

1-1-2014

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### Recommended Citation

Hlava, P., Elfers, J., & Offringa, R. (2014). Hlava, P., Elfers, J., & Offringa, R. (2014). A transcendent view of gratitude: The transpersonal gratitude scale. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 33(1), 1–14.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 33 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2014.33.1.1>



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# A Transcendent View of Gratitude: The Transpersonal Gratitude Scale

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The importance of gratitude in interpersonal relationships is well recognized, but less is known about experiences of gratitude beyond this domain. The authors sought to examine the lived experience of gratitude as it arises in a transpersonal context. Drawing from interviews with 68 adults, the authors generated 110 items. In two separate studies ( $n=314$ ;  $n=385$ ) the authors culled the scale to sixteen items by using a combination of Cronbach's alpha, exploratory factor analysis, and assessments of content validity. Internal consistency for the overall scale and the subscales was high with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. A confirmatory factor analysis revealed strong fit indices for the factor structure. The final scale exhibited good convergent validity, as quantified by positive correlations with positive reciprocity, grateful disposition, empathy, and spiritual transcendence. In addition, the final scale exhibited good discriminant validity, as quantified by negative correlations with negative reciprocity. These results indicate that our assessment of gratitude is similar to previous assessments of gratitude, but also distinct from scales that quantify negative reciprocity. Conclusions are drawn regarding the theoretical structure of gratitude and the importance of adding a transpersonal and spiritual dimension to the construct.

**Keywords:** *Gratitude, scale, reciprocity, transpersonal, spirituality*

Gratitude is a complex emotion that arises within the transactional dynamics of human relationships. A fundamental understanding, used by many researchers, is that gratitude requires three essential elements: a benefit, a benefactor, and a beneficiary (Roberts, 2004). Cognitive models of gratitude focus on the appraisal that the recipient makes in response to a benefit, judging it as desirable and intentional (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Weiner's (2006) attribution theory emphasized the deliberate activity of an agent and recognition of the benefit as the result of another's intentional benevolence.

Evolutionary theories suggest that gratitude is an adaptation for reciprocal altruism, involving the exchange of gifts between nonrelatives, and providing a benefit to human social communities (Komter, 2010; McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Komter (2004) referred to gratitude as part of the "chain of reciprocity" (p. 195). Both reciprocity and gratitude are motivators of prosocial behavior that draw from distinct inclinations. One inclination is to reduce feelings of obligation, guilt, worthlessness, and indebtedness, and the other is to enhance affiliative connections.

Gratitude is considered a unique construct distinct from happiness or obligation and has been found to be a moral barometer and significant motivator of prosocial behavior (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; McCullough et al., 2008). Carter (2006) found that gratitude draws from a wealth of interpersonal positive emotions such as admiration, humor, and respect, while reciprocity seems to draw from the need for anxiety-reduction.

The subjective experience of gratitude seems to vary with the perceived value of the gift, the intention of the gift-giver, and the level of sacrifice involved in giving (McCullough & Tsang, 2004). Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) discovered that two powerful predictors of gratitude were the level of enjoyment of the benefit and the perception that the benefactor was being sensitive to the receiver's personal needs and wishes. Several researchers portray gratitude as an empathic emotion, asserting that the benefactor must be sensitive to the needs of the recipient and that the beneficiary must recognize that the gift was given freely and involved a voluntary sacrifice on the part of the benefactor (Fredrickson, 2004; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994).

## Beyond Benefit

While scientific investigation necessitates precision in defining a construct, the narrow understanding of gratitude as an emotion driven by the receipt of tangible benefits may be ignoring essential elements. Buck (2004) referred to definitions of gratitude based on reciprocal benefits as the gratitude of *exchange*. Lambert, Graham, and Fincham (2009) referred to the same as *benefit-triggered* gratitude. There is evidence from both theory and research that the experience and behaviors associated with gratitude extend beyond the exchange of tangible benefits. Buck (2004) widened the exchange model of gratitude to include the gratitude of caring, in which “benefits are accrued from the giving of benefits: the ineffable but incomparable benefit of loving and being loved” (p. 117). Research is demonstrating the role of gratitude as a component of relationship building (Algoe et al., 2008) and relationship maintenance (Hlava, 2010; Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, & Keijsers, 2011). As a complex emotion, gratitude is present in the calculating dynamics of benefit-triggered reciprocity, as well as within profound feelings of connection.

Steindl-Rast (2004) portrayed gratitude as encompassing a spectrum of experiences related to the nature of the benefit. On one end of the continuum is the feeling of thankfulness upon receipt of a gift. On the opposite pole is gratitude arising out of a peak experience of cosmic oneness that one might experience upon receipt of an undeserved gift, or in a feeling of profound connection with nature. He labeled the first experience as *personal*, the second as *transpersonal* because the context of the experience is beyond the self. Yet both experiences, while they embody different subjective feelings, fit the definition of gratitude and are described as such. Steindl-Rast envisioned these two distinctions as extremes of a continuum that are “sufficiently distinct to deserve two different designations” (p. 285). Emmons (2008) understood gratitude as having a worldly meaning and a transcendent meaning: “Gratitude’s other nature is ethereal, spiritual, and transcendent” (p. 122).

These broader definitions expand the understanding of gratitude from reciprocity to mutuality, from the emotional response of tangible benefits to an appreciation of the quality of a relationship. “The reciprocity in caring relations is not contractual; that is, we do not expect the cared-for to balance the relation by doing what the one-caring does” (Noddings, 2003, p. xiii). Such expanded definitions suggest that the

construct of gratitude can be thought of as a range of experience that lies along a continuum.

