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Feelings of Gratitude Toward God Among Older Whites, Older African Americans, and Older Mexican Americans

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Abstract

The first goal of this study is to see if social relationships in the church influence feelings of gratitude toward God. The second goal is to assess the impact of race and ethnicity on this relationship. The data support the following hypotheses: (1) older people who go to church more often tend to receive more spiritual support from fellow church members; (2) older adults who receive more spiritual support at church will derive a deeper understanding of themselves and others; (3) older people who develop greater insight into themselves and others will derive a greater sense of religious meaning in life; and (4) older adults who develop a deeper sense of religious meaning in life will feel more grateful to God. The results also indicate that the study model explains how feelings of gratitude toward God arise among older blacks and whites, but not older Mexican Americans.

Keywords

Gratitude to God; race and ethnic; spiritual support

Introduction

During the past several decades researchers have expressed a growing interest in the study of gratitude (see Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, for a review of this research). This attention is justified because a number of studies indicate that people who feel grateful tend to enjoy better physical and mental health than individuals who do not feel grateful (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). The potential health-related benefits of gratitude may arise in a number of ways. For example, research by Krause (2006) suggests that the deleterious effects of stress on health are reduced significantly for older people who are more grateful. Given these potentially important health-related effects, it is not surprising to find that a number of interventions have been devised to help people feel more grateful (e.g., Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In view of these important developments, steps should now be taken to broaden the scope of research by delving more deeply into how feelings of gratitude arise. This is accomplished in the current study by addressing two key issues.

First, many researchers have studied feelings of gratitude toward other people, but fewer studies have been conducted to assess feelings of gratitude toward God. It is important to study this type of gratitude because the sacred texts of many major faith traditions in the world extol the virtue of feeling grateful to God (Lundberg, 2010). It is for this reason that the analyses that are presented below focus specifically on feelings of gratitude toward God.

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Second, a good deal of the research on gratitude has been conducted with college students (e.g., Wood et al., 2008). As a result, it is difficult to determine if the findings from these studies can be generalized beyond the college campus. More research is needed with other populations, especially those consisting of minority group members. An effort is made in the analyses that follow to explore how feelings of gratitude toward God arise among older whites, older African Americans, and older Mexican Americans. It is especially important to examine feelings of gratitude toward God among older Mexican Americans because there are no studies in the literature that evaluate this issue.

A Conceptual Model of Feelings of Gratitude Toward God

Figure 1 contains the latent variable model that is evaluated in this study. In order to simplify the presentation of this conceptual scheme the elements of the measurement model (i.e., the factor loadings and measurement error terms) are not depicted in this diagram nor are the effects of age, sex, and education, even though the influence of these demographic factors was controlled statistically when this model was estimated.

The analyses that are presented below are based on data that are provided by older people who attend Western Christian Churches. Although a number of relationships will be evaluated with the study model, the conceptual core is captured in the following linkages: (1) older people who go to church more often tend to receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members; (2) older adults who receive more spiritual support from the people who worship with them will derive a deeper understanding of themselves and others; (3) older people who develop greater insight into themselves and others will find a greater sense of religious meaning in life; and (4) older adults who develop a deep sense of religious meaning in life will feel more grateful to God.

Church Attendance and Spiritual Support

There is a straightforward reason why the study model begins with the frequency of church attendance. The church is the primary source of information about the principles of a faith tradition. This information is provided in a number of ways, including sermons, hymns, and group prayers. But one goal of the study model is to suggest that fellow church members may also play a role in this process by exchanging spiritual support. Krause (2002a) defines spiritual support as assistance that is specifically intended to increase the religious commitment, beliefs, and behaviors of a fellow church member. It is important to point out that the explicitly religious focus sets spiritual support off from other types of support that may be provided by fellow church members, such as emotional support or tangible assistance.

The emphasis on spiritual support in the study model is consistent with Berger's (1967) insights on how religious world views are created and maintained. He argues that religious worlds, "... are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective .... and subjective .... depends upon *specific* social processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question" (Berger, 1967, p. 45). Although Berger (1967) is not clear about the precise way in which this religious social maintenance takes place, focusing on the spiritual support that is exchanged by fellow church members represents one way in which this may happen. And attending worship services provides one setting in which this type of exchange takes place.

