

## Article

# The Hidden Power of “Thank You”: Exploring Aspects, Expressions, and the Influence of Gratitude in Religious Families

Joe M. Chelladurai <sup>1</sup>, Loren D. Marks <sup>1</sup> , David C. Dollahite <sup>1</sup> , Heather H. Kelley <sup>2</sup> and David B. Allsop <sup>3,\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Joseph F. Smith Building Rm 2086, Provo, UT 84602, USA; joe.chelladurai@live.in (J.M.C.); loren\_marks@byu.edu (L.D.M.); david\_dollahite@byu.edu (D.C.D.)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Utah State University, 2905 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322, USA; heather.kelley@usu.edu

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Dalhousie University, Life Sciences Centre Rm 3263, 1355 Oxford St., Halifax, NS B3H 4R2, Canada

\* Correspondence: david.allso@dal.ca

**Abstract:** Gratitude has been extensively studied over the past two decades. Among several predictors, aspects of religiosity and spirituality have been consistent predictors of gratitude. To explore the religious motivations and processes that foster the practice of gratitude, we undertook a systematic thematic analysis using interview data from a national qualitative project of 198 highly religious families. Participants ( $n = 476$ ) included mothers, fathers, and children from various socioeconomic backgrounds and from diverse religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in the United States of America. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes. Data for this study were analyzed using a team-based approach to qualitative analysis. The findings were organized thematically, including: (a) aspects of gratitude, (b) expressions of gratitude, and (c) the influence of gratitude. Two aspects of gratitude were identified: *functional*—what people were grateful for—and *directional*—to whom they were grateful. Expressions of gratitude involved participation in regular, gratitude-focused prayers and mutual day-to-day appreciation. The relational context and implications and context of gratitude in religious families were further examined and reported with sub-themes: (a) gratitude prompted positive re-evaluation of relationships and (b) gratitude reinforced religious faith. Implications, strengths, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** gratitude; parent–child; marriage; family; relationships; qualitative



**Citation:** Chelladurai, J.M.; Marks, L.D.; Dollahite, D.C.; Kelley, H.H.; Allsop, D.B. The Hidden Power of “Thank You”: Exploring Aspects, Expressions, and the Influence of Gratitude in Religious Families. *Psych* **2023**, *5*, 742–756. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psych5030048>

Academic Editors: Lucia Monacis and Einar B. Thorsteinsson

Received: 24 April 2023

Revised: 28 June 2023

Accepted: 12 July 2023

Published: 20 July 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, gratitude has been studied across diverse relational domains including parental (see [1]), sibling [2], marital [3], and romantic relationships [4]. Apart from examining the potential implications of gratitude in relationships [5], scholars have also identified important predictors of gratitude such as religion and spirituality [6,7]. Further, religiosity has been consistently associated with gratitude, providing a potentially rich context for exploring gratitude [8]. However, social science has offered little insight as to why and how religion influences gratitude. By better understanding the mechanisms through which religion influences gratitude, practitioners and educators may be better positioned to promote gratitude in families, with potential benefits to couple relationships [5] and parent–child relationships [9]. Thus, in this article we examine how and why religion influences gratitude through in-depth analysis of qualitative data.

### 1.1. Gratitude and Religiosity

Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, as well as several other religions, value gratitude [10]. Many religious beliefs suggest a dependence on God and acknowledging

one's indebtedness. Additionally, religion prescribes practices such as prayer to channel gratitude and can add sacred meaning to gratitude expressions [11]. Religiosity and spirituality have been linked with various psychological constructs, which have also been related to gratitude [12]. For instance, in a sample of Jewish individuals seeking clinical treatment, religious belief and practice were associated with gratitude, controlling for negative and positive affect, whereas gratitude and religious involvement were correlated after controlling for depression and stress [13]. In this study, religious coping fully mediated the relationship between religious involvement and gratitude. Similarly, people who reportedly turned to God for help through either collaboration or deference have also reported higher levels of gratitude [6]. Finally, gratitude was also related to reported transcendence [6].

