

The Journal of Positive Psychology

Dedicated to furthering research and promoting good practice

ISSN: 1743-9760 (Print) 1743-9779 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpos20>

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To cite this article: Frank D. Fincham & Ross W. May (2020): Generalized gratitude and prayers of gratitude in marriage, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/17439760.2020.1716053](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1716053)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2020.1716053>



Published online: 16 Jan 2020.



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Generalized gratitude and prayers of gratitude in marriage

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ABSTRACT

Although gratitude research has begun to examine how gratitude to God or a divine being relates to human behavior research on gratitude in romantic relationships has not yet addressed this type of gratitude. Because gratitude to God is typically expressed through prayer, this study examined whether generalized gratitude and prayers of gratitude were independently related to relationship satisfaction in 95 married couples. Data analysis using the Actor Partner Interdependence Model showed intrapersonal associations (actor effects) between both forms of gratitude and marital satisfaction. Wives' prayers of gratitude also predicted husbands' marital satisfaction but not vice versa. This gender difference is explained in terms of gender differences in religious involvement, in gratitude, and in awareness and expression of emotion. The need for including a theistic component in future marital research is emphasized and the implications for work in applied settings are outlined.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 October 2019
Accepted 23 December 2019

KEYWORDS

Gratitude; prayers of gratitude; marital quality; dyadic analysis

"Properly understood and applied, it [prayer] is the most potent instrument of action."

Mahatma Gandhi

Consistent with a substantial body of research showing the positive effects of gratitude on individual well-being and health (e.g. Emmons & Mishra, 2012; Jans-Beken et al., *in press*), gratitude is also related to the perceived quality of relationships (e.g. Algoe, 2012, 2019; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010), as well as characteristics that foster their development and maintenance, such as forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2013).

Like the broader research literature on gratitude, however, research on gratitude in romantic relationships has paid little attention to how gratitude to God or a divine being relates to human behavior. This is important for three reasons. First, over 80% of the world's population are religiously affiliated, with the majority of these believers identifying with one of the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, namely, Christianity, Islam or Judaism (Pew Research Center, 2012). Second, most world religions promote gratitude as a desirable attribute (Carman & Streng, 1989; Emmons & Crumpler, 2000) and this is likely to manifest in, *inter alia*, gratitude towards God. Third, for many people of faith religious beliefs are a core motivation for their behavior. Thus, a more complete understanding of gratitude in human behavior requires examination of gratitude to God.

Although limited, research on gratitude to God is not altogether absent in the broader research literature on

gratitude. There is evidence to suggest that gratitude to God is related to well-being over and beyond that of general gratitude. For example, Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen, Galler, and Krumrei (2011) showed that feeling grateful to God accounted for variance in psychological well-being beyond that attributed to general gratitude. In the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, gratitude to God was inversely related to depressive symptoms as well as physical health symptoms (Krause, Hayward, Bruce, & Woolever, 2014). Gratitude to God has been shown to relate to a biomarker, lower hemoglobin A1C, in women but not men (Krause, Emmons, Ironson, & Hill, 2017). Krause, Emmons, and Ironson (2015) in a large scale, national survey found that gratitude to God was related to higher levels of hope, which was, in turn, related to higher self-rated overall health and fewer reported physical symptoms.

It is noteworthy that no studies were found on gratitude to God in romantic relationships such as marriage. This is somewhat surprising as marriage is often viewed as a sacred union in many religious belief systems. This suggests that spouses may be prone to express gratitude towards God for their marriage and perhaps even the daily expressions of love by their partner. Given that prayer has been viewed as 'every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine' (James, 1902, p. 352), the spouses' gratitude to God for their partner/relationship is likely expressed through prayer. Indeed, Krause et al. (2017, p. 642) note that 'prayer is one of the major avenues for expressing feelings of gratitude to God.'

Two peer reviewed articles exist on gratitude and prayer. Controlling for social desirability and religiosity, Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, and Beach (2009, Study 3) showed that prayer frequency predicted gratitude six weeks later but not vice versa. These investigators went on to conduct an experimental study in which they assigned subjects randomly to engage in prayer for four weeks or to an alternative daily activity shown to result in an equal level of engagement (Lambert et al., 2009, Study 4). They found that participants assigned to the prayer condition displayed higher levels of gratitude than those in the control condition at the end of the study. These findings may reflect the fact that prayer provides an opportunity for the person praying to reflect on what he or she is grateful for. This possibility is supported by the fact that 'thanking' was the second most frequently mentioned feature, next only to 'God,' when people were asked to list the attributes or characteristics that come to mind when they think of prayer (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009).