Spiritual Support and Deriving a Deeper Understanding of Self and Others

Josiah Royce (1912/2001) was a well-known philosopher of his day. His work helps show that one of the key functions of spiritual support is to provide people with greater insight into themselves and others. He accomplishes this by identifying what is perhaps the most

fundamental human need: “We need to give life sense, to know and control our own selves .... This is our need. To live thus is our ideal (but) because this need is far off from the natural man, we need salvation” (Royce 1912/200, p.31). Royce (1912/2001, p. 91) then went on to specify how his notion of salvation is attained: “.... the principle means of grace .... lies in .... communion with the faithful and with the unity of spirit which they express in their lives. It is natural that we begin this process of communion through direct personal relations with the fellow servants of our own special cause.” In essence Royce (1912/2001) suggests that the spiritual support older people receive from fellow church members helps them better understand their own lives and the lives of others.

Insight into Self and Others and Religious Meaning in Life

Researchers who study meaning in life in secular settings have found that this construct is notoriously difficult to define. This challenge is captured by Spilka and his colleagues: “There is a scientific vagueness to the idea of ‘meaning’, no other word seems to capture as well its inherent significance” (Spilka et al., 2003, p.15). Even so, the definition that is provided by these investigators serves as a useful point of departure. They argue that, “... in essence, people need to make sense out of the world in which they live .... When we turn to religion, we focus on higher-level cognitions *and some understanding of ourselves and our relationship to others in the world. The result is meaning ....*” (Spilka et al., 2003, p.15–16, emphasis added). Their choice of words is illuminating. These investigators propose that a religious sense of meaning in life is derived, in part, from an individual’s understanding of themselves and others. But they also maintain that this understanding is not in and of itself religious meaning. Instead, religious meaning is something that arises from insights into the self and others.

Although examining the work of Spilka et al. (2003) is helpful, it doesn’t go far enough because the precise nature of the how people should relate to others is not discussed. Delving more deeply into this issue reveals another way in which better understanding one’s self and others promotes a sense of meaning in life. Returning to the work of Lundberg (2010) provides an important point of departure for addressing these issues. He maintains that, “Every religion asks us to do what we can for those in need” (Lundberg, 2010, p. 255). So if helping other people is an important part of the relationships that are forged with others, then the realization of this fundamental religious tenet should provide people with a sense of purpose. This realization is important because researchers have argued for some time that a sense of purpose is an important component of meaning (Frankl, 1959/1984).

Religious Meaning in Life and Gratitude Toward God

Gratitude toward God is defined as a positive emotion that involves feelings of thankfulness toward God for the benefits that God has bestowed. These benefits may arise from pleasant experiences (e.g., the love of family members) or they may arise from difficult experiences (e.g., personal growth through adversity). It follows from this definition that extent to which people feel grateful to God should be determined, at least in part, by the nature of the benefits they feel God has given them. And providing a sense of meaning in life may be one of the most important gifts that God can bestow. Evidence of this may be found in the work of a number of scholars who argue that finding a sense of meaning satisfies one of the most important and fundamental needs in life. For example, Berger (1967:22) argued that there is “... a human craving for meaning that appears to have the force of instinct.” Similarly, Frankl (1959/1984:126) maintained that, “there is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life.” Finally, Maddi (1998:3) boldly underscored the centrality of meaning in life when he observed that, “A cardinal assumption of existential psychology is

that an individual's personal sense of meaning is the major determinant of mentation and action."

Bringing the Influence of Race and Ethnicity to the Foreground

African Americans—Some time ago, Nelsen and Nelsen (1975) discussed the historical influences on the development of the church in the black community. These investigators argued that due to centuries of prejudice and discrimination, the church became the center of the African American community. As a result, black people turned to the church primarily because it was the only institution in their community that they built, funded, and wholly owned. In the process, the church became much more than a place of worship; it also became a conduit for the delivery of social services.