Lambert et al. (2009) conducted a series of studies comparing the narrower, benefit-triggered understanding of gratitude to a broader understanding by examining the concepts of gratitude held by laypersons. Applying a *prototype* approach in which a construct is defined by central features rather than categorical distinctions, participants were asked to identify their personal understanding of the features of gratitude. Examples of central features included appreciation, sincerity, and graciousness. Examples of peripheral features of gratitude included satisfaction, generosity, and praise. In the second phase, a separate group of participants rated how closely those features, previously identified by the first group, matched their concept of gratitude. The results showed high levels of agreement in identifying some specific features of gratitude as more prototypical than others. Participants then rated the level of gratitude of a hypothetical person displaying either benefit-triggered or generalized displays of gratitude. Responses by participants contained central features of gratitude that reflected both a benefit-triggered and generalized conceptualizations of gratitude. The overall conclusion of this series of studies revealed that gratitude is defined more broadly by laypersons than is described in the benefit-triggered definitions used by many researchers.

Taking a grounded theory approach to the construct of gratitude, the authors conducted a study of the lived experience of gratitude (Hlava & Elfers, 2014). Based on semistructured interviews, 68 participants shared examples of profound experiences of gratitude, as well as experiences within the context of everyday expressions of appreciation. The emotion of gratitude was described across a range of somatic descriptors and emotion labels, including feelings of warmth, joy, awakening, release, feeling blessed, and awe. The range of emotional experience of gratitude supported a prototypical approach to the construct. The intensity of affect associated with gratitude varied from mild feelings to feelings of overwhelming emotion. A thematic analysis revealed that experiences of gratitude could be classified within the domains of personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal experience. In fact, all of the 68 interviewees shared at least one example of a profound experience of gratitude in nature or similar transpersonal context. In transpersonal gratitude the

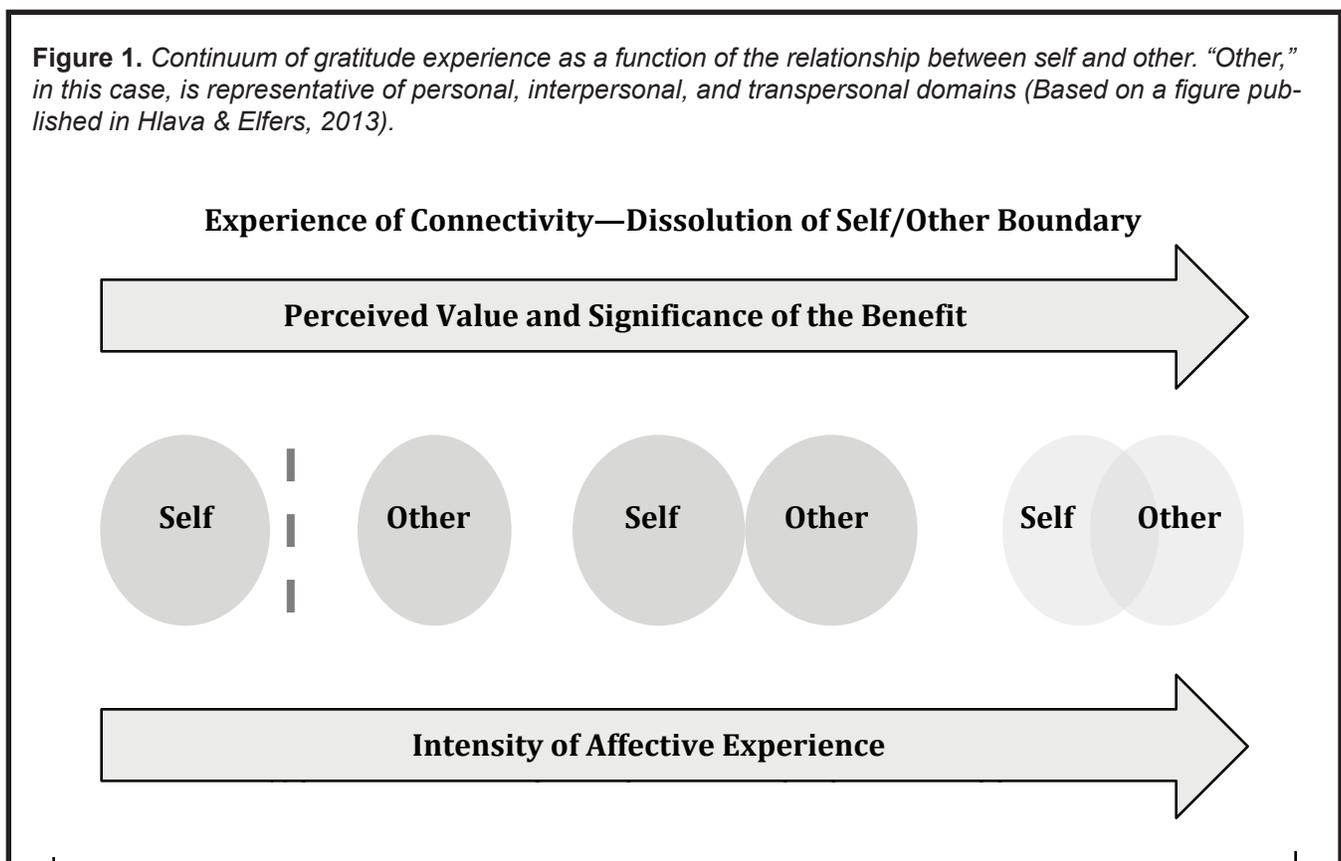
“other” is no longer a gift or a person, but a recognition of benefit that comes from a source beyond the self or through a deep connection with nature.

The results of this study supported an expanded definition of gratitude that lies along a continuum of experience. At its core, gratitude was found to be a relational experience between self and other founded on mutual exchange and reciprocal benefit. In caring relationships the emphasis on fairness and equality of exchange shifted to descriptions of the maintenance or enhancement of the relationship. Feeling grateful toward another became recognized as feelings *with* another, representing a shift from subjective to intersubjective experience. For some participants, when affect was particularly deep and overwhelming, the phenomenal experience of a boundary between self and other was temporarily attenuated, resulting in the experience of oneness and identity with the other as described by Steindl-Rast’s transpersonal gratitude (2004). Conclusions from this study were summarized in a diagram in which the experience and expression of gratitude varies with the perceived value of the benefit, the intensity of the associated emotion, and experience of connection with an other (See Figure 1).

