Introduction

Although gratitude has been defined and studied in many ways across diverse disciplines for many centuries, the scientific understanding of gratitude has significantly grown only over the last two decades. The nature of this construct has been primarily conceptualized in the field of social science research in two ways. First, there is a line of research that approaches gratitude as a disposition. These studies assume that gratitude is part of a global life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world. Individuals with such a grateful disposition tend to be more satisfied with their lives, happier in general, and more hopeful about life (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008a). Another line of research views gratitude as an emotional experience specifically in response to the receipt of benefits. According to this view, people feel
grateful after they receive something positive (e.g., a kind act or a gift) from another person, which is perceived as altruistic and valuable (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008b). The previous research taking this perspective shows that individuals who are induced to feel grateful in experimentally manipulated settings report more positive emotions and engage in prosocial behavior compared to those in control groups who do not get to experience grateful emotions (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; McCullough et al., 2001). Despite the significant contributions made by the previous research, important limitations remain that merit more research to deepen our understanding of gratitude. While the empirical picture of gratitude among adults is more solidly established, there is little research conducted with adolescents. Adolescence is a critical period where important virtues necessary for successful adulthood are acquired and cultivated. As previous research with adults documents evidence for positive psychological and social functioning associated with grateful disposition (Froh et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2008a), gratitude must be one of the key virtues to be fostered during adolescence for transitioning to healthy and well-functioning adulthood. Researchers suggest that it may not be until early adolescence (ages 10-14) that children can reliably experience genuine gratitude and reap its psychological benefits (Froh & Bono 2008). Thus, early adolescence would be an ideal period for examining to what extent adolescents experience gratitude, what might cultivate gratitude, and its psychological effects.

Also, as gratitude has previously been linked with many social and psychological benefits among adults, it is important to identify what fosters gratitude early on in life. Given that parents continue to be critical socializing agents in adolescents’ lives with significant impact on their development, one can expect what parents do might have impact on adolescent gratitude. However, there has been little systematic exploration of the role of parents in adolescent gratitude. A study by Gordon, Musher-Eizenman, Holub, and Dalrymple (2004) suggests that family may be particularly important for young adolescents’ experience of gratitude. In this study, when middle school children were asked to think about what they were most grateful for, the most common gratitude theme was family. For instance, family members were cited nearly three times as often as teachers and/or school. Bai and Jin (2016) found that Chinese children in 6th grade with greater levels of family cohesion and adaptability scored higher on gratitude. Also, Seplowitz (2011) showed more specifically that mothers’ parenting behaviors that emphasized emotion expression to their children (ages 9-13) were significantly associated with higher levels of gratitude among children. Finally, one study conducted with Korean adolescents (Lim, Kim, Kim, & Xiong, 2015) showed that paternal teaching/instructive lesson and mother’s affectionate attention explained grateful disposition for male and female high school students.

A couple of previous Korean studies also found that grateful disposition among Korean adolescents was significantly associated with psychological well-being (Ham, Byeon, & Cheon, 2011; Noh & Shin, 2008). These studies further highlight the importance of fostering gratitude among adolescents. However, despite the evidence that parenting might be related to adolescent gratitude and gratitude is associated with greater psychological well-being, most of the previous research is correlational based on cross-sectional data. As such, the direction of influence between parenting and gratitude and between gratitude and psychological well-being remains unclear. These limitations call for more research with younger adolescents, using repeated measurements of the variables across time.

Another limitation in the field of gratitude research is the lack of attention to gratitude as a daily mood. According to Rosenberg (1998), moods fluctuate across days and vary as a function of the events that occur to people each day. While emotions are more acute and have a relatively short duration, moods can have broader and more pervasive effects on the psychological state of the person over relatively long span of time (Rosenberg, 1998). McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons (2004) suggest that psychological effects of gratitude are probably caused by gratitude as a mood, rather than gratitude as an emotion, as emotions are far too short lasting. Therefore, to understand what kind of experience with parents might be associated with adolescents’ gratitude on a daily basis and how gratitude may influence their psychological lives, it would be useful to examine how they experience grateful moods in daily life.

The goal of the present study was to address the aforementioned limitations in the previous research by examining the daily...