Given the central role that the church has played in the black community, it is not surprising to find that it exerts a significant influence on the social relationships that are developed among the people who worship there. Evidence of this may be found in the work of J. Deotis Roberts (2003, p. 78), a noted black theologian: "The black church, as a social and religious body, has served as a kind of 'extended family' for blacks. In a real sense then, thousands of blacks who have never known real family life have discovered the meaning in real kinship in the black church." Consistent with this view, Krause (2002b) reports that scores on ten out of twelve church-based social relationship measures are higher for older blacks than older whites. If feelings of gratitude may be traced back to social relationships that arise in the church, then it follows that older blacks should feel more grateful to God than older whites.

Mexican Americans—Like older blacks, older Mexican Americans have struggled with difficult historical experiences. There are at least two ways in which these historical forces came into play. First, the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish caused a great deal of pain and suffering (Leon, 2004). Carrasco (1990) documents the shocking extent of this problem. He reports that in 1500 there were 25 million indigenous people living in Mexico, but due to factors such as disease and slavery, this population was reduced to 1 million by 1600. Given this data, it is not surprising to find that Leon (2004, p. 198) refers to this period of colonization as the "Mexican diaspora." Second, the deleterious consequences of colonization were exacerbated by a number of subsequent historical events including the Mexican American War of 1848 and the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Each of these events rekindled earlier conditions of subordination and diaspora that were encountered during the Spanish colonization. The vestiges of these historical events are captured by Rodriguez (1994, p. 69), who argues that: "What makes the experience of Mexican Americans unique compared to other ethnic populations that migrated to this country is their psychohistorical experience and their subsequent subjugation – all taking place in what the indigenous peoples considered to be their own land."

At first, it may seem as though Mexican Americans would turn to the church for solace, just as many African Americans have done. But a closer examination of the history of the church in the Mexican American community suggests otherwise. As Krause and Bastida (2010) report, approximately 77% of older Mexican Americans identify with the Catholic faith. But unlike African Americans, Mexican Americans did not own and operate the church in their own community. Instead, it was imposed upon them by Anglos. The control of the church by Anglos was manifest in at least three ways. First, Hispanic men were not permitted to become priests until the early twentieth century (Fernandez, 2007). Second, as Burns (1994) points out, during the first half of the twentieth century, Anglo members of the clergy viewed many of the religious practices of Mexican Americans (e.g., maintaining - altarcitos - religious altars in the home) as mere superstitions. Third, Virgilio Elizondo is widely regarded as the founder of Latino theology (Matovina, 2000). When he was struggling to be

ordained into the priesthood during the 1970's, he found that, "U.S. Catholicism was ashamed of our Mexican Catholicism, and thus to become good priests .... we had to assume that shame of our own people" (Elizondo, 2010, p. 55). Because of these developments, Leon (2004, p. 94) concludes that, ".... it should not be surprising to find that many Mexicans have developed a strong attachment to the symbols and rituals of Catholicism, while developing a weak commitment to its institutional obligations." This suggests that involvement in the church should play a greater role in shaping feelings of gratitude toward God among older whites than among older Mexican Americans.

Methods

Study Samples

The data for the current study come from two nationwide surveys. Older blacks and older whites participated in the first survey, which is referred to below as the Religion, Aging, and Health Survey (RAH). The second survey is called the Religion, Aging, and Health – Mexican American Survey (RAHMA). Both studies were approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

RAH Survey Data—The population for the RAH Survey was defined as all household residents who were either black or white, noninstitutionalized, English-speaking, and 66 years of age or older. Geographically, the study population was restricted to all eligible persons residing in the coterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). In addition, the study population was restricted to individuals who were currently practicing Christians, people who were Christian in the past but no longer practice any religion, and individuals who were never affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime.

The sampling frame consisted of all eligible persons contained in the files that are maintained by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). A five-step process was used to draw the sample from the CMS data base (see Krause, 2002a, for a detailed discussion of these procedures).

Interviewing for the first wave in the RAH Survey began in March 2001, and concluded in August 2001. A total of 1,500 Wave 1 interviews were completed face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. Older blacks were over-sampled so sufficient statistical power would be available to examine race differences in religion. Consequently, the sample consisted of 748 older whites and 752 older blacks. The overall response rate for the study was 62%.

A second wave of interviews was conducted in 2004. A total of 1,024 of the original 1,500 study participants were re-interviewed successfully. Not counting those who had died or moved to a nursing home, the re-interview rate for the Wave 2 survey was 80%.

