

Relationship between Gratitude, Resilience and Well-Being among College Students

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ABSTRACT

College students are prone to more academic, career, and social pressures that could impact their well-being (Prasad, 2023). This study intends to examine the relationship between gratitude, resilience and well-being of male and female college students in Chennai through a mixed method research design. A total of 150 students were selected using convenient sampling, with mean age of 26.5 years. Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith et al., 2008) and General Well-being Measure (Verma & Verma, 1989) were the tools used to collect the data. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the qualitative data. The findings showed that males and females have exhibited moderate gratitude, medium low resilience and low well-being. Correlation analysis revealed no significant relationship between gratitude and resilience, and gratitude and well-being. However, resilience and well-being exhibited small but significant relationship. Additionally, the study also confirms that there is no significant gender difference between the variables. Four dimensions of gratitude were explored such as reasons for feeling grateful, gratitude practices, factors that influence the sense of gratitude and reasons for not expressing gratitude using qualitative analysis. The findings highlight the need for interventions to improve resilience and well-being for the sample studied. Further, qualitative analysis emphasize the need to customize gratitude interventions as it is found in the present study that social learning, religious teaching and personal factors play major role in gratitude formation among college students.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Resilience, Well-being, College Students*

Well-being is an outcome of positive emotions where people perceive that their lives are going well (Vaghela, 2021). Individuals who have a high level of positive emotions and few negative emotions, who also feel satisfied with their lives, are people who are said to be having high subjective well-being (Kar, 2021). Well-being is crucial for college students' overall health, influencing their academic success, emotional stability and long-term personal development. Gratitude and resilience has a major role to play in enhancing well-being as it is evident in numerous studies. Study conducted by Sewari (2022) found that gratitude enhances both social connections and serves as a protective factor against stress, thereby improving one's well-being. Bono et al.

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(2020) revealed that students with higher resilience reported better coping mechanisms during adversity, thus enhancing well-being.

Gratitude is defined as the sense of thankfulness and happiness in response to receiving gift, either a tangible benefit (e.g., a present, favor) given by someone or a fortunate happenstance (e.g., a beautiful day) (American Psychological Association, 2018). Research conducted by Kardaş and Yalçın (2021), suggested gratitude to be positively correlated with resilience, psychological well-being and other variables, having significant positive influences on psychological well-being and resilience through mediating variables by enhancing positive emotions, promoting optimism and preventing depression and stress.

Resilience is defined as “the ability to bounce back or recover from stress” (Smith et al., 2008). According to Masten (2001), The two factors are involved in the judgment of resilience. Firstly, a person must encounter a ‘significant threat’, which has the potential to generate positive outcomes. Secondly, the resilience would be judged based on the favorable or good outcome following an adversity. Fedrickson (2004) found from his study that people even during highly stressful events, were likely to showcase positive emotions like gratitude. His study concluded that frequency of pleasant emotions positively correlated with measure of person’s resilience, whereas unpleasant emotions pointed a negative correlation with resilience. Students with higher resilience are psychologically healthy and are less likely to have negative emotions (Haddadi & Besharat, 2010; Shi et al., 2016; Blackmon et al., 2017; Arslan, 2019).

Well-being is a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life (American Psychological Association, 2018). Practicing gratitude highly influence mental health and emotional stability, improving happiness and satisfaction with life (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Gratitude interventions such as journaling or expressing appreciation have been proved to elevate overall happiness and reduce emotional distress, lasting its effects over time, addressing common psychological challenges and improving overall well-being (Basit, Ali, Rahman, & Shah, 2024).

Majority of the previous studies were conducted in other cultural contexts (Kardaş & Yalcin, 2021; Caleon, Ilham, Ong, & Tan, 2019; Calleja et al., 2024; Yang, Zhang, Li, Jia, & Kong, 2024), projecting the importance of research in Indian context to understand the cultural influence in experiencing gratitude, resilience and well-being. There is a lack of mixed methods research that intends to combine the statistical findings with personal narratives.

