UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

September 24, 2026
Sonia Fernandez

The benefits of gratitude interventions vary based on where they are practiced, and by whom

Counting one's blessings. Journaling. Saying a prayer. Writing a letter of appreciation. We can all intuit that practicing gratitude has positive effects on our lives — generally improving our outlook, maybe increasing our life satisfaction — effects that could, in turn, lead to stronger social bonds and a more cohesive society.

However, despite the ubiquity of gratitude practices across the globe and throughout history, the effects of gratitude interventions differ across countries and cultures, and also by practice. In a multinational megastudy published in the Proceedings of the National Academies of Science, UC Santa Barbara social psychologist Hongbo Yu and collaborators tease out these differences across 34 countries, with findings that illustrate the importance of cultural context. The study was led by Professors Nicholas Coles at University of Florida and Michael McCullough at UC San Diego.

"One of our goals was to systematically examine and compare across different gratitude interventions," Yu said. "Another was to comprehensively understand how culture influences the effectiveness of these interventions."

Culture is key

Researchers have long known about the importance of gratitude practices to the wellbeing of societies. Throughout history, different peoples have embedded these interventions into their personal and social practices; in today's world, gratitude is seen as a happiness strategy that can improve both personal mental health and social wellbeing.

However, according to Yu, there had not been a close look at the relative effectiveness of different gratitude interventions, nor had there been an examination of how effective these interventions are in different cultural contexts.

"Most of the studies tested only one intervention," said Yu, "so there were no systematic comparisons across different intervention methods." Counting one's blessings emerged as one of the most popular practices; another was journaling. But it was unclear if one was more effective than the other, and there were no comparisons to other common but perhaps lesser known interventions, such as sending a letter.

Additionally, a large proportion of studies of gratitude interventions were conducted in the United States, with a distinctly Western context that may not apply in other cultures. "So we didn't really know whether gratitude interventions were effective in other cultures, because different cultures may see help and gratitude differently for their own reasons," Yu said.

To investigate, the international collaboration recruited 10,696 individuals across 34 countries to each test each one of six randomly assigned gratitude practices or one of three control tasks, after which the participants completed a set of questionnaires to assess their subjective outcomes.

"Ideally, we want the interventions to make us feel more positive," Yu said. "We also want to see a reduction in negative feeling." The gratitude practices included gratitude text message, gratitude letter, Naikan reflection (a structured, introspective practice designed to move one toward gratitude), divine gratitude, mental subtraction (imagining life without the thing one is grateful for) or gratitude list (counting one's blessings). The subsequent questionnaires measured six outcomes: positive affect, negative affect, optimism, life satisfaction, envy and feelings of indebtedness.

According to the study, the greatest effects were reported for gratitude texts and gratitude letters, followed by Naikan reflection and divine gratitude. Mental subtraction came in after that and in last place, the gratitude list.

One possible explanation for this trend is that some gratitude practices may feel more natural in certain cultural settings than in others, Yu said. Cultural context is key, he explained. “The same exercise can be experienced quite differently depending on the cultural context in which it is introduced,” he said. “A practice that feels emotionally natural and socially appropriate in one culture may feel overly explicit, awkward or unnecessary in another.”

Overall, the gratitude practices did lead to improvements in positive affect, optimism and life satisfaction, while reducing negative affect and feelings of envy. In a nod to gratitude’s role as a social emotion, for the majority of respondents it also increased feelings of social indebtedness.

“Gratitude functions as a reminder that we’re intrinsically socially connected with other people with this kind of overlapping reciprocity,” Yu said. “So that helps us strengthen our social connections.”

Different countries experienced the different outcomes to varying degrees, moderated by country and culture specific variables such as GDP, individualism, religiosity, tightness and others. This helps the researchers predict whether gratitude interventions would be effective in a given country and to what extent.

“For example, we see a moderate positive correlation between a country’s individualism and the effect size of optimism, meaning that for a country that scores high in individualism, such as the United States, gratitude interventions also tend to have bigger effects on optimism,” Yu said — so, Americans would likely feel more optimism after a given gratitude intervention than would the Chinese. Similarly, in countries that have a more egalitarian structure, gratitude interventions would have a bigger effect on life satisfaction than in countries with a more hierarchical society.

The researchers also found a range of the estimated effects of gratitude interventions with the greatest effects in Mexico, and close to zero in Norway. China came in last. Yu, who with his students, was responsible for the Chinese data collection. “Initially, we didn’t expect to see a huge effect in China,” Yu said,

explaining that gratitude interventions are not as common or popular there as they are in other places. “But we still thought there might be some positive effects. It surprised me that we found no effect at all.”

It’s a question for another time; this study was focused on seeing broader trends.

“We don’t really focus too much on each individual country; we’re trying to see a pattern,” he said.

The paper is the most comprehensive study of its kind and future directions may be to expand the work to include other populations and more interventions for a nuanced understanding of gratitude practices. “The results suggest that future work should pay more attention to culturally embedded forms of gratitude,” Yu added, “rather than assuming that practices developed in one cultural context would work equally well everywhere.”

The work reminds Yu said the work reminds him of a study he recently conducted on the feeling of indebtedness in China, with potential insights as to why gratitude interventions may not be as effective toward feelings of wellbeing and human flourishing over there.

“It’s a social pressure, the feeling of owing something,” he said. “I think it could be interesting to extend my research in that direction.”

Media Contact
Sonia Fernandez
Senior Science Writer
(805) 893-4765
sonia.fernandez@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the

edge of the Pacific Ocean.