Questions about feelings of gratitude toward God were not administered until Wave 2. As a result, the data on older whites and older blacks come from this interview. However, not all Wave 2 respondents are included in the analyses presented below. Some cases are excluded because people must attend church on a regular basis in order to receive spiritual support from the people who worship there. Consequently, when the study questionnaire was designed, the research team felt that it did not make sense to ask about things like receiving spiritual support from fellow church members if people either never go to church, or if they only attend worship services only once or twice a year. Based on this rationale, 349 study participants are excluded from the analyses presented below because the questions dealing with spiritual support were not administered to them. This means, in effect, that the analyses

presented below are based on practicing Christians only. After implementing these exclusion criteria, data are available for 374 older blacks and 301 older whites.

RAHMA Survey Data—The population for the RAHMA Survey was defined as all Mexican Americans aged 66 and over who were retired (i.e., not working for pay), not institutionalized, and who speak either English or Spanish. The sampling frame consisted of all eligible study participants who resided in the following five-state area: Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The sampling strategy that was used for the widely-cited Hispanic Established Population for Epidemiological Study (HEPESE) was adopted for the current study (see Markides, 2003). The interviews were administered face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. Because all of the interviewers were bilingual, study participants could choose whether they wanted to be interviewed in English or Spanish. A total of 1,005 interviews were completed successfully. The response rate was 52%.

Consistent with the strategy discussed above, the spiritual support measures were only administered to older Mexican Americans who reported that they attend worship services more than twice a year. As a result, data were available for 663 study participants.

Measures

Table 1 contains the items that are used to measure the core constructs in this study. The procedures that are used to code these indicators are provided in the footnotes of this table. The items that are used to assess spiritual support, insight into self and others, and religious meaning in life were crafted with the item development strategy reported by Krause (2002c).

Gratitude Toward God—Three items were devised to measure the extent to which older study participants feel grateful to God. A high score on these indicators represents feeling more grateful to God. The mean is 11.2 ($SD = 1.3$).

Church Attendance—The participants in this study were asked how often they attend religious services during the year. A high score stands for more frequent church attendance. The mean of this indicator is 7.2 ($SD = 1.4$).

Spiritual Support—Spiritual support is assessed with three indicators (see Table 1). A high score means the older study participants received spiritual support from fellow church members more often. As shown in Table 1, study participants were instructed to exclude spiritual support received in Bible study groups, prayer groups, and church services when answering these questions. As a result, the measures in Table 1 reflect informal spiritual support. The mean of this measure is 6.2 ($SD = 4.0$).

Insight into Self and Others—The participants in this study were asked how often their faith helps them better understand themselves and others. A high score indicates greater endorsement of these beliefs. The mean is 6.7 ($SD = 2.2$).

Religious Meaning in Life—Three items were used to assess whether the respondents believe that God put them in this life for a purpose, whether God has a specific plan for their lives, and whether God has a reason for everything that happens to them. A high score denotes a stronger sense of religious meaning in life. The mean is 10.5 ($SD = 2.2$).

Race and Ethnicity—Two binary variables were created to assess the influence of race and ethnicity on the core study constructs. The first contrasts older African Americans (scored 1) with older whites (scored 0) while the second contrasts older Mexican Americans (scored 1) with older whites (scored 0).

Demographic Control Measures—The relationships among the constructs listed in Table 1 were estimated after the effects of age, sex, and education were controlled statistically. Age and education were scored in a continuous format (i.e., in years) while sex is assessed with a binary indicator (1 = men; 0 = women).

Results

Assessing the Fit of the Model to the Data

The model in Figure 1 was estimated with Version 8.80 of the LISREL statistical software program (du Toit & du Toit, 2001). The maximum likelihood estimator was used in this process. Following the recommendations of du Toit and du Toit (2001, p. 143) departures from multivariate normality were handled by converting raw scores on the observed indicators to normal scores prior to estimating the model.