The objectives of the present study were

- To measure the gratitude, resilience and well-being of college students
- To understand the relationship between gratitude, resilience and general well-being among college students.
- To understand the difference between male and female college students on gratitude, resilience and well-being.
- To analyze the gratitude practices and the factors that influence gratitude.

The following were the hypotheses

- H₀1: There will be no significant correlation between gratitude and resilience.
- H₀2: There will be no significant correlation between gratitude and well-being.

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- H₀₃: There will be no significant correlation between resilience and well-being
- H₀₄: There will be no significant difference between male and female college students in the scores of gratitude.
- H₀₅: There will be no significant difference between male and female college students in the scores of resilience.
- H₀₆: There will be no significant difference between male and female college students in the scores of well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample included 150 participants, 83 female and 67 male college students with the mean age 26.5 years, with minimum age of 20 years and maximum age of 28 years consisting of postgraduate students from Chennai, participants who gave their consent to participate in their study. Convenient sampling method was adopted. The study excluded students who have clinical mental health conditions.

Instruments

Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) (2002) developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang was used. The tool has 6 items, designed to measure individual's disposition towards feeling grateful in daily life. The scale is rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with third and sixth item being reverse scored. The scale has a strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.82-0.87$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.70-0.80$). The scale has strong construct validity with positive correlation with life satisfaction and well-being, negative correlations with depression and envy (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

Brief Resilience Scale (2008) developed by Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard was used. It is a self-report scale consisting 6 statements, scored on a 5-point likert scale that ranges from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' with items 2, 4 and 6 are reverse scored before calculating the mean score from the total scores. Higher scores represent higher resilience and lower scores represents lower resilience. The scale has a fine internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.80 - 0.91 (Athallah & Zinna, 2021). The scale demonstrates strong construct validity with positive correlation with optimism and well-being, with negative correlation with anxiety and depression (Smith et al., 2008).

General Well-Being Measure (1989) developed by Santhosh Verma and Amita Verma measures the current level of general well-being. The tool has 20 items, higher scores depicting higher well-being. The reliability was measured using K.R. 20 formula and was found to be 0.98. The reliability for the English version was derived with rate of 0.91 and for Hindi, the reliability was 0.86. The validity of the scale was also proven to be high (Vaghela, 2021). The scale exhibits good concurrent validity, positively correlating with other established well-being scales and mental health scales (Verma & Verma, 1989).

Procedure

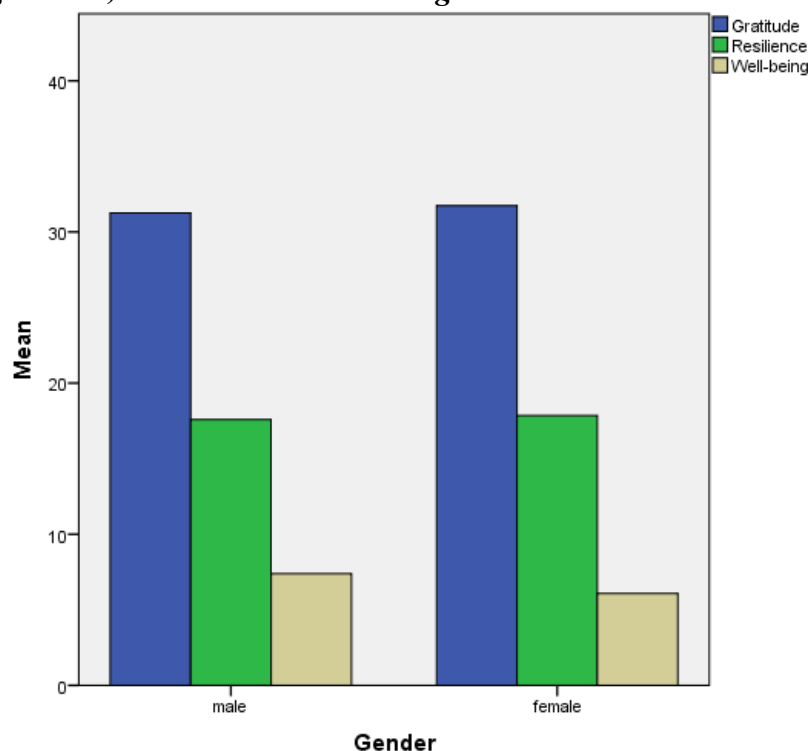
The quantitative data was collected using the above mentioned standardized tools from all the 150 participants. To have an in depth understanding of gratitude of the participants, 22 participants were selected from different levels of gratitude scores and their responses were obtained through interview. For this qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview

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schedule was prepared based on review of related literature and discussion with experts in the field. Codes were generated from the responses from which themes emanated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 Represents the bar graph of male and female participants' mean score on gratitude, resilience and well-being



From Figure 1, it is understood that male and female participants show similar trend of scores on the variables, gratitude, resilience and well-being respectively with both male and female participants showing moderate level of gratitude, medium low level of resilience and low level of well-being. This is aligning with the results of research conducted by Arnett (2015), who states that urban college students often struggle with mental health issues, adjustment stress and lack of institutional emotional support that prevent them from higher resilience scores. The lowest well-being scores might be due to the postgraduate students struggling with internships, part time jobs and academic responsibilities, leading to burnout and lower well-being as reported by Kumari & Sharma (2019).

Table 1 Represents the descriptive statistics of gratitude, resilience and well-being

Variable	n	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Gratitude	150	31.53	3.587	-.663	.307
Resilience	150	17.73	2.699	.977	.889
Well-being	150	6.66	4.940	.877	.295

The table 1 shows a right skewed distribution (positive skewness), suggesting a not perfectly normal data for gratitude. It also shows a right skewed distribution (positive skewness), suggesting a not perfectly normal data for resilience. The table also shows a positively skewed distribution of well-being, also suggesting a not perfectly normal data. Hence non-parametric tests were used for statistical analysis.

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Table 2 Represents the Spearman's rank correlation on variables

Variables	Gratitude	Resilience	Well-being
Gratitude	1	0.34	-0.005
Resilience		1	.173*
Well-being			1

* $p < 0.05$

From Table 2, is found that there is no significant relationship between gratitude and resilience, hence the hypothesis H₀₁ stating 'There will be no significant correlation between gratitude and resilience' is accepted. A research study on resilience states that multiple psychological mechanisms like social support, optimism, and meaning-making influence resilience (Southwick & Charney, 2018). Also, gratitude fosters resilience only when individuals actively engage in cognitive appraisal (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

The table also shows that there is no statistically significant relationship between gratitude and well-being, hence the hypothesis H₀₂ stating 'There will be no significant correlation between gratitude and well-being' is accepted. The impact of gratitude on well-being can depend on different aspects like individual personality traits, the measurement variations in the tools of gratitude and well-being, cultural factors, as gratitude behavior in a culture could not be applied to another culture, impacting the well-being scores (Sansone & Sansone, 2010).

The table also shows a small but statistically significant positive correlation between resilience and well-being, hence the hypothesis H₀₃ stating 'There will be no significant correlation between resilience and well-being' is not accepted. This aligns with the research conducted by Hu, Zhang and Wang (2015), who found that resilience correlates with subjective well-being but its effect is moderated by other variables such as optimism, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence.

Table 3 Represents the difference in gratitude among male and female college students

Variable	Gender	n	Mean	S.D	p-value
Gratitude	Male	67	31.25	3.513	.299
	Female	83	31.75	3.652	

Table 3 shows that there is no significant difference in gratitude of male and female participants, hence the hypothesis H₀₄ stating "There will be no significant difference between men and women in the scores of gratitude" is accepted. This corroborates with the research of Kashdan, Mishra, Breen and Froh, (2009), indicating that irrespective of gender, younger generation engage in gratitude practices equally, especially in academic and professional setting where both the genders are exposed to similar stressors and coping mechanism. The mean score of both males and females fall under moderate level of gratitude, reflecting the collectivistic nature of Indian culture, which while at the same time fosters gratitude and also simultaneously pressurizes students to meet academic milestones, limiting them to reach the greatest depth of gratitude (Kumar & Dixit, 2014).