Religious involvement has also been related to gratitude over time. Through an experience-sampling methodology over a three-week period, Olson and colleagues [7] found that spiritual behaviors such as prayer and meditation were associated with increases in gratitude, thereby establishing a longitudinal trajectory. In a series of studies, Lambert and colleagues [14] also found a longitudinal relationship between prayer and gratitude. Specifically, participants who prayed to express gratitude reported high levels of gratitude. Rosmarin et al. [15] examined both religious gratitude and general gratitude and found that religious gratitude was a potential pathway for religious people to experience general gratitude.

Religious coping processes may also involve gratitude as a part of benefit finding and reappraisal. In a qualitative study, Krause and colleagues [8] found multiple benefits of feeling grateful to God, harmonizing with previous quantitative findings that gratitude seems to serve as a buffering coping mechanism for people who are grateful to God [16].

In religious families, gratitude may be part of sanctification. Highly religious people often sanctify relationships (or frame relationships as sacred)—and this tendency can heighten relational meaning towards relational spirituality—where religion and relationships are brought together [17]. Moreover, religion can have a pervasive influence in family life through established religious contexts, religious processes, and related outcomes [18]. In a study examining gratitude in religious parents and children, Brelsford and Righi [19] found that high levels of sanctification were related to high levels of gratitude.

When family members experience gratitude they may also sanctify their parent–child relationships. For parents, there was a significant relationship between gratitude and the perception of their relationship to be a manifestation of God, even after controlling for religiosity and parent–child relationship quality [19]. Although religion may foster the practice of gratitude and religion is an important predictor among other factors, non-religious people also benefit from the practice of gratitude and may be motivated with humanist values (see [20]); they may consider gratitude as a secular spiritual practice.

### *1.2. Gratitude and Family Relationships*

Families are dynamic adaptive systems [21,22]. To examine gratitude in interpersonal contexts such as family life, it is important to examine gratitude through a systemic relational lens. In this regard, the process model of gratitude and relationship maintenance provides a relevant systemic view [23]. Propositions of this model include: (a) feeling appreciated by a partner promotes one's own appreciative feelings, (b) appreciative feelings promote relationship maintenance, and (c) appreciation is signaled through relationship maintenance behaviors. Further, from a positive psychology lens, gratitude has been classified as a character strength and virtue that may be a part of a flourishing life [24]. Together, these systemic feedback processes promote a dyadic understanding of gratitude as a relational virtue; the expressor avails the personal benefits of gratitude, whereas the benefactor experiences feelings of love [25]. Gratitude-laced interactions over time may result in positive outcomes for both persons in a relationship.

Recent evidence further illustrates the need to examine gratitude from a relational lens. In marital relationships, gratitude has been found to have significant cross-partner outcomes. Gordon, Arnette, and Smith [5] found that people who reported feeling high levels

of gratitude tended to have spouses who reported high levels of relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Chang et al. [26] found that the gratitude of husbands was negatively related to the depressive symptoms of wives. These studies suggest that consistently receiving gratitude from a spouse can have positive implications for experiencing more satisfying relationships and increased personal wellbeing.

Even so, experts have cautioned that gratitude, in some contexts, can have potential downsides [27] and that gratitude may function differently in asymmetrical relationships. For instance, McNulty and Dugas [28] found that when one partner is low in gratitude, it was related to lower marital satisfaction for both partners. One highly grateful person in a relationship cannot satisfactorily compensate for an ungrateful partner. Similarly, Algoe and Zhaoyang [29] found that people who expressed gratitude to partners who were low in responsiveness reported negative daily emotions. It appears that perceived responsiveness is an important process that enables gratitude to have mutually reinforcing and reciprocating benefits [23,30]. This line of research reflects scholars' concern regarding the need to exercise caution before introducing gratitude interventions [31].