The full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) procedure was used to deal with item non-response. This procedure was selected because research reveals that FIML provides data that are equivalent to more time consuming imputation procedures, such as multiple imputation (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Because FIML was used to deal with item nonresponse, the LISREL software program only provides two goodness-of-fit measures. The first is the full information maximum likelihood chi-square value (208.499 with 80 degrees of freedom, $p < .001$). Unfortunately, this statistic is not informative because the sample for this study is large. However, the second goodness-of-fit measure is more useful; the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The RMSEA value for the study mode is .035. As Kelloway (1998) reports, values below .05 indicate a very good fit of the model to the data.

Reliability of Multiple Item Study Measures

The factor loadings and measurement error terms that were derived from estimating the study model are important because they provide preliminary information about the reliability of the multiple item indicators. Kline (2005) recommends that items with standardized factor loadings in excess of .600 tend to have good reliability. The standardized factor loadings range from .774 to .943, indicating the reliability of each indicator is good.

Although obtaining information about the reliability of each item is useful, it would also be helpful to know something about the reliability for the multiple item scales as a whole. Fortunately, it is possible to compute these estimates with a formula provided by DeShon (1998). This procedure is based on the factor loadings and measurement error terms. Applying the procedures described by DeShon (1998) to these data yields the following reliability estimates for the multiple item constructs in Figure 1: spiritual support (.893), religious meaning in life (.886), and feelings of gratitude toward God (.878). Once again, these data suggest the reliability of the measures of the multiple item constructs is good.

Substantive Findings

Relationships Among the Core Study Constructs—Table 2 contains the estimates of the relationships among the core constructs in the study model. Viewed broadly, these data provide support for the key linkages in this conceptual scheme. More specifically, the findings indicate that older adults who go to church more often report that they receive more spiritual support from fellow church members than older people who do not go to church as frequently (Beta = .283; $p < .001$). The results further reveal that older individuals who receive more spiritual support are more likely to indicate that their faith helps them better understand themselves and others (Beta = .247; $p < .001$). And older study participants who better understand themselves and others are more likely to have developed a strong sense of

religious meaning in life ($\text{Beta} = .645; p < .001$). Finally, the data suggest that older adults who have found a greater religious sense of meaning in life tend to feel more grateful to God ($\text{Beta} = .413; p < .001$).

One of the advantages of working with latent variable models arises from the fact that it is possible to assess the indirect and total effects of a construct that operate through a conceptual scheme. A simple example helps clarify the meaning of these terms. The study model specifies that spiritual support is associated with greater insight into self and others, and greater insight into self and others is, in turn, associated with a stronger sense of religious meaning in life. This means that spiritual support affects religious meaning indirectly by providing greater insights into self and others. When the direct effect of spiritual support on religious meaning is added to the indirect effect that operates through insight into self and others, the resulting total effect provides a broader vantage point for assessing the role that spiritual support plays in the study model. Breaking down the effect of a construct into direct, indirect, and total effects is known as the decomposition of effects.

Two decompositions will be discussed briefly. The first has to do with the relationship between the frequency of church attendance and feelings of gratitude toward God. According to the theoretical rationale that was developed for this study, church attendance occupies an important role in the study model because it is the primary place where answers to fundamental questions about life are provided. These insights are important because they form part of the basis for feeling grateful to God. But if attention is devoted solely to the direct effects of church attendance on gratitude, it may appear as though going to worship services has a rather modest effect on feelings of gratitude toward God ($\text{Beta} = .092; p < .01$). However, a decomposition of effects shows that the relationship between the two may be significantly larger than this. When the indirect effects of church attendance on gratitude ($\text{Beta} = .137; p < .001$; not shown in Table 2) are added to the direct effect ($\text{Beta} = .092; n.s.$), the resulting total effect ($.137 + .092 = .229; p < .001$) indicates that more frequent church attendance does promote more gratitude toward God. Put another way, about 60% of the effect of church attendance on gratitude operates through the constructs in the study model (i.e., $.137/.229 = .598$).

According to Berger (1967), religious world views are continuously maintained by social interaction with like minded religious others. Since feelings of gratitude toward God are an important part of a religious world view, it follows that spiritual support from fellow church members should bolster and maintain greater feelings of gratitude toward God. However, focusing solely on the direct effect of spiritual support on feelings of gratitude provides only modest support for this view ($\text{Beta} = .069; p < .05$). But once again, the decomposition of effects provides a more complete picture. The indirect effect of spiritual support on gratitude toward God is statistically significant ($\text{Beta} = .100; p < .001$; not shown in Table 2). When this indirect effect is combined with the direct effect, the resulting total effect indicates that older people who get more spiritual support report that they feel more grateful to God ($.069 + .100 = .169; p < .001$).