Table 4 Represents the difference in resilience among male and female college students

Variable	Gender	n	Mean	S.D	p-value
Resilience	Male	67	17.58	2.407	.574
	Female	83	17.86	2.922	

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Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference in the variable resilience between male and female participants, hence the hypothesis H₀₅ stating “There will be no significant difference between men and women in the scores of resilience” is accepted. The mean scores of the male and female participants demonstrate medium low level of resilience. Resilience is more related to personality and coping mechanism than gender based (Bonanno et al., 2011). Mastrokoulou et al. (2024) conducted a study that revealed that first year university students frequently experience higher level of anxiety, stress and depression due to the challenges faced in adapting to novel academic and social environments. This could have contributed to lower resilience levels during the transitional phase. Another study shows that resilience is equally present in both men and women when adjusting to stress, self-efficacy and social support (Campbell-Sills, Forde, & Stein, 2009).

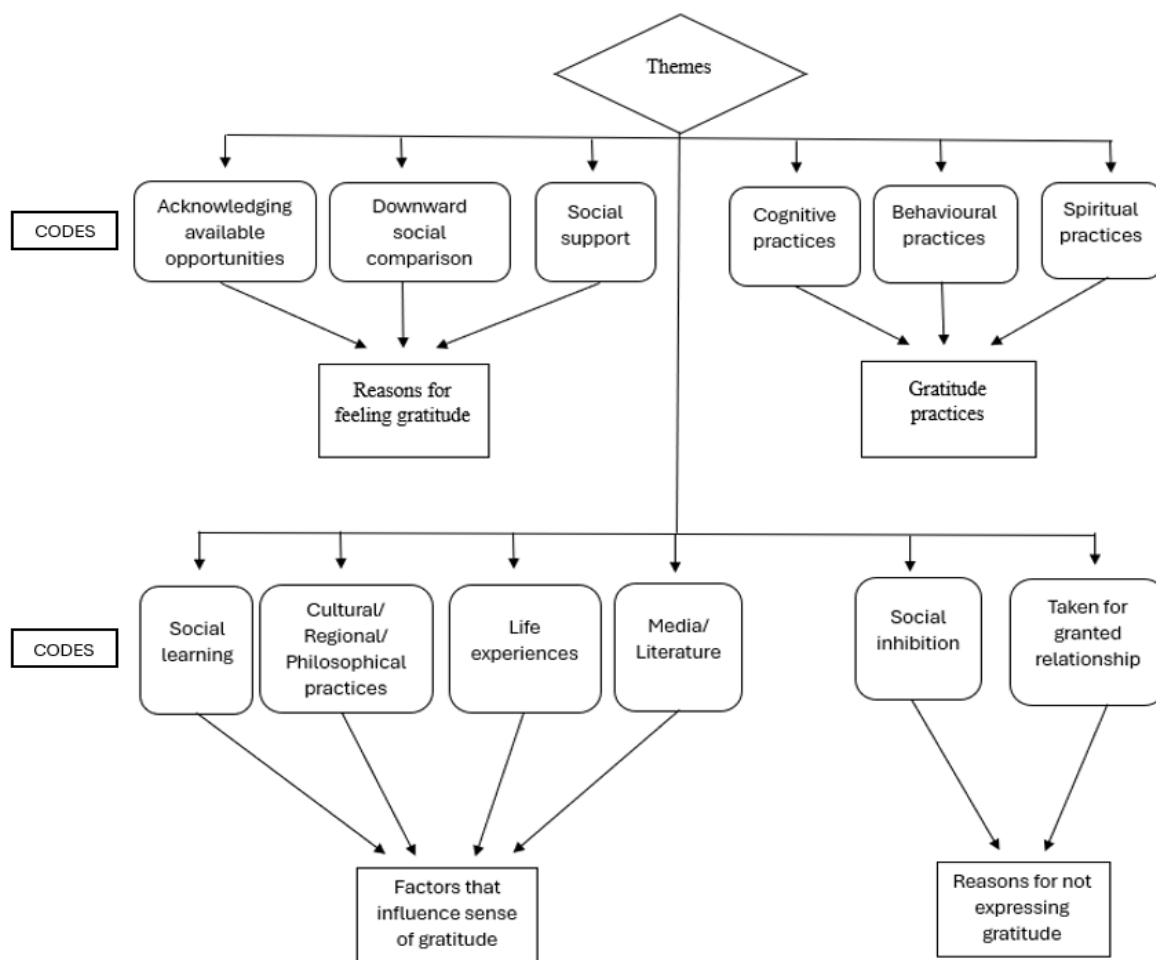
Table 5 Represents the difference in general well-being among male and female college students