### Implications for Transpersonal Studies

The studies by both Lambert et al. (2009) and the authors (Hlava & Elfers, 2014) were based upon conceptualizations of gratitude drawn from lived experience. Both support a generalized understanding of gratitude that transcends the receipt or exchange of benefit as described by some theorists (e.g., Buck, 2004; Steindl-Rast, 2004).

Three self-report instruments have been designed to measure gratitude. The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002) is a six-item assessment that measures the frequency, intensity, and duration of a grateful disposition. The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003) assesses gratitude as a trait and taps four domains: a sense of abundance, simple appreciation, appreciation for others, and importance of gratitude expression. The Appreciation Scale (Adler & Fagley, 2005) assesses eight dimensions of appreciation as a disposition. Appreciation is defined as superordinate to gratitude, with gratitude being one of the eight dimensions. These three measures are based upon the narrower definition of gratitude as involving tangible benefits. Currently, there are no measures based



upon the broader definitions that include the gratitude of caring or gratitude within a transpersonal context. Given that so much research related to gratitude is based on self-report, “if researchers know how people think about gratitude, this allows them to tailor measures tapping the particular aspects of gratitude that interest them” (Lambert et al., 2009, p. 1194).

The transpersonally-informed gratitude scale described here, was designed and tested as an instrument that would measure the more generalized features of gratitude across several domains. The development of such a measure would support the expansion of the construct of gratitude beyond benefit-triggered conceptualizations and include a transpersonal dimension. Given the reported commonality of experiences of gratitude with a transpersonal other (Hlava & Elfers, 2014), there are potential implications for the understanding of the phenomenology and construct of gratitude within the field of transpersonal studies.

The targeted development and application of gratitude holds potential for the psychology of transformative experiences. “As an emotion, the roots of gratitude can be seen in many of the world’s great religious traditions” (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000, p. 59). Feelings of awe, associated with mystical experience, are also part of the phenomenological profile of gratitude (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). A validated measure of the expanded features of gratitude would allow researchers to test the efficacy of transpersonal disciplines and practices such as mindfulness and forgiveness, and determine the overlap among them.

#### **Scale Development and Validation**

The Transpersonal Gratitude Scale (TGS) was created to measure the construct of transpersonal gratitude. The initial phase of scale development began with identifying common descriptions of gratitude experience drawn from transcripts of 68 interviews on the lived experience of gratitude (Hlava & Elfers, 2014). These descriptions were used to generate statements expressive of its various features. Most statements were edited for clarity and readability. An emphasis was placed on maintaining as much participant language and sentiment as was possible in order to achieve the goal of creating an instrument based on lay understandings. The result was a sample of 110 statements describing the outcomes, context, motivation, and expression of gratitude. A large number of items were used in order to begin with four to five times the number of items

anticipated for the final scale as recommended by DeVellis (2003). The survey was designed in a 6-point Likert-type format with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Four university professors who have taught courses or conducted research in the field of emotion-experience were recruited to form an expert panel. Each panel member reviewed the 110 initial scale items and commented upon their readability, appropriateness, and alignment with the construct of gratitude. Two laypersons representative of the target audience of the survey were recruited to review the items for readability and ease of comprehension. Results from the reviewers produced suggestions that were incorporated into the draft of the initial survey.

#### **Study 1: Establishing the Scale**

Existing measures of gratitude (GQ-6, GRAT, and Appreciation Scale) were constructed and validated using university students with mean ages of approximately 20 years. Although homogenous recruitment strategies may result in high internal validity, this often comes at the expense of external validity. We hypothesized that our more expansive definition of gratitude may vary by age, with older participants exhibiting higher gratitude scores. We therefore sought to recruit a range of ages, despite the fact that this could potentially reduce internal validity.

**Recruitment.** A total of 314 participants were recruited for this study through friends, colleagues, and social media outreach, including postings on Yahoo Groups and Facebook. Participants responded to a solicitation to participate in a gratitude study. This part of the overall sample was designed to recruit respondents with a more typical range of gratitude experience and interest. While this strategy limited part of the sample to adults who frequent social media sites, this limitation was accepted in order to secure respondents across a range of ages while maintaining the cultural homogeneity of English-speaking countries. The basic demographics from this study are displayed in Table 1.

**Item selection.** The original 110 items were honed to 16, by using an iterative process through which we ran an exploratory factor analysis, assessed the overall factor structure, and evaluated each factor with Cronbach’s alpha. This information was used to eliminate redundant items, items that did not load well, and items that did not meet our standards for content validity. As an example of this process, initial factor

analyses allowed us to flag two latent factors that we were not interested in. The first factor corresponded to *reciprocity*, while the second corresponded to feelings of *obligation* and *indebtedness*. The items that composed these two factors were eliminated based on content validity. This general process was repeated until the scale was culled to 16 items that adequately expressed our definition of gratitude—an embodied response resulting from a perceptual shift in the appraisal of personal and transpersonal benefit—with acceptable internal consistency and a good factor structure.

The exploratory factor analysis was conducted with Mplus version 6.12, and all factors were obliquely rotated with the Geomin rotation, which allowed for some correlation between the factors. Weighted least squares estimation with mean and variance adjustments (WLSMV) was used to account for both the non-normal distribution of Likert items and non-normal distribution

of the summed scale. This estimation process allowed us to produce and evaluate normally distributed factors.