Relatively little research has examined gratitude in parent–child relationships. However, gratitude has been found to be an important protective process for children. In one study, children's levels of gratitude moderated the association between suicidal ideation and negative parenting styles [32]. In another study, the relationship between the mother's emotional support and the child's self-esteem was fully mediated by the child's levels of gratitude [9]. Child gratitude has also been identified as a protective factor against internalizing symptoms in the context of parental illness [33].

Two research teams have noted that parents with high levels of gratitude provided socialization opportunities aimed at teaching their children to be grateful, thereby influencing child gratitude [34,35]. For parents of children with special needs, hope and gratitude interventions have been found to be helpful [36], whereas, in a qualitative study, mothers of children with autism similarly reported positive parenting experiences through gratitude practices [37].

At present, research has addressed some important methodological concerns. Advances in measurement have extended dispositional measures of gratitude to better understand gratitude in relationships, indicating the possibility of different types and profiles of gratitude [38,39]. Prototype analyses of gratitude suggest at least two types of gratitude: (a) benefit-triggered gratitude, which involves another person, and (b) generalized gratitude, which looks more like dispositional (e.g., permanent or trait) gratitude [40]. Moreover, recent research has found preliminary evidence for different gratitude profiles dependent upon to whom gratitude is directed. For instance, five gratitude profiles were identified, based on the target person (e.g., a mother, father, grandparent, sibling, partner, or friend) and these profiles were associated differently with outcomes such as coping and wellbeing [41]. For example, young adults who were primarily grateful to *both* parents had higher levels of wellbeing than those who were only grateful to one parent. Similarly, in research examining gratitude and religion, gratitude to God has been found to be different from general gratitude [15]. Recent research also indicates that there may be differences between interpersonal and non-interpersonal gratitude [42]. These directional aspects in gratitude research need to be further explored to make sense of the relational systems that constitute interpersonal relationships.

Gratitude has been theorized to help people *find* new relationships, *remind* people of their existing and established relationships, and *bind* continuing relationships [43]. Consistent with this theory, subsequent empirical research has indicated that gratitude seems to help with relationship formation [44], relationship maintenance [45], and reported relational satisfaction [5]. Working through dyadic mediating processes such as responsiveness [29], warmth [44], and positive perceptions [46], gratitude may have important implications for day-to-day close relationships. Expressions of gratitude that manifest as “other-praising” behavior may rejuvenate and strengthen relationships [25]. In the present study, we utilize a qualitative methodology to explore two research questions: (a) How does religion influence gratitude in family life? and (b) How does gratitude influence relationships in religious families?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants for this study were from 198 families ( $n = 476$ ; 198 mothers, 198 fathers, 41 daughters, and 39 sons) from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities. The average age of the mothers was 45 and the average age of the fathers was 47; average marital length was 20 years. The average age of the interviewed children was 16 years (range: 6–25). Participants were from all eight socioreligious regions in the United States (i.e., Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Mountain West, New England, Northwest, Pacific, the South, and Southern Crossroads regions, see [47]). We oversampled for diversity, and over half of the participants (51%) were from racial and/or ethnic minority groups, including (but not limited to) American Indian, Asian, Black, East Asian/East Indian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander families (see Table 1; see also Table S1 in Supplemental Material for additional details on race/ethnicity). Furthermore, about a quarter of the participant families were immigrants to the United States.

**Table 1.** Number and Percentage of Families by Religious/Ethnic Community.

Religious-Ethnic Community	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Christian</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>72</b>
Asian American	24	12
Black Christian	26	13
Catholic and Orthodox Christian	21	10
Evangelical Christian	24	11
Mainline Christian	20	10
Latter-day Saint Christian	28	14
<b>Jewish</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>15</b>
Conservative Jewish	12	6
Orthodox Jewish	7	4
Reform Jewish	11	6
<b>Muslim</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>13</b>
Sunni Muslim	19	9
Shia Muslim	6	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>100</b>

### 2.2. Procedure

We employed Nