



GIVING THANKS BY GIVING BACK: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRATITUDE AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG PRESCHOOLERS

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(Received: March 08, 2025; Accepted: April 08, 2025)

Abstract: Gratitude is a fundamental social-emotional construct that has been associated with prosocial behaviors. While extensive research has highlighted its positive connections to well-being and social relationships in adults and adolescents, less is known about how gratitude emerges in early childhood and how it relates to prosocial behaviors. This study examines the multidimensional nature of gratitude in preschool children, focusing on different aspects—expressing thanks, appreciating what one has, positive social comparison, and savoring the present moment—and their associations with prosocial behaviors such as helping, sharing, and cooperating. A sample of 478 preschoolers was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) to explore these relationships. The findings show that appreciating what one has is positively associated with prosocial behavior, whereas other dimensions, such as gratitude expression and positive social comparison, do not demonstrate significant associations. These results provide insights into the role of gratitude in early childhood and its potential relevance for educational approaches aimed at fostering gratitude and social responsibility in young children.

Keywords. Gratitude, prosocial behaviors, preschoolers, relationships

1. Introduction

Gratitude is a vital social-emotional construct that plays a significant role in shaping human personality and fostering prosocial behaviors. Extensive research on adults has highlighted the positive impact of gratitude on well-being and social connections, emphasizing its function as a moral motivator that enhances interpersonal relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Algoe, 2012). Studies have shown that gratitude promotes prosocial behavior, such as helping, sharing, and cooperating, which are essential components of harmonious social interactions (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Despite this substantial body of work, much of the existing research focuses on adults and adolescents, leaving a notable gap in

understanding how gratitude manifests and interacts with prosocial behavior in early childhood.

Children in the preschool years are in a critical period of social-emotional development, making it an opportune time to cultivate virtues such as gratitude. Research on children has primarily centered on gratitude as a moral emotion and its developmental trajectory. For instance, Froh et al. (2014) demonstrated that gratitude interventions in children could enhance their social-emotional skills and foster positive peer relationships. However, these studies often rely on adult-based measures of gratitude, adapted for children, which may not fully capture the unique expressions of gratitude in early childhood. Furthermore, while gratitude is linked to prosocial tendencies, few studies have systematically examined the specific components of gratitude—such as expressing thanks, appreciating what one has, social comparison, and savoring the present moment—and their relationship with prosocial behavior in young children.

This study addresses these gaps by applying a novel gratitude scale tailored for preschool children and exploring how its distinct components interact with prosocial behavior. The findings will not only enhance our understanding of gratitude's role in early social development but also contribute to the design of age-appropriate interventions that foster gratitude and social responsibility from a young age. By focusing on a population that has received limited attention in gratitude research, this study represents a pioneering effort to expand the theoretical and practical understanding of gratitude in early childhood. Moreover, the study's emphasis on the multidimensional nature of gratitude provides a nuanced approach that goes beyond the general assessments commonly employed in existing literature.

In addition to filling a crucial research gap, this work has significant implications for educational practice. Demonstrating how gratitude contributes to prosocial behaviors, the study offers actionable insights for designing programs encouraging young children to engage in meaningful social interactions. These contributions underscore the innovative and impactful nature of the research, bridging existing knowledge from studies on adults and older children to the underexplored domain of preschool-aged populations.

2. Literature Review

What is Gratitude?

For children aged 5–6, gratitude is in the early stages of development, gradually being nurtured and cultivated. At this age, gratitude often appears as a "pre-gratitude" experience, which becomes more complex and fully formed as the child matures (Hussong et al., 2019). Based on definitions from the perspective of Positive Psychology proposed by authors such as Wood et al. (2010), Sansone & Sansone (2010), and Cunha (2019), we define gratitude in 5–6-

year-olds as an emotional state that arises when children recognize, appreciate, and value the positive aspects of life, expressed through corresponding behaviours. Gratitude extends beyond simply feeling thankful for the help or actions of others; it also involves recognizing and valuing positive elements in the environment, within oneself, and in relationships.

What is Prosocial Behaviour?

Prosocial behavior has been widely defined in previous research as voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, sharing, comforting, cooperating, and showing concern (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Carlo et al., 2003). From the perspectives of developmental and positive psychology, prosocial behavior reflects empathy and altruistic motivation while also playing a crucial role in fostering positive social relationships (Batson, 1991; Perner et al., 2005). In this study, prosocial behavior is conceptualized based on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by Goodman (1997). Specifically, it refers to the extent to which an individual demonstrates positive behaviors toward others, including: (1) willingness to share, (2) readiness to help those in need, (3) concern for others' feelings, (4) kindness toward younger children, and (5) frequent engagement in helping behaviors. This definition emphasizes prosocial behavior not only as an expression of kindness but also as a key social skill that contributes to healthy psychological and social development.

3. Methods

Participants

This study included 478 parents, who provided information on gratitude and prosocial behavior for a total of 478 children. The sample of children had a nearly equal gender distribution, with 236 boys (49.4%) and 242 girls (50.6%). Their average age was 63.9 months ($SD = 4.2$).

A total of 240 preschool teachers participated in the study, with 124 teachers (51.7%) working in urban areas and 116 teachers (48.3%) working in rural areas. The teachers' ages ranged from under 30 to over 40 years, with a mean age of 36.2 years ($SD = 5.7$). On average, they had 12.5 years of teaching experience ($SD = 6.9$), and their experience specifically in teaching five- to six-year-old children averaged 6.8 years ($SD = 5.8$).

Additionally, 478 parents participated in the study, corresponding to the number of children represented. Among them, 79 (16.5%) were fathers, 393 (82.2%) were mothers, and 6 (1.3%) were other caregivers. The parents' average age was 34.6 years ($SD = 5.5$).

Measures

Gratitude

Based on the aforementioned definition of gratitude, Nguyen et al. (2025) developed a gratitude scale for children consisting of four subscales with 26 items, incorporating four key components: Gratitude expressing behaviors (10 items, e.g., *The child expresses good wishes to others.*), Appreciating what they have (7 items, e.g., *The child takes good care of their personal belongings and toys.*), Positive social comparison (4 items, e.g., *The child does not compare their belongings with others' to feel lacking*), and Focusing on present positives (5 items, e.g., *The child is delighted to notice positive changes in familiar things*). The scale consisted of 26 items comprising four subscales: Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from very low ("never" = 1) to very high ("very frequently" = 5), providing a structured measure of gratitude in preschool-aged children.

This questionnaire was validated, demonstrating satisfactory reliability and validity. The Cronbach's alpha values for the subscales in this study were .89, .82, .72, and .85, respectively.

Prosocial Behaviour

In this study, we used the Prosocial Behavior subscale from the parent-reported version (ages 4-10) of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), developed by Goodman (1997), to assess preschoolers' prosocial behavior. The SDQ has been shown to have predictive validity for psychiatric diagnoses across various countries, including Vietnam (Tran et al., 2004; Dang et al., 2017). This subscale consists of five items, one of which is: "I often volunteer to help others (parents, teachers, children). The subscale demonstrated high reliability in our study, with a Cronbach's alpha of .85.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to understand the distribution of each variable with the support of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Statistical analyses were conducted using structural equation modelling (SEM) to test a measurement model and a structural model to examine the role of gratitude on prosocial behaviour. Given the presence of missing values, and to avoid interpretive problems related to the normality of the data, the Mplus 8.1 with maximum likelihood estimation is used to estimate the confirmatory and structural equation models in this study. Similar to the above report, for the model estimated, we would report the following recommended goodness-of-fit indices: normed $\chi^2 < 2$; comparative fit index (CFI $> .90$); root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA $< .08$), and (SRMR $< .08$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

4. Results

Preliminary Analyses

Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson product correlations among variables included

in the current study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptives and Correlations among Study Variables

Subscale	M	SD	1. GEB	2. APPR	3. FPP	4. PSC
1. GEB	3.93	0.57	1			
2. APPR	4.11	0.56	.66**	1		
3. FPP	4.33	0.50	.69**	.65**	1	
4. PSC	3.44	0.90	.49**	.47**	.37**	1
5. PB	1.32	0.29				

***Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

GEB: Gratitude expressing behaviour

APPR: Appreciating what one has

FPP: Focusing on present positivity

PSC: Positive social comparison

PB: Procial Behaviour

The CFA provided support for the initial measurement model (normed χ^2 (956.224)/420 = 2.28; CFI = .90, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .05). All indicators demonstrated significant factor loadings on their latent variables, β s = .422 to .808 at $p < .001$ (Table 2). Besides, the Composite Reliability value for each construct ranges from .72 to .89, which is acceptable for exploratory research (Hair *et al.* 2014). All reliability and validity were assumed, and they also confirmed that all the measurement models were valid, suggesting that it was appropriate to test the structural model.