### Results: The Culled Scale

Internal consistency for the overall scale and the subscales was high with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88. Items within this scale structure reflect a range of emotion-experience, from “showing appreciation” to “overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude.” The final scale included 16 items that could be broken apart into four latent subscales, which have been labeled as Expression of Gratitude, Value of Gratitude, Transcendent Gratitude, and Spiritual Connection (see Appendix A).

**Expression of gratitude.** This factor reflected conditions and circumstances under which participants express and share their feelings of appreciation with others (e.g., “I show appreciation to others when they have positively influenced my life”). The items that define this latent variable captured a disposition toward expressing feelings of gratitude with others. When treated as a subscale, it exhibited relatively low internal consistency at 0.59. This number reflects the diversity of responses and the fact that these questions capture a unique amount of variance.

**Value of gratitude.** This factor reflected the ways in which feelings of gratitude are beneficial to relationships. While the focus of Expression of Gratitude is on personal patterns of behavior, the Value of Gratitude emphasizes the benefits to interpersonal relationships (e.g., “Gratitude helps me to feel more open with others”). As noted previously, experiences of gratitude are born from relational experiences, as well as from targeted behaviors or tangible gifts. Items in this subscale reflect a heightened sense of connection with another person. This construct highlights the centrality of the relational context of gratitude to feelings of benefit, connection, and intimacy. When treated as a subscale, it exhibited high internal consistency with Cronbach’s alpha at 0.86.

**Transcendent gratitude.** This factor was defined as experiences of gratitude that extend beyond the gratitude that arises within an interpersonal context. That is, the other to which a person feels grateful is not a specific person, but a more remote and generalized conceptualization (e.g., “I feel grateful for just being alive”). The emotion-experience of transcendent gratitude is a feeling of connection to something greater and outside of the self. This factor exhibited relatively good internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha at 0.68.

**Table 1. Demographics from Study 1 and Study 2**

Variable	Study 1	Study 2
Total Participants	314	385
Age (Mean [SD])	47.7 (14.1)	45.7 (16.1)
Female	224 (71.3%)	220 (57.1%)
Male	90 (28.7%)	165 (42.9%)
Native English	312 (99.4%)	375 (96.1%)
Non-Native English	2 (0.6%)	10 (3.9%)
Country of Origin		
United States	254 (80.1%)	368 (95.6%)
Canada	15 (4.8%)	1 (0.3%)
United Kingdom	37 (11.8%)	2 (0.5%)
Germany	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)
Australia	2 (0.6%)	4 (1.0%)
Other	5 (1.6%)	9 (2.3%)
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	274 (87.3%)	324 (84.2%)
Hispanic	5 (1.6%)	20 (5.2%)
Native American	1 (0.3%)	7 (1.8%)
Asian	6 (2.0%)	7 (1.8%)
Black	3 (1.0%)	16 (4.2%)
Indian	4 (1.3%)	1 (0.3%)
Other	17 (5.4%)	10 (2.6%)
Self-Reported Gratefulness		
Grateful Person	227 (72.3%)	271 (70.4%)
Sometimes Grateful	81 (25.8%)	111 (28.8%)
Not Grateful	6 (1.9%)	3 (0.8%)

**Spiritual connection.** This factor was defined as an awareness and connection within a spiritual domain (e.g., “I am grateful to a divine being for everything in my life”). While Transcendent Gratitude was not directed at any particular being, these questions quantified an explicitly spiritual experience of gratitude. Not all survey respondents identified spiritual connection as a feature of their gratitude experience, some expressing that this area was not meaningful or relevant. Yet a significant percentage of respondents consistently identified spirituality as relevant to their experience of gratitude. This factor exhibited extremely high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha at 0.93.

**Study 2: Confirming the factor structure**

The purpose of Study 2 was to identify an independent sample and conduct a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the factor structure of the TGS as it had been determined via exploratory factor analysis. A separate sample of participants was recruited for the purpose of confirming the exploratory factor structure from Study 1. Respondents for this study were recruited predominantly through social media sites, including SurveyMonkey, Facebook and Reddit, in which individuals were already predisposed to taking surveys. The final sample was  $n = 385$  and the demographics for Study 2 are visible in Table 1.

Similar to above, we used the WLSMV estimator in order to account for the usage of ordinal Likert scales that were negatively skewed. This estimator allowed us to produce normally distributed latent factors from non-normal data. The goal was to identify a different sample with a similar but distinct demographic profile from the original sample in Study 1.

The confirmatory factor analysis yielded excellent Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) values; respectively 0.99 and 0.99, indicating that our CFA fit the data extremely well. All items loaded significantly on to their expected factors, even after accounting for correlations between latent factors. All factor loadings and correlations between factors can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 2.

**Study 3: Convergent Validity**

In Study 2, the factor structure of the TGS was confirmed with a confirmatory factor analysis. Once the scale structure was confirmed, it was then compared with several additional measures in order to establish convergent validity. Several scales were identified that examine the extent to which the TGS factors converged

with similar constructs and diverged from disparate constructs. Given the distinction among the latent variables, a variety of measures were chosen that would validate the range of features within the overall construct of gratitude. Four measures were used to demonstrate construct validity of the scale regarding dimensions and factors. Participants completing these measures were subsamples of participants from the same recruitment period as Study 2. Subgroups of roughly equal size answered questions pertaining to the TGS and a second scale intended for the assessment of convergent validity.

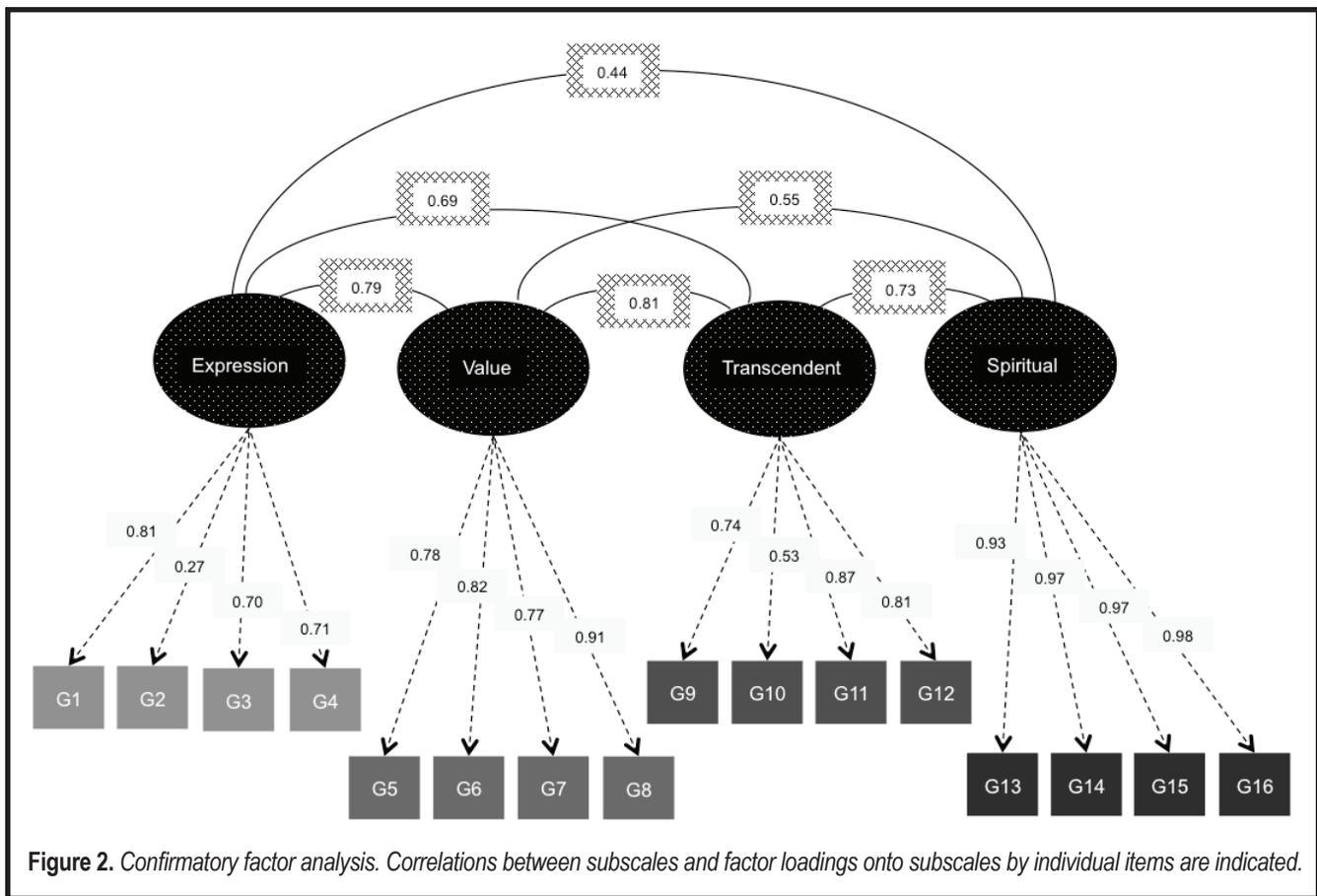
**Scales used to establish construct validity.**

The first group of respondents ( $n = 122$ ) took the TGS and the Personal Norm of Reciprocity Scale. The second group ( $n = 142$ ) took the TGS, the GQ-6, and the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. The third group ( $n = 120$ ) took the TGS and Spiritual Transcendence Scale.

**Personal Norm of Reciprocity Scale.** The Personal Norm of Reciprocity Scale (PNR) developed by Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, and Ercolani (2003) is a multidimensional measure scored into three subscales. For the purpose of this scale, reciprocity is considered an individual’s internalized social norm “to reciprocate others’ behavior, that is, to reward others’ helping behavior and to retaliate against others’ hurting behavior” (Perugini, et al., 2002, p. 253). Given that theorists point to reciprocity as the evolutionary origin of gratitude (Komter, 2010; McCullough et al., 2008), and that the results of our own research demonstrated

**Table 2.** Factor loadings from the exploratory factor analysis of study 2. Factor loadings above 0.30 are highlighted in bold.

Item	Expression	Value	Transcendent	Spiritual
G1	<b>0.76</b>	0.05	0.02	0.10
G2	<b>0.47</b>	0.07	-0.01	0.13
G3	<b>0.37</b>	-0.01	0.27	-0.10
G4	<b>0.31</b>	0.30	0.26	-0.04
G5	-0.05	<b>0.84</b>	-0.00	0.08
G6	0.04	<b>0.84</b>	-0.01	0.01
G7	0.01	<b>0.64</b>	0.14	0.05
G8	0.12	<b>0.55</b>	<b>0.39</b>	-0.07
G9	-0.04	-0.07	<b>0.73</b>	0.12
G10	-0.01	0.16	<b>0.42</b>	0.06
G11	0.01	0.08	<b>0.68</b>	0.23
G12	0.10	0.04	<b>0.65</b>	0.02
G13	0.17	-0.05	0.06	<b>0.79</b>
G14	0.21	-0.05	-0.03	<b>0.91</b>
G15	-0.01	0.15	-0.00	<b>0.89</b>
G16	-0.10	0.11	0.04	<b>0.91</b>



some overlap between reciprocity and gratitude (Hlava & Elfers, 2014), the authors hypothesized that Positive Reciprocity would show mild to moderate correlations with the subscales of the TGS. Negative Reciprocity was hypothesized to demonstrate divergent validity between the constructs of retaliation and gratitude based upon its focus on repaying hurtful behavior.