Variable	Gender	n	Mean	S.D	p-value
Well-being	Male	67	7.39	5.140	.111
	Female	83	6.07	4.721	

Table 5 shows that well-being has no significant difference in gender, hence the hypothesis H₀₆ stating “There will be no significant difference between men and women in the scores of well-being” is accepted. Lucas and Diener (2008) stated that personality factors like extraversion and emotional stability can be better predictors of well-being than gender, highlighting that there is no statistically significant gender difference in well-being. Eryilmaz (2011) also mentioned in his study that men and women are no different when controlling life satisfaction, meaning in life and autonomy. However, an earlier study explained the possibility of gender difference in well-being to men’s problem focused coping strategies and women’s emotion focused coping strategies (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). The mean score shows the low well-being levels of the sample population. This could be due to the higher prevalence of academic burnout in Indian students (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009), higher sleep deprivation, poor diet and sedentary lifestyles which negatively impact physical and psychological well-being in college students (Kumar & Akoijam, 2017).

Thematic Analysis

Figure 2 Represent the themes emanated from the qualitative analysis of gratitude practices of the participants



Reasons for Feeling Grateful

Analyzing the responses of the subjects to the interview, the following codes were identified such as acknowledging available opportunities, downward social comparison and social support. Some participants acknowledged the opportunities they have in terms of education, career advancement and material resources (“I got my first ever laptop”), health recovery and other blessings. Some participants compared themselves with persons facing economic hardship (“I am able to afford many things when so many people could not afford it”) which narrow down to code of downward social comparison aligning with the social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), which explains how people derive gratitude from contrasting their life with others who are less fortunate. Additionally, students reported social support as a major reason to feel grateful, where the students reported regular gratitude towards their family members (parents, siblings, grandparents), friends, teachers and mentors (“I can’t forget a friend who helped me financially at time of need”). After grouping similar responses of the participants who scored high and moderate on gratitude scale, three major codes were identified namely acknowledging available opportunities, downward social comparison and social support as the major reasons for participants to be grateful. Participants with low gratitude scores were unable to reflect on these reasons for feeling grateful.

Gratitude Practices

On further analyzing the responses, cognitive practices, behavioral practices and spiritual practices emerged as different gratitude practices among different participants. Firstly, the cognitive practices include the reflective thinking before sleep, journaling gratitude experiences and using self-affirmations. This corroborates with the positive psychology principles of Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005), highlighting the importance of journaling as an effective tool to promote well-being. Behavioral practices comprise of verbal acknowledgement (“thank you”), letter writing, gift-giving, acts of reciprocity, usage of humor (“I tell my friends at times that I have such amazing friends who have not yet abandoned me, that’s a real dedication”), sarcasm (“whenever I do something stupid, I say things like oh great, spilled my coffee, thanks for wonderful start to my day”) and physical gestures (hugs, quality time). This interpersonal nature of gratitude can be connected with the interpersonal communication theory of Gordon, Impett, Kogan and Oveis (2012), emphasizing the importance of gratitude on social bonds. Spiritual practices like prayer, meditation and fasting (“Doing fasting when some good things happen”) supporting the mindfulness theory of Kabat-Zinn (2003), considering gratitude as an effective tool for building present-moment awareness. However, participants with low gratitude demonstrated a lack of intentional gratitude practices, furthermore stating that they used to miss out expressing their gratitude most of the time.

Factors that Influence the Sense of Gratitude

Participants revealed that social learning, cultural/ religious/ philosophical teachings, life experiences and media/ literature were the influential factors that developed the sense of gratitude. Similar to the social learning theory of Bandura (1977), students develop their sense of gratitude through observing their parents, teachers and spiritual leaders. The cultural/philosophical/ religious teachings include the moral and religious teachings in Hinduism, christianism and from Indian philosophical texts (‘Thirukural’, ‘Bhagavad Gita’, ‘Mahabharata’, ‘Ramayana’). This can be termed as a cultural conditioning Triandis (1995) in gratitude development. The life experiences like overcoming adversities, health challenges and financial struggles also reinforces the importance of appreciation in one’s life (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Media/ literature also plays an important role in shaping awareness towards gratitude (“Man’s Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl” and “Arthamulla Indhu Madham by Kannadasan in tamil) were quoted by two participants who scored high in gratitude scale. These findings support the research study conducted by Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski and Miller (2011), who highlights that gratitude development is enhanced when individuals are exposed to gratitude promoting environments in childhood. However, low gratitude students suggested that they had not consciously reflected on the role of life experiences and other aspects influencing their gratitude.

Reasons for not expressing gratitude

Participants highlighted the taken for granted relationships (“I have never acknowledged my parents’ efforts towards my education”) and social inhibition (“I have not expressed me being thankful to people with whom I am not close with”) playing a major role in not expressing gratitude at the right time. Parents, especially fathers, siblings and teachers were often unacknowledged for their contributions. Algoe, Gable and Maisel, (2010) conducted research highlighting gratitude towards family members are often taken for granted and neglected than articulated. Some students also mentioned that they only recognized gratitude once they have lost their loved ones due to lack of awareness during the right time (“I never reciprocated my gratitude towards my grandparents, realizing their efforts after they left

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us”). Cultural norms of collectivistic society often inhibited expressing gratitude directly towards non family members (Tsang, 2006).

Implications

This study highlights the need for intervention to improve resilience and well-being of the participants of the present study. Further from the qualitative analysis, it is learned that there is a need to customize gratitude interventions as it is found that participants of the present study lack necessary social skills to express gratitude both to people with whom they are close with (taken for granted) and also to acquaintances or people with whom they are not very close with (as they don't perceive the need to express gratitude) implicating the need to customize gratitude interventions that incorporate appropriate social skills. The findings also reveal that books/media/literature play an important role in formation of gratitude. This can be considered by educationists to incorporate in their syllabus/ curriculum/ books/ literature that can help in developing values like gratitude. Another strength of this research is that being exposed to such an exercise may stimulate the cognitive process of people who have scored low on gratitude to engage in thought processes that will facilitate appreciation of the benefits they are endowed with.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the relationship between gratitude, resilience and well-being among college students. The results indicate that there is no relationship between gratitude and resilience, and gratitude and well-being, but there is a small but statistically significant relationship between resilience and well-being. The findings also prove that there is no significance of gender difference between the variables. The qualitative analysis throws light on reasons for feeling grateful and factors that influence gratitude. The study also revealed different gratitude practices like thoughts (cognitive), actions (behavioral) and faith-based or spiritual practices. Further social inhibition and taken for granted attitude are the major reasons for not expressing gratitude. Depending on their subscription to various religions, their gratitude practices were influenced by different religions, scriptures or practices or various cultural literature. While quantitative results do not support strong links between gratitude and other variables, qualitative results showcase the complex and personal nature of gratitude. These findings emphasize understanding gratitude as a multifaceted experience by individual, social and cultural factors that pave the way for future research and interventions aiming to foster well-being among diverse populations.

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Conflict of Interest

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