

*Gratitude to family and ancestors as the source for  
wellbeing in Japanese elderly people*

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**Abstract**

The current article focused on gratitude as a factor improving the wellbeing of the elders. The socioemotional selectivity theory suggests the elders' tendency of limiting the target of gratitude to close and pleasure interpersonal relationships. However, it is not clearly explained how the elders could achieve their developmental task of accepting their lives in a broad historical context. Introducing specific utterances of older Japanese adults, especially their remarks based on the Japanese cultural background of ancestor worship, the authors argued a way to achieve the developmental task with the cultural belief in Japanese elders.

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The relationship between gratitude and wellbeing has received much attention from the current social and clinical psychologists. A recent meta-analysis indicated that dispositional gratitude has a significant positive correlation with different aspects of wellbeing (e.g., Portocarrero, Gonzalez, & Ekema-Agbaw, 2020; Jans-Beken et al.,2020).

In its idealistic sense, gratitude assumes mutual respect between the person expressing gratitude and that receiving it (Kant, 1797/1991). Based on the above assumption, gratitude implies the recognition that the self is supported in the relationship with mutual trust and respect, suggesting a positive correlation between gratitude and wellbeing.

Is the relationship between gratitude and wellbeing identical at every developmental stage, such as adolescence and adulthood? The type and targets of gratitude leading to wellbeing

might differ depending on the developmental stage. The present study examined the relationship between gratitude and wellbeing in the elderly, based on the previous studies on gratitude in elderly Japanese people.

## **Characteristics of the elderly**

General characteristics of older adults (roughly defined as persons over the age of 65), which include the shrinking of their physically active territory and awareness of the limit of their lifetime, approaching death, and trying to understand the meaning of their lives. Erikson (1950) proposed eight stages of psychological development in the lifespan. The eighth stage is the stage of “integrity versus despair,” at which point people have the task of valuing their lives in a historical context and finally accepting death with placidness. Today, improving older adults’ wellbeing is a significant issue in many countries.

Previous studies on gratitude in the elderly have indicated the following characteristics. Chopik, Newton, Ryan, Kashdan, and Jarden (2019) suggested that dispositional gratitude would increase with age. They conducted three surveys with 31,206 participants aged 15-90 and demonstrated that older adults consistently showed more dispositional gratitude than middle-aged and younger adults. Moreover, Portocarrero, Gonzalez, and Ekema-Agbaw (2020) indicated through a meta-analysis that the relationship between dispositional gratitude and wellbeing (subjective wellbeing) was more robust in older adults. Why is dispositional gratitude higher and the relationship between dispositional gratitude and wellbeing stronger in older adults?

One possibility is that factors such as occupational achievement might be more correlated with and contributed to wellbeing in adolescents and younger adults. High dispositional gratitude in older adults might be developed by increased opportunities to explore the cause of their happiness. Moreover, recognition of happiness resulting from others might increase in old age.

## **Two perspectives of gratitude in the elderly**

Previous studies have suggested two main types of psychological explanations about the characteristics of gratitude in the elderly; the socioemotional selectivity theory and the gerotranscendence theory. The former theory explains why older adults experience gratitude more often through the following process (Chopik et al., 2017; Killen & Macaskill, 2015). (a) Older people become aware that their lifetime is limited; (b) which leads them to select personally positive and meaningful events and focus and remember stimuli with positive valence;

(c) which is ensured by investing in social interactions with close and significant others and striving to maintain intimate and healthy relationships; (d) close and positive relationships with others are promoted by gratitude.

The gerotranscendence theory, suggested by Tornstam (2005), is based on older adults' qualitative data, the psychoanalytic theory of C. G. Jung, and Zen Buddhism, among others. According to this theory, (a) people in the process of aging transit from a materialistic and rationalistic perspective to a more cosmic and transcendental view of life; (b) in contrast to the socioemotional selectivity theory, this theory proposes that people often feel a close empathic relationship with the universe, and redefine life and death in this context; (c) people increase the feelings of affinity with past generations and decrease interest in superficial social interactions according to the defined life and death in the universe; (d) it is inferred that these individuals come to feel gratitude towards the universe, which embraces everything.

The above theories seem to give contrasting explanations about gratitude in the elders. In the theory of socioemotional selectivity, the target of gratitude is concrete, i.e., people that currently have comfortable relationships. Conversely, in the gerotranscendence theory, the primary target is abstract, i.e., cosmological time and space, which may make relations with some people meaningful.

Moreover, gratitude in the gerotranscendence theory can be interpreted as a medium of solving developmental tasks in old age based on Erikson's psychological development stages. In contrast, it is not clear how the socioemotional selectivity theory's explanation of elderly peoples' gratitude could achieve the developmental task of valuing their lives in a historical context. Thus, we may raise a question whether the theory could provide a way to resolve the elder's developmental task. It was expected that studies on elderly Japanese people might shed light on the issue.

## Gerotranscendence studies in Japan

Gerotranscendence studies in Japan might provide new perspectives on gratitude for limited people having close relationships, suggesting the significance of a person's life in the world and the link with wellbeing. Masui et al. (2010) applied Tornstam's concept of gerotranscendence to elderly Japanese people. They conducted interviews with older Japanese adults using the interview guide developed by Tornstam (2005) and constructed the Japanese version of the Gerotranscendence Scale. Their study indicated that Tornstam's framework was generally applicable to older Japanese adults, although there were several disagreements. For example, older Japanese adults mentioned a bond with their family, deceased wife or husband, and ancestors instead of a universal perspective. Moreover, Ono and Fukuoka (2018) conducted

interviews about the consciousness of elderly peoples' bonds and obtained the following utterances among others; "I started to pray to my husband in front of the Buddhist altar after he died. I rarely recall him, but he sometimes appears in my dream," and "I rarely think about my parents these days, but I visit the grave once a month." Furthermore, Ono and Fukuoka indicated that the consciousness of bond was related to wellbeing.

These responses are seemingly identical to the gratitude of older adults described in the theory of socioemotional selectivity. However, it might be different when considering the traditional view of life and death in Japanese people. Knowledge of traditional religious belief in Japan, such as ancestor worship, which refers to "the totality of the belief in the superhuman power of the dead who are recognized as ancestors, and the rituals based on this belief" (Morioka, 1984) help understand the responses of older Japanese adults. Japanese ancestor worship generally includes the following characteristics.

- People are buried in the relative's grave a few days after they die. The spirits are prepared for the afterlife through death rituals.
- Relatives, mainly direct descendants, hold memorial services for the spirit of the dead, and the spirit watches over the living descendants.
- The spirit visits home for a few days, several times a year, and spends time together with living relatives (*Bon*). Some houses have mortuary tablets and altars, where the spirits of ancestors are enshrined.
- Finally, the spirit moves to the mountain or the sea, becoming the god without individuality, and watches over living people.

Ancestor worship and related rituals, including *Bon*, present an image of the relationship between the world after death and the present world. The two worlds have been considered close together (Yanagita, 1975). Many Japanese people visit their ancestors' graves and parents' homes during the *Bon* period even today. The sense of familiarity and gratitude towards ancestors and the deceased described above are based on the view of the world and history, which is in the background of ancestor worship. In other words, confirming the bond with actual, close relatives and feeling gratitude to them implies expressing gratitude for ancestors and nature.

However, recently, ancestor worship in Japan has been changing. Ancestor worship was closely connected with the traditional Japanese "*Ie* (family) system," in which the eldest son takes over the household and takes charge of rituals related to ancestor worship. After World War II, however, it has become more and more challenging to maintain the customs of ancestor

worship especially in urban areas because of people's free movement and a decrease in the birth rate, among others (Matsumoto 1997; Morioka, 1984). Maintaining the *Ie* system is indispensable for holding rituals, and maintaining the ancestor-centered view of the world has become problematic in contemporary society.

## Final remarks

This article focused on gratitude as a factor improving the wellbeing of older adults. We introduced two theories explaining gratitude in older adults; the socioemotional selectivity theory and the gerotranscendence theory. The former suggests the tendency of limiting the target of gratitude to close interpersonal relationships. However, does the tendency of showing gratitude to close interpersonal relationships lead to identifying the significance of one's life? Specific utterances of older Japanese adults, especially their remarks based on the Japanese cultural background of ancestor worship, give clues to answering this question. Some of the Japanese elders describe intimate relationships with people close to them and express gratitude to relatives and ancestors. Therefore, cultural beliefs may expand the world of older adults, who are usually constrained in their physically and psychologically narrow reality. Older adults might be able to feel the significance of their life based on their beliefs. We must consider now how to support older adults to construct new perspectives of the world and history in the current situations.

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