Table 2: Measurement Model

Factor	Items	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability
GEB	GEB7	0.731	0.89
	GEB8	0.696	
	GEB4	0.675	
	GEB12	0.683	
	GEB6	0.643	
	GEB13	0.672	
	GEB11	0.692	
	GEB5	0.639	
	GEB3	0.642	
	GEB2	0.665	
APPR	APPR14	0.714	0.80
	APPR9	0.601	
	APPR10	0.651	
	APPR22	0.551	
	APPR20	0.577	
	APPR24	0.661	
	APPR15	0.422	
FPP	FPP21	0.546	0.75
	FPP27	0.633	
	FPP26	0.652	
	FPP25	0.598	

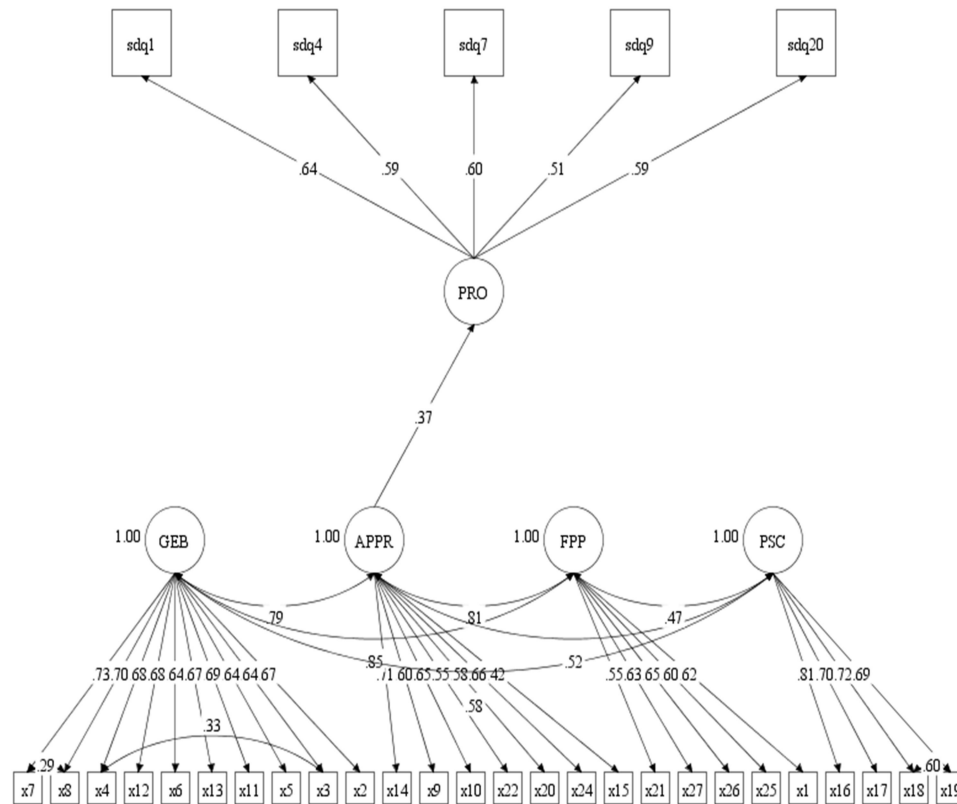
Factor	Items	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability
PSC	FPP1	0.624	0.82
	PSC16	0.808	
	PSC17	0.696	
	PSC18	0.724	
	PSC19	0.695	
PRO	SDQ1	0.635	0.72
	SDQ4	0.587	
	SDQ7	0.605	
	SDQ9	0.512	
	SDQ20	0.590	

Main Analysis

We examined the structural model of the relationship between gratitude dimensions and prosocial behavior. The model demonstrated an acceptable fit to the data (normed $\chi^2 = 2.26$, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.05). These results indicate that the relationships between the four gratitude factors and prosocial behavior were statistically tested. The results of the path analysis are presented in Fig. 1.

Cohen's (1988) guidelines were applied to interpret small ($\beta = .10$), medium ($\beta = .30$), and large ($\beta = .50$) effect sizes. As expected, Appreciating What They Have significantly predicted higher prosocial behavior ($\beta = 0.37$, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.42], $p = .008$), showing a medium effect size. However, unexpectedly, Gratitude Expressing Behavior did not significantly predict prosocial behavior ($\beta = -0.16$, 95% CI = [-0.26, 0.10], $p = .384$). Similarly, Focusing on Present Positivity was not a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.20$, 95% CI = [-0.23, 0.61], $p = .366$). Lastly, Positive Social Comparison had a negligible and non-significant effect ($\beta = 0.01$, 95% CI = [-0.06, 0.07], $p = .874$). These findings highlight that among the four dimensions of gratitude, only Appreciating What They Have was a significant predictor of prosocial behavior, suggesting that children who appreciate what they possess tend to exhibit higher levels of prosocial actions.

Fig. 1 Structural Relations Between Gratitude and Prosocial Behaviour among Preschoolers



Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between various dimensions of gratitude and prosocial behavior in preschool-aged children. The findings revealed that only the Appreciating What They Have dimension significantly predicted prosocial behavior, whereas Expressing Gratitude Behaviorally, Focusing on Present Positivity, and Positive Social Comparison did not exhibit significant effects.

When children appreciate what they have, they develop a sense of sufficiency and become more willing to share with others as a way of "*paying it forward*." The concept of paying it forward refers to responding to acts of kindness by extending goodwill to others rather than repaying the original benefactor. Research has demonstrated that gratitude plays a crucial role in strengthening social bonds and fostering prosocial behavior. Specifically, experiencing gratitude can create a sense of obligation to help others, even those who were not directly responsible for the initial benefit received (Vitelli, 2015).

Previous research on adolescents and adults has explored the multifaceted nature of gratitude and its impact on prosocial behavior. Li et al. (2022) employed a three-dimensional

model of gratitude, encompassing grateful affect, grateful cognition, and grateful behavior, to examine its relationship with prosocial behavior among adolescents. Their study found that all three dimensions positively correlated with prosocial behavior in adolescents, suggesting that both the emotional experience of gratitude and its cognitive and behavioral expressions can enhance prosocial tendencies. Ma and Chan (2024) focused on the role of psychological resilience as a mediator between gratitude and prosocial behavior in adults. While their study did not explicitly dissect gratitude into specific components, it emphasized the overall impact of a grateful disposition on fostering prosocial actions through enhanced resilience.

However, the current study's finding that only the Appreciating What They Have dimension significantly predicts prosocial behavior in preschoolers may be attributed to developmental factors. Preschool-aged children are in the early stages of cognitive and emotional development, and the ability to appreciate one's possessions is a concrete concept that they can grasp. This appreciation may directly influence their willingness to share and help others. Children may exhibit gratitude behaviors, but if these behaviors arise from politeness, social conventions, obligation, or imitation rather than genuine appreciation, they do not necessarily lead to prosocial actions. For example, a child who receives a toy may say "thank you" and keep it without any intention of sharing. Regarding positive social comparison, it can also lead to self-satisfaction, which may influence its predictive value for prosocial behavior. For instance, a child may feel lucky to have a toy that another child does not, but this does not mean they will share it. Similarly, focusing on present positivity does not necessarily translate into kind actions. For example, a child may be delighted to receive a favorite toy and simply enjoy the happiness it brings, without considering sharing it with others. Perhaps most importantly, the ability to share is likely to be greater when a child feels a sense of abundance or sufficiency. These aspects may reflect gratitude; however, they do not necessarily create a deep enough sense of fulfillment for the child to share with others, as does truly appreciating what they have.

5. Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

This study contributes to the understanding of how specific dimensions of gratitude influence prosocial behavior in early childhood, a relatively underexplored area of research. By examining gratitude as a multidimensional construct, the study provides a nuanced perspective that can inform targeted interventions aimed at fostering prosocial behavior in young children.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design of the study limits causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the development of gratitude dimensions and their long-term impact on

prosocial behavior. Additionally, the study's sample may lack diversity in terms of socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. Future research should incorporate more heterogeneous samples to enhance external validity.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the role of gratitude in shaping prosocial behavior in preschoolers, showing that only Appreciating What They Have significantly predicts their willingness to help others. This suggests that when young children recognize sufficiency in what they have, they become more inclined to pay it forward. In contrast, Expressing Gratitude Behaviorally, Positive Social Comparison, and Focusing on Present Positivity did not predict prosocial behavior, likely due to the cognitive and socio-emotional demands of these dimensions, which may develop later in childhood. These findings emphasize the importance of fostering appreciation in early childhood as a key pathway to prosocial behavior. Future research should explore how different dimensions of gratitude evolve over time and their long-term impact on social development.

Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by Hue University, under Grant number DHH2024-03-200.

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