Exploring the Influence of Race and Ethnicity—Earlier it was proposed that historical forces strengthened the ties that older blacks have with the church and as a result, the extent to which they feel grateful to God should be influenced by the social environment of the place where they worship. The findings in Table 2 provide support for this view. The direct effects reported in Table 2 indicate that compared to older whites, older blacks receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members ($\text{Beta} = .097; p < .01$), they are more likely to gain a deeper understanding about themselves and others ($\text{Beta} = .086; p < .05$), and they are more likely to have a stronger religious sense of meaning in life ($\text{Beta} = .087; p < .01$). In contrast, the direct effect of this race comparison on gratitude toward God

is not statistically significant ($Beta = .041$; *n.s.*). This might appear to suggest that older blacks are not more likely than older whites to feel grateful to God. However, further analysis reveals that there is a statistically significant indirect effect that operates through the constructs in the model: compared to older whites, the indirect effects that operate through spiritual support, understanding self and others, as well as a religious sense of meaning in life tend to elevate feelings of gratitude toward God among older blacks ($Beta = .088$; $p < .001$; not shown in Table 3). Put another way, the data suggest that older blacks feel more grateful to God than older whites and approximately 68% of this difference can be attributed to the intervening constructs in the study model ($.088/.129 = .682$).

Because the church in the Mexican American community was historically controlled by Anglos, it was hypothesized that Mexican Americans would have a more tenuous relationship with it. The data in Tables 2 provide support for this view, but the evidence is complex. The direct effects in Table 2 indicate that compared to older whites, older Mexican Americans tend to receive less spiritual support at church than older whites ($Beta = -.126$; $p < .001$). Yet the data further reveal that older Mexican Americans feel more grateful to God than older whites ($Beta = .176$; $p < .001$). Since the study model predicts that spiritual support ultimately helps people feel more grateful to God, it is not clear why older Mexican Americans nevertheless feel more grateful to God than older whites. One possibility is that social factors outside the church explain the relatively higher levels of gratitude toward God among older Mexican Americans. Preliminary support for this notion may be found by turning to the indirect effects that operate through the model. These data suggest that the indirect effect of Mexican ancestry on feelings of gratitude toward God is not statistically significant ($Beta = .010$; *n.s.*; not shown in Table 2). So if older Mexican Americans are more grateful to God than older whites, but the intervening variables (i.e., the indirect effects) in the model do not explain this relationship, then variables that are not contained in the model must obviously be at work.

Conclusion

In their comprehensive review of the literature, Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) recently conclude that, "...gratitude is related to a variety of clinically relevant phenomena, including psychopathology (particularly depression) ..... and health" (p. 902). These investigators go on to report that, "Longitudinal and experimental work suggests that the benefits of gratitude to well-being may be causal" (Wood et al., 2010, 902). In order for researchers to develop a well-rounded understanding of gratitude, they must move beyond the assessment of its potential health-related effects to study how feelings of gratitude arise in the first place. The purpose of the current study was to address this issue. The findings provide support for the following relationships: (1) older adults who go to church more often tend to receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members; (2) older individuals who receive more spiritual support from people at church tend to understand themselves and others better; (3) older people who understand themselves and others better tend to have a stronger religious sense of meaning in life; and (4) older adults with a stronger sense of meaning in life tend to feel more grateful to God.

Instead of merely evaluating the relationships among the core linkages in the study model, an effort was also made to explore the influence of race and ethnicity. The findings indicate that older blacks and older Mexicans tend to feel more grateful to God than older whites. However, key differences emerged between the two minority groups in the way in which feelings of gratitude toward God arise. The relationships among the core constructs in the study model explain how stronger feelings of gratitude among older blacks arise, but the same was not true for older Mexican Americans. The differences between older blacks and

older Mexican Americans are consistent with their historical experiences with the church that were discussed earlier.