In an important study, Schnitker and Richardson (2019) show that gratitude expressed in prayer is particularly powerful. They found that framing gratitude journaling as prayer lead to greater gratitude after five weeks of journaling than both private gratitude journaling and journaling that involved sharing gratitude with another human being. Because neither of the two studies examined prayer and gratitude in a relationship context, we do not know whether prayers of gratitude are associated with relationship satisfaction independently of generalized gratitude at either the intrapersonal or interpersonal level. The present study therefore examined this issue.

Method

Subjects and procedure

As part of a larger study, 95 healthy couples married for at least 1 year and between the ages of 20 and 60 years old were recruited from the community (i.e. local libraries, stores, laundromats, churches, etc.). As the larger study included physiological measures, couples were initially screened to have no history of hypertension or other heart problems. Couples came to the laboratory for a single visit during which they engaged in discussions while physiological responses were recorded. They also completed a survey that included the measures used in this study. Husbands averaged 38.96 ($SD = 10.89$) and wives averaged 37.57 ($SD = 10.73$) years of age, respectively. As regards religious identity wives identified as Protestant ($n = 83$), Catholic ($n = 4$), agnostic ($n = 3$), atheist ($n = 1$) and 'other' ($n = 4$). Husbands identified as

Protestant ($n = 81$), Catholic ($n = 4$), Jewish ($n = 1$), agnostic ($n = 2$), atheist ($n = 1$), none ($n = 1$) and 'other' ($n = 4$). Couples reported an average annual family income of \$54,866 ($SD = \$31,395$), had been married an average of 8.42 ($SD = 8.16$) years and identified as African American ($n = 11$), White ($n = 82$), more than one race ($n = 1$) and one couple declined to answer any question about race.

Measures

Gratitude

Gratitude as an affective trait was measured with the 6-item Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; e.g. 'I have so much in life to be thankful for'). This measure clearly demonstrates convergent validity by showing strong, but not overly strong correlations with similar measures. For example, it correlates moderately ($r = .53$) with satisfaction with life, vitality ($r = .46$), and optimism ($r = .51$) (McCullough et al., 2002). In the present sample coefficient alpha was .81 for wives and .75 for husbands. Responses were summed so that higher scores reflected greater gratitude.

Prayers of gratitude

Three items were used to assess the extent to which spouses expressed gratitude to God for their partner/relationship ('I thank God for giving me my partner in my prayers,' 'I give thanks to God for my relationship,' 'I express gratitude for my partner in my prayers'). Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from 'never' (1) to 'very frequently' (5). Coefficient alpha was .95 and .96 for wives and husbands, respectively. Responses were summed with higher scores reflecting more frequent prayers of gratitude.

Marital satisfaction

Starting with 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an Item Response Theory analysis to develop a 4-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties. Their measure correlates .87 with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and .79 with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory. Coefficient alpha was .93 for both husbands and wives.

Religiosity

Religiosity was measured with two items. The first item asked about the frequency of attending religious services/meetings and used a 4-point response scale that ranged from 'Never or almost never' (1) to 'One or more times a week' (4). The second item asked, 'How important is religion in your life?' with response options ranging from 'Not important' (1) to 'very important' (4). The

two items were highly correlated ($r = .77$ and $.70$ for wives and husbands, respectively) and hence they were combined to yield an index of religiosity.

Results

The inter-correlations among the measures, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 1. General gratitude and prayers of gratitude were related to marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives at the univariate level. This leads naturally to the question of whether they are related in a multivariate context.

Because responses from husband and wife are not independent, the data were analyzed using the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This model allows for the potential impact of general gratitude and prayers of gratitude on one's own marital satisfaction to be estimated (actor effects) as well as the potential impact of each spouse's general gratitude and prayers of gratitude on the partner's marital satisfaction to be estimated (partner effects). Actor effects, to be measured accurately, should be estimated while controlling for partner effects and vice versa. When manifest variables are used, the standardized effects can be interpreted as path coefficients.

The APIM can be conducted with distinguishable dyads and with indistinguishable dyads. Heterosexual couples are conceptually distinguishable suggesting that the distinguishable version be used. Nonetheless, even theoretically distinguishable dyads may not be empirically distinguishable. Therefore, the omnibus test of distinguishability (I-SAT) was conducted (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). In this test, equality constraints are imposed on the means, variances, and covariances of the manifest variables for both members of the dyad. If χ^2 is significant when these constraints are imposed, the couples are empirically distinguishable. If the constraints hold (χ^2 is not significant), then the indistinguishable version of the APIM should be used. In the present study, I-SAT tests indicated that use of the APIM with distinguishable dyads was appropriate.

Table 1. Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations for husbands (above diagonal) and wives (below diagonal).