**The Gratitude Questionnaire.** The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), developed by McCullough, et al. (2002), is a brief, unidimensional measure consisting of 6 items reflecting levels of intensity, frequency, density, and span of the emotion of gratitude. The GQ-6 assesses experiences and expressions of dispositional gratitude in daily life. Since the GQ-6 is commonly used as a measure of the disposition of gratitude, the authors hypothesized that the GQ-6 would strongly correlate with the all the subscales of the TGS.

**Toronto Empathy Questionnaire.** The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) developed by Nathan Spreng and colleagues (Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, & Levine, 2009) is a 16-item measure with a single factor structure and high internal consistency. The TEQ represents empathy as primarily an emotional process

and as an important component of social cognition and the promotion of prosocial behavior (Spreng et al., 2009). The authors hypothesized that empathy would correlate with the subscales of Expression and Value since these two variable describe grateful sentiments of an interpersonal nature.

**Spiritual Transcendence Scale.** The Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS), developed by Ralph Piedmont (1999), has a long history of use in research related to transcendence and personality factors (Piedmont, 2001; Piedmont, Ciarrochi, Dy-Liacco, & Williams, 2009). The STS measures individual efforts to create a broad understanding of personal meaning that goes beyond the immediate sense of time and space. The STS is scored into three subscales: Prayer Fulfillment, Universality, and Connectedness. The authors hypothesized that the STS subscales would reveal a strong correlation with the TGS subscales of Transcendent Gratitude and Spiritual Connection, demonstrating that gratitude in the transcendent and spiritual domains are distinct from the other subscales.

Table 3 summarizes the Pearson Correlations among the various scales and subscales described above

to help substantiate construct validity. Overall the scales performed as predicted. The tendency to reciprocate perceived benefits is considered by researchers to be at the core of gratitude, yet reciprocity is a distinct construct (McCullough et al., 2008).

The modest correlations between Positive Reciprocity and the Expression, Value, and Transcendent subscores, show good convergent validity, while still asserting the uniqueness of the TGS scale. This makes sense, because although positive reciprocity is related to the emotional feeling of gratitude, the two constructs are very distinct. The absence of any correlation with the Spiritual Connection subscale suggests that this construct is not related to positive reciprocity. As we hypothesized, there was a modest negative correlation with the negative reciprocity scale and all subscales.

Scores on the GQ-6 showed strong correlations with all of the subscales of the TGS. Given the similarity of constructs measured by each instrument, these results suggest that we are utilizing a construct that is similar to the GQ-6. Although the GQ-6 does not directly measure transcendent gratitude or a spiritual connection, we still found a strong positive correlation within these subscales. These results suggest that these subscales are not merely measuring a relationship with something greater than the self; instead they are directly accessing a specific type of gratitude.

Scores on the TEQ showed mild to moderate correlations with the subscale with the exception of the Expression of Gratitude subscale, which strongly correlated. This seems reasonable, given that empathy is related to gratitude, but not directly comparable. In fact, gratitude has been identified as an empathic emotion because the benefactor must discern the needs of the beneficiary in order to offer some genuine benefit (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Our findings could therefore be explained by the fact that expressing gratitude requires empathy more so than appreciating the intrinsic value of gratitude, or being transcendentally or spiritually thankful. These results could also be interpreted to indicate strong concurrent validity.

The scores on the STS produced strong correlations with the Transcendent and Spiritual Connection subscales. The use of this scale was designed to confirm the transcendent features that accompany gratitude experience in specific contexts. The Connection subscale of the STS showed low correlations with all of the TGS subscales. As expected, none of the STS

subscales correlated with the TGS Expression subscale, indicating strong discriminant validity. Items scoring on Connection were related to relationships with those family members who have died, and so were combined with attitudes about life after death, making this subscale less relevant to gratitude.

**Comparison to self-identified disposition toward gratitude.** Prior to taking the survey in Study 2, respondents were asked to select whether they identify as “I am not a grateful person,” “I am a grateful person sometimes,” or “I consider myself to be a grateful person.” It was predicted that those respondents identifying as a grateful person ( $n = 271$ ) would show a higher overall score on the TGS compared to those identifying as less grateful (Netemeyer, Bearden, & Sharma, 2003). Because those identifying as “I am not a grateful person” were rare ( $n = 3$ ), they were grouped with those identifying as “I am a grateful person sometime” ( $n = 111$ ).

**Table 3.** Pearson Correlations between the Transpersonal Gratitude Scale subscales and the Personal Norm of Reciprocity Scale (PNR), Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), and Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS) subscales for prayer (STS-P), universality (STS-U), and connectedness (STS-C). Significant correlations are flagged with an asterisk or double asterisk depending on the significance threshold for that value.

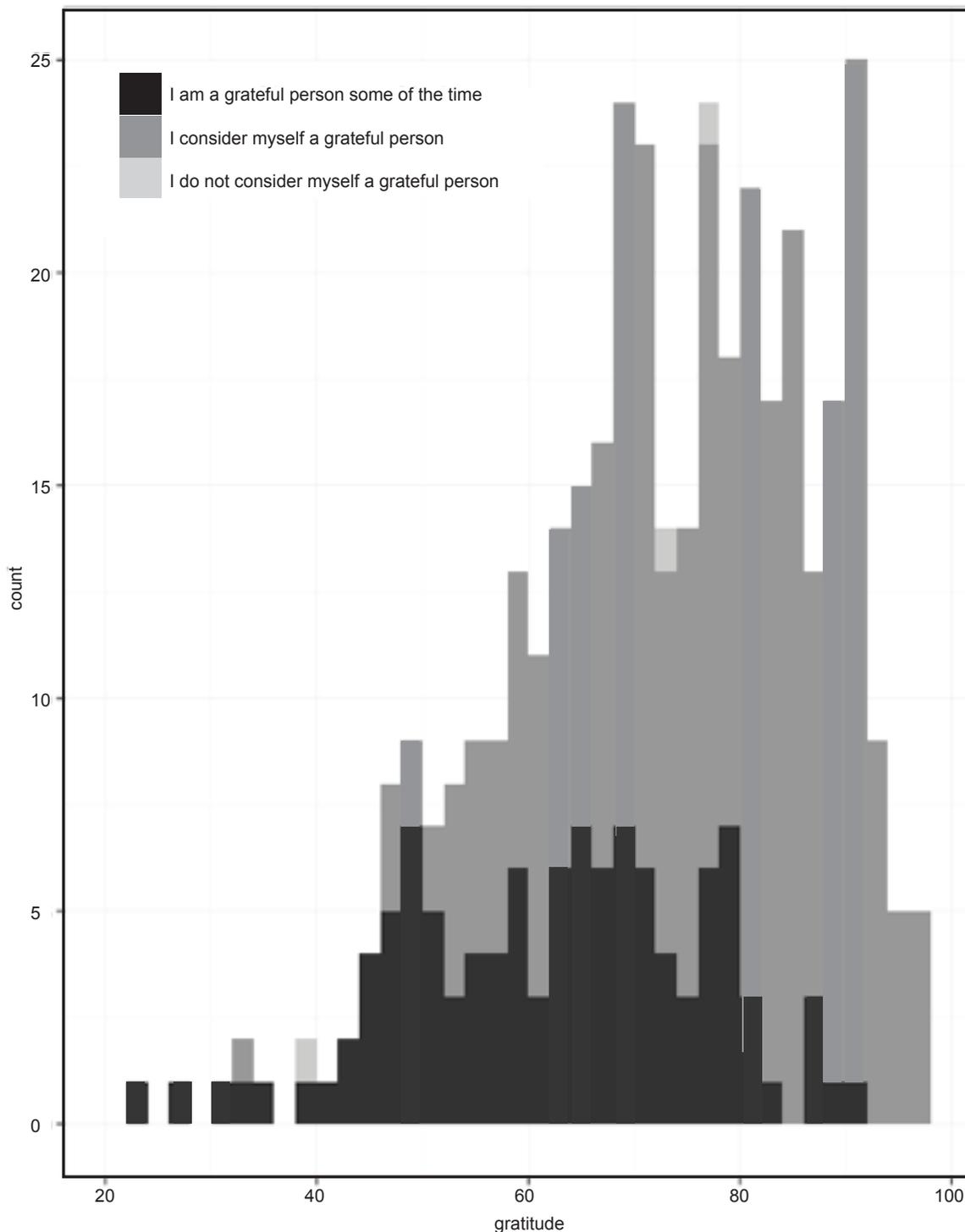
	Expression	Value	Transcendent	Spiritual
PNR Positive Reciprocity N = 122	.29**	.24**	.26**	.00
PNR Negative Reciprocity N = 122	-.47**	-.38**	-.36**	-.42**
GQ-6 N = 142	.39**	.51**	.69**	.43**
TEQ N = 142	.52**	.28**	.33**	.20*
STS - P N = 120	-.03	.18*	.39**	.42**
STS - U N = 120	.12	.18*	.35**	.35**
STS - C N = 120	.04	.13	.21*	.20*

\*( $p < .05$ ) \*\*( $p < .01$ )

A one-way ANOVA demonstrated significant differences between the two groups,  $F(1, 383) = 97.83, p < 0.001$ . This effect was driven by lower TGS scores for those identifying as “sometimes grateful,” mean = 61.89, sd = 14.22, versus those identifying as a “grateful person,” mean = 76.11, sd = 12.28. The effect size for this finding was medium, with

an eta-squared value of 0.203, which is greater than Cohen’s suggested cutoff (0.13) for medium effect sizes. Overall, this analysis provided an approximation of known-group validity, where those identifying as more grateful were also rated significantly higher on the TGS. See Figure 3 for a histogram illustrating the distribution of scores.

**Figure 3.** Histogram illustrating the distribution of TGS scores as labeled by self-identified disposition toward gratitude.



## General Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the understanding of gratitude as a complex emotion that arises in response to the receipt of some recognizable benefit and to test the viability of an expanded definition of gratitude. Drawing from interviews of lay experiences of gratitude, the initial survey items yielded four distinct subscales that capture a dimension of caring and transpersonal experience to gratitude. The TGS showed strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. Confirmatory factor analysis supported original factor structure with excellent fit indices. Evidence of construct validity was established by correlations of the TGS subscales with reciprocity, grateful disposition, empathy, and spiritual transcendence.

The elements of the traditional model of gratitude—as feelings that arise in response to the receipt of a benefit from a benefactor—were not rejected in this study. Gratitude clearly emerges within transactional and relational dynamics of all kinds. The benefits that trigger transpersonal gratitude are in response to “just being alive” or for “the blessings I have received.” In contrast to an exchange-based model, transpersonal gratitude seems to describe feelings that emerge in response to a transformed view of a benefit and its relationship to the beneficiary. When someone sees himself or herself not as the recipient of a gesture or favor, but as someone participating at the confluence of an intimate relationship with another person or a profound connection with the entire panoply of nature, the benefit is no longer tangible or straightforward. As described in Figure 1, the liminal separation between self and other is attenuated in profound feelings associated with gratitude, resulting in a stronger sense of relational connection with the other. The interpersonal and transpersonal context of such profound feelings may well represent the higher octave of the emotions and motivation related to gratitude-experience.

The Value of Gratitude subscale includes items that point directly to the benefit implicit in affiliative relationships. Some of the scale items in the Value and Transcendent subscales imply a transformed attitude or behavior (e.g., “Gratitude helps me to feel open with others” and “Thinking of the blessings that I've received helps me to appreciate life”). Such items suggest that the cognitive appraisal inherent to the emotion-experience of gratitude can create a shift in one's perspective of a relationship, a shift that implies a profound connection

with the other. For some respondents, recognition of the benefits that flow from a divine being or presence was a source of benefit and motivation and these benefits are captured in the Spiritual Connection subscale.

## Limitations

The use of social media as a venue for recruiting participants is relatively new in the field and concerns about potential biases related to online solicitation are being addressed in many areas of research. While this unconventional approach to sampling in this study carries that liability, compared to the homogeneity of 18-24 year-old college coeds, the samples recruited for this study exhibit greater external validity at the sacrifice of internal validity.

Additionally, the assessment of known-group validity was difficult to assess, and we were only able to approximate such a measure. Although transpersonal gratitude is an extension of previous conceptualizations of gratitude, it would still be difficult to find participants with extremely high or low levels of this trait. Participants who might have very low gratitude, such as victims of trauma or people diagnosed as depressed, might be hard to access and their responses would probably be confounded by other variables. Other participant pools with potentially high gratitude, such as meditation groups or religious organizations may bias toward the spiritual subscale and are not guaranteed to exhibit high levels of gratitude, compared to the general populous. Because of these difficulties, we were forced to approximate known-group validity through the self-identification of high or low gratitude.

The TGS is not a comprehensive measure of gratitude and is limited to a bounded dimension of that construct. Therefore its usefulness as a tool is limited to the exploration of transpersonal gratitude. One concern that cannot be avoided is the bias inherent to all measures that rely on self-report, however, in the future we hope to do more to validate this scale against external measurements of gratitude.

## Future Directions

The critical importance of gratitude within the transactional dynamics of human relations social economies, and the potential for cultivating transpersonal development makes it an important topic of ongoing inquiry. The range of gratitude experience measured by the TGS suggests the possibility of a developmental dimension to the continuum of gratitude. A developmental model of gratitude would begin with

the recognition of tangible, concrete benefits. Such a beginning would conform to conceptualizations of the world in concrete terms as evidenced in childhood. With increasing facility for abstraction, the very recognition of benefit beyond an immediate material gift, is something that develops with age. Does the experience of gratitude develop over time and, more specifically, does the experience of transpersonal gratitude require the achievement of some developmental milestone? The evidence for a transcendent dimension to gratitude in the TGS points toward a transpersonal dimension to a developmental model of gratitude.

An emerging understanding of transpersonal psychology is the importance of the psychology of transformation (Hartelius, Caplan & Rardin, 2007). A detailed study of the process of transformation revealed that lasting and dramatic change is attributed to enduring shifts in self-identity, worldview, and the perception of what is possible (Schlitz, Vieten, & Amorok, 2008). Gratitude has been repeatedly defined as a shift in perspective taking. One way of understanding transpersonal gratitude is the recognition of a benefit that derives from a transcendent or transpersonal other. The deliberate cultivation of gratitude is a potential doorway to transpersonal growth and development. As an inherently relational construct, transpersonal gratitude is consistent with a participatory epistemology of transpersonal knowing as proposed by Ferrer (2002). The intimate connection with a transcendent being or other makes gratitude a potential gateway to an intersubjective experience of transcendence.

Another area of research that remains to be explored is the triggers and contexts that elicit, or are associated with, experiences of gratitude in the transpersonal domain. A clearer sense of such precursors could inform the development of strategies for cultivating gratitude. Several studies have demonstrated the value of cultivating gratitude experience to personal and relational wellbeing (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough et al., 2002). Cultivating gratitude in a transpersonal context may facilitate individual growth and transformation. Finally, the relationship between transpersonal gratitude and other transpersonal constructs such as mindfulness and forgiveness is another promising area of research. As an instrument designed to measure gratitude within the interpersonal and transpersonal domains, the TGS can support such investigations.

### **A Transcendent View of Gratitude**

### **Conclusions**

The primary contribution of this study is the introduction of a transpersonal dimension to the construct of gratitude. The research reported here introduces a promising assessment tool for exploring the dimensions of caring and transpersonal experience of gratitude, and points to specific areas of potentially beneficial research.

Komter (2004) suggested that, "A theory of gratitude should integrate its psychological, moral, social, and cultural dimensions. Like the gift, gratitude proves to be a truly interdisciplinary subject" (p. 208). Gratitude-experience clearly encompasses a wide range of affect, from feelings of thankfulness to feelings of oneness and connection as suggested by Steindl-Rast (2004). Intense feelings of breath-taking awe, or tears of overwhelming joy in response to an experience of gratitude in nature (e.g., "I become overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude"), do not correspond to a model that views gratitude as the response to the perception of a tangible benefit. The transpersonal gratitude scale is not only comprehensive enough to account for this complex range of emotional experience, it is also internally consistent, externally valid and exhibits a factor structure that matches well to the corresponding subscales.

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## Appendix A

### Transpersonal Gratitude Scale

#### Expression of Gratitude

- G1. I show appreciation to others when they have positively influenced my life.
- G2. It is difficult for me to express my gratitude. \*
- G3. I go out of my way to acknowledge favors.
- G4. I tell my friends that I am grateful for them.

#### Value of Gratitude

- G5. Gratitude helps me to address obstacles in my relationships.
- G6. Gratitude helps me to feel open with others.
- G7. I have patience when I feel gratitude.
- G8. Gratitude helps me to feel loving toward others.

#### A Transcendent View of Gratitude

#### Transcendent Gratitude

- G9. I feel grateful for just being alive.
- G10. I become overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude.
- G11. Thinking of the blessings that I've received helps me to appreciate life.
- G12. I am grateful for the opportunities I have had in my life.

#### Spiritual Connection

- G13. I say prayers of thanks for everything I have.
- G14. I thank God for the good things I have in my life.
- G15. I know there is a divine presence that is blessing me.
- G16. I am grateful to a divine being for everything in my life.

(\* ) This item is reverse scored.

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### **About the Journal**

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).