Although the findings may have contributed to the literature, a significant amount of research remains to be done. While social relationships in the church provide a good deal of insight into how a religious sense of meaning may arise among older blacks, the same was not true for older Mexican Americans. It was assumed that social factors outside the church are involved, but these social factors were not measured or evaluated empirically. Identifying the precise factors that shape a religious sense of meaning in life among older Mexican Americans should be a top priority. A second issue has to do with probing more differently into the ways in which race and ethnicity may shape feelings of gratitude toward God. The analyses presented above focus solely on the additive effects of race and ethnicity on the core study measures. However, it is also important to test for statistical interaction effects in this conceptual scheme. This means, for example, that the size of the relationship between religious meaning in life and gratitude toward God may differ across the three racial and ethnic groups. Third, Caucasians do not constitute a single homogeneous group. Even so, no effort was made to evaluate the influence of cultural variations among Anglos. Doing so should be yet another priority in future research. In the process of expanding the scope of research on feelings of gratitude toward God, researchers should pay careful attention to the limitations in the current study. Perhaps the most significant shortcoming has to do with the cross-sectional nature of the data. Because the data are cross-sectional, the temporal ordering among the constructs in the study model was based on theoretical considerations alone. Consequently, other investigators may legitimately propose a different causal ordering. For example, the study model proposes that greater insight into one's self and others promotes a deeper sense of religious meaning in life. However, it might just as easily be argued that people who have a strong sense of religious meaning in life are able to better understand themselves and others. Even though there are limitations in this study, the findings will hopefully encourage other investigators to delve more deeply into this important topic.

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Figure 1.

Table 1**Core Study Measures**

1	Gratitude Toward God ^a
	A. I am grateful to God for all He has done for me.
	B. If I were to make a list of all the things God has done for me, it would be a very long list.
	C. As I look back on my life, I feel I have been richly blessed by God.
2	Church Attendance ^b
	How often do you attend religious services?
3	Spiritual Support ^c
	A. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you find solutions to your problems in the Bible?
	B. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often do the examples set by other in your congregation help you to live a better religious life?
	C. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does someone in your congregation help you to know God better?
4	Insight into Self and Others ^a
	A. My faith helps me better understand myself.
	B. My faith helps me better understand other people.
5	Religious Meaning in Life ^a
	A. God put me in this life for a purpose.
	B. God has a specific plan for my life.
	C. God has a reason for everything that happens to me.

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^aThese items are scored in the following manner (coding in parenthesis): strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), strongly agree (4).

^bThis item is scored in the following manner: never (1), less than once a year (2), about once or twice a year (3), several times a year (4), about once a month (5), 2 to 3 times a month (6), nearly every week (7), every week (8), several times a week (9).

^cThese items are scored in the following manner: never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

Table 2

The Relationship Between Spiritual Support and Gratitude Toward God ($N = 1,338$)

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Attend Church	Spiritual Support	Insight into Self/Others	Religious Meaning	Gratitude Toward God
Age	-.005 ^a (-.001) ^b	-.031 (-.005)	.041 (.008)	-.002 (-.001)	.045 (.003)
Sex	-.044 (-.131)	-.063 [*] (-.136)	-.093 ^{***} (-.226)	-.026 (-.036)	-.071 ^{**} (-.052)
Education	.092 ^{**} (.030)	-.043 (-.010)	-.037 (-.010)	.042 (.006)	.051 (.004)
Black vs. White	-.034 (-.109)	.097 [*] (.225)	.086 [*] (.225)	.087 ^{**} (.131)	.041 (.033)
Mexican American vs. White	-.075 (-.214)	-.126 ^{**} (-.262)	-.022 (-.052)	.143 ^{***} (.192)	.176 ^{***} (.125)
Attend Church		.283 ^{***} (.205)	.117 ^{***} (.095)	.074 ^{**} (.035)	.092 ^{***} (.023)
Spiritual Support			.247 ^{***} (.278)	-.057 [*] (-.037)	.069 [*] (.024)
Insight into Self/Others				.645 ^{***} (.370)	.234 ^{***} (.071)
Religious Meaning					.413 ^{***} (.218)
Multiple R ²	.020	.125	.128	.427	.432

^a Standardized regression coefficient^b Unstandardized (metric) regression coefficient* $p < .05$;** $p < .01$;*** $p < .001$