means the person is not only able to acknowledge someone who contribute to their well-being, but also recognize the other factors that can be beneficial to them, for instance the ability to appreciate what they have, enjoying beauty of the nature, and having ability to be independent. For measurement, the present study used the Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) by McCullough et al. (2002).

2.3 Components of Gratitude

According to Watkins and colleagues (2003), there are three characteristics of grateful individuals. First, the grateful individuals will have a sense of abundance. In other words, they will not feel underprivileged in their life. Second, grateful individuals tend to appreciate simple pleasures in their daily lives. The simple pleasures are related to pleasures that are readily available to everyone, and they can be associated with the beautiful nature or nice sceneries. People who appreciate the simple pleasures should be inclined to experience gratitude as they constantly experiencing the subjective rewards in their life. Third, grateful individuals tend to appreciate others' contribution towards them and their well-being. Furthermore, Watkins and colleagues found that the internal locus of control is positively correlated to gratefulness. This suggested the grateful individuals believe that they are taking personal control over their own achievement. In other words, grateful individuals are not only able to acknowledge others for the contribution towards their well-being, they also take proper recognition of their own accomplishment.

In addition, McCullough and colleagues (2002) described that there are four facets of grateful disposition. They used the term facets rather than dimensions because they proposed that the elements of grateful disposition are not distinct, but rather co-occur. The first facet is *intensity*. Individuals who scored high on gratitude disposition are expected to feel more intense sense of gratitude when they experience positive events compared to people who scored low on gratitude disposition. The second facet is *frequency*. They suggested that the individuals with disposition toward gratefulness will report feeling grateful more frequently and their gratitude might elicited by the simplest favour of others. The third facet is *span*. Gratitude span refers to the numbers of life events that a person feel grateful for at a given time.

The individuals with high grateful disposition are expected to feel grateful for a number of different aspects in their lives, such as being grateful for their gratitude towards their families, spouses, health conditions, careers, and life. Lastly, the fourth facet is *density*. Density refers to the number of persons or objects that individual feels grateful for a single positive outcome or achievement. Individuals with high grateful disposition will feel grateful to God, families, friends, lecturers, and government for a single event such as obtaining scholarship to study abroad.

The above conceptualization suggest there are a number of ways of how grateful disposition as a trait can contribute to the experience of gratefulness as a state. People with high gratitude disposition are more likely to experience frequent and more intense gratefulness incidents and are more likely to be grateful for a lot of events and to a lot of sources. The present study assesses grateful disposition and examine how it can be related to the experience of gratefulness.

The present study will apply two of the four facets that proposed by McCullough et al. (2002) in the self-constructed measurement of gratitude-triggering events. To The facets of *intensity* and *frequency* were adapted in the present study. The present study explores the grateful intensity of participants towards the events and the frequency of occurrence of these events. Instead of asking how frequent the participants are feeling grateful in general, the present study modifies the conceptualisation of frequency by asking how frequent a particular event happens in the past 12 months. This ensures the present study to get richer and more precise information about the frequency of every event. To ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness of the self-constructed measurement of gratitude-triggering events, the list of events is obtained from an earlier phase of study (i.e., Phase 1)

where similar characteristics of participants reported potential gratitude eliciting events. This is explained further in Methodology.

However, the present study could not employ the *span* because the measurement of gratitude-triggering events that used in the second phase of study was the product in Phase 1. This mean the events (as well as number of aspects that the participants are grateful for) were written by the participants in Phase 1 but not Phase 2. Hence, the results cannot be blended together. Moreover, the fourth facet *density* will not be used in the present study due to the contradiction in the nature of this facet and the aim in this study. The focus of this study is the events that potentially trigger one's gratitude in general and it is not necessary (and not only) related to one's achievement.

2.4 The Triggering Events of Gratitude

Although more work has focused on the conceptualising and measuring the dispositional gratitude, less work has been investigated on the factors that contributed to gratitude in general. Nonetheless, there are some studies that have looked at contributing factors of gratitude and their works are reviewed below. For example, Tesser and colleagues (1968) investigated on the determinants of gratitude, which are (1) the perception of recipients towards the intentionality of the benefactor, (2) the cost to benefactor in providing the benefit to the recipients, and (3) the value of benefit to the recipients. The finding in their study showed that the three factors are significantly and positively related to feeling of gratitude. The results in Tesser and colleagues' study can be confirmed by looking at Okamoto and Robinson's study in 1997. Okamoto and Robinson revealed that the receiver will express more gratitude to the benefactor when the receiver is aware that the benefit provided is

costly to the benefactor. In other words, gratitude will be more likely to occur in the condition that the assistance from benefactors is costly to them.

Furthermore, Weiner and colleagues (1979) found that the external attributions are more related to thankfulness and gratitude. External attribution refers to individual's acknowledgement of other people or sources that contribute to one's own positive gain (Bono, 2013). This indicates acknowledgement of others in own favourable outcome is related to thankfulness and gratitude. The results in Zaleski's study (1988) can serve as a support to Weiner and colleagues' study. Zaleski found that the gratitude is related to external attribution of success. This means the people experience gratitude when they believe that the efforts of others contributed benefits (i.e., success) to them. Similarly, McCullough and colleagues (2001) also believed that "The prototypical situation that elicits gratitude is one in which a person realizes that he or she has obtained a good outcome as a result of the actions of another person" (p. 250). This suggested that individuals' acknowledgement that they gained some advantages because of someone would elicit their feeling of gratefulness. In brief, these three studies implied that the external attribution is related to gratitude.

As a result, Watkins and colleagues (2003) also hypothesised that gratitude could cultivate external locus of control as grateful individuals tend to make external attribution of success. External attribution can lead individuals to attribute others as the source of control of many things that are happening to themselves, thus they tend to have external locus of control. For instance, when grateful individuals achieve something in their life, they tend to recognise others' contribution to this achievement. Surprisingly, Watkins and colleagues' result showed that gratitude is positively correlated with internal locus of control. As this is a correlational study, the result can be explained in opposite direction. Watkins and colleagues reasoned

that individuals who are high in internal locus of control may not be expecting help from others. This is because they think they could have control over many things by their own selves. For this reason, it makes help from others as more notable to them and thus increases their gratefulness. On the other hand, individual who are high in external locus of control may expect help from others. This may lower their gratefulness when help are offered. In fact, Bar-Tal and colleagues (1977) found that when individuals have strong expectation on others to help, they are less likely to feel grateful when help is offered. This result can provide a reasonable explanation to the contradiction in Watkins and colleagues' hypothesis and finding.

Indeed, Graham and Barker (1990) found similar result with Watkins et al. (2003). In an experimental research by Graham and Barker, they presented short films to their young participants. The films were about other children completing a task successfully either by receiving helps or work independently. Even though the participants thought the child would feel most grateful when helped, the participants also felt that the child would feel some degree of gratitude when they work independently. This can indicate as an appreciation towards one's own capabilities and thankfulness towards the situation where successful work was possible (Wood et al., 2010).

In addition, Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that the gratitude-inducing experiences of the individuals also including "waking up in the morning". This can be classified as a feeling of thankful and appreciation of life. Furthermore, some of the participants reported "thankful for the Lord for just another day", and "grateful to God for giving me determination" (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This result can serve as evidence for Froh and colleagues' (2008) preposition that the object of gratitude can be God. From the abovementioned studies, the feeling of