Variables	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. Gratitude		.15	.38**	.25*	35.47	4.90
2. Prayer Gratitude	.38**		.40**	.37**	11.45	3.46
3. Marital Satisfaction	.50**	.46**		.26*	19.57	4.03
4. Religiosity	.18	.24*	.18		5.60	1.65
Mean	37.58	11.47	18.84	5.88		
SD	4.72	3.39	4.50	1.49		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In the APIM, both general gratitude and prayers of gratitude were used to predict marital satisfaction. Figure 1 shows that significant actor effects were obtained for general gratitude and prayers of gratitude in both husbands and wives. To examine possible gender differences in actor effects and whether any difference existed in the actor effects for general gratitude and prayers of gratitude, all four actor effects were constrained to be equal. This model fit the data, $\chi^2(3) = 2.53$, $p > .10$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00. Thus, there were no gender differences in actor effects. The strength of the relationship between general gratitude and prayers of gratitude with own marital satisfaction also did not differ.

In regard to partner effects, a significant partner effect emerged in that wives' prayers of gratitude predicted husbands' marital satisfaction, but no partner effect was found for husbands' prayers of gratitude predicting wife satisfaction. Although an effect was obtained for wives but not husbands, this does not demonstrate the existence of a gender difference. To examine a potential gender difference, the two partner effects for prayers of gratitude were constrained to be equal and the model was recomputed. This constrained model did not fit the data, $\chi^2(1) = 5.27$, $p < .03$, RMSEA = .21, CFI = .96, showing that there was a significant gender difference in this parameter. As partner effects are often weaker than actor effects, the relative strength of the wives' prayers of gratitude partner effect was examined. To determine whether this partner effect for prayers of gratitude differed in strength from those found for actor effects it was constrained to be the same as those for the actor effects. This constrained model fit the data, $\chi^2(4) = 3.76$, $p > .10$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00. Thus, the partner effect was as strong as each of the actor effects.

Finally, to determine whether prayers of gratitude simply served as a proxy variable for religiosity, the initial APIM analysis was repeated using religiosity as a control variable. The significant effects reported above did not change. Again, all four actor effects were significant and the partner effect for wives' prayers of gratitude was the only significant partner effect. Finally, the significant gender difference found for this partner effect remained.

Discussion

The present study is among the first to use dyadic data analyses to replicate the previously documented association between general gratitude and own relationship satisfaction. Thus, it shows that this intrapersonal association exists independently of any effect of partner gratitude on relationship satisfaction. The association between general gratitude and own relationship satisfaction is hardly surprising as gratitude facilitates

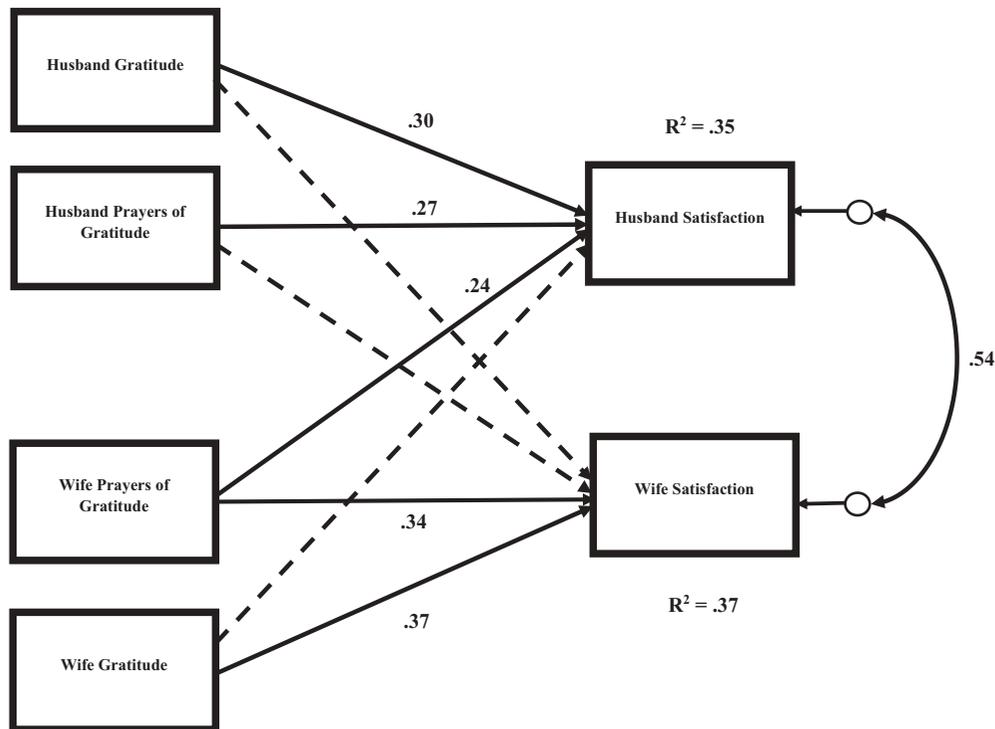


Figure 1. Actor Partner interdependence Model. Solid lines are significant, $p < .01$; dashed paths are nonsignificant, $p > .05$.

a positive view of life (Wood et al., 2010). As such, it provides meaning and significance to events, experiences, and relationships. Grateful spouses are therefore likely predisposed to noticing goodness in their partners and to attribute partner behavior to benevolent intentions. It is well documented that such benign attributions are relationship enhancing (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). This finding for general gratitude may, however, be open to question. Because gratitude, at both the general level and in relation to a Supreme Being, is emphasized in religious traditions it is possible that some people may be thinking about God in answering questions concerning their general gratitude. It is therefore important to note that the general gratitude-marital satisfaction association occurred independently of gratitude to God as both were included in a single model.

The second major finding, that prayers of gratitude accounted for variance in own satisfaction over and beyond that of general gratitude, is consistent with the few prior findings from studies that have simultaneously examined general gratitude and gratitude to God (Krause et al., 2015, 2017, 2014; Rosmarin et al., 2011). Again, however, this is the first study to document this phenomenon in the context of a romantic relationship. Unlike general gratitude, prayers of gratitude yielded a partner effect. Specifically, wives' prayers of gratitude for her

relationship/partner predicted husbands' marital satisfaction over and beyond his general gratitude and his prayers of gratitude. No corresponding partner effect was found for husbands' prayer and the two partner effects were shown to differ significantly in strength. Why might this gender difference exist?

In seeking to understand this finding, three important observations are apposite. First, there is a documented gender difference showing that women tend to be more involved in religion than men (e.g. Barna, 2006; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1994). In fact, Cooper, May, Kamble, and Fincham (2019) found that in both Christian and Hindu families offspring develop mental representations of God(s) from their mothers rather than their fathers. It is also the case that several nationwide surveys show that women tend to pray more than men (Barna, 2006). Second, there is substantial evidence to show that women, compared to men, report greater gratitude on trait assessments and in real life narratives (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009; Krause et al., 2017). Third, women generally tend to be more aware of, and comfortable expressing, emotions than men and this is certainly true for gratitude which women view positively whereas men view it 'as more challenging, anxiety provoking, and burdensome' (Kashdan et al., 2009, p. 33). As regards gratitude to God, Krause et al. (2017) report a similar gender difference.

In light of the above observations regarding gender differences, it can be argued that wives are more likely than husbands to express their gratitude overtly in the relationship and that this has an impact on husband relationship satisfaction. According to Algoe's (2012) find-remind-and-bind theory of gratitude, such expressed gratitude has an acute psychological effect on the target of the gratitude. It is hypothesized that this impact, in turn, contributes to improving the target's satisfaction with the relationship, in addition to improving the relationship satisfaction of the person expressing the gratitude. But why was a partner effect found only for prayers of gratitude?

Thanking God for the relationship/partner acknowledges God as the source of this good and doing so likely magnifies the positive emotion inherent to the experience of gratitude. In addition, being grateful to a Supreme Being acknowledges the good experienced (the marriage) is not accidental but occurred by design. Failure to act in a manner that honors this divine gift would disrespect or let down God. Following the logic of Algoe's (2012) theory, outlined earlier, prayers of gratitude also potentially have a dual effect in strengthening the relationship not only with the partner but also with God. Finally, Gandhi's observation about prayer as a source of action suggests the possibility that prayers of gratitude may be more likely to give rise to action than general gratitude.

Notwithstanding its novel contributions, it is important to bear in mind several limitations when interpreting the results of this study. Perhaps the most important limitation is that expressions of gratitude in the marriage were not assessed which means that the account given for the findings remains speculative. It will be important to include such assessment in future research. A second concern is that the variables studied are particularly prone to eliciting responses that reflect socially desirable responding. This may be especially the case for responses to questions about prayers of gratitude for participants who see themselves as religious. Future research might benefit from assessing socially desirable responding and using it as a statistical control variable. A final issue that bears mention is the nature of the sample as it was predominantly Christian. It will therefore be important to replicate the findings with samples reflecting other religious belief systems, particularly those that extend beyond the Abrahamic faiths (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism).

Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, the present study yields findings consistent with past research and contributes to a small but growing literature that extends the study of gratitude to include gratitude to a Supreme Being. In addition, the present study suggests that research

on marital functioning needs to be expanded to include a theistic component. The component investigated in this study, prayers of gratitude, may also be important to consider in applied settings. They could be an additional vehicle for increasing marital satisfaction among couples who profess religious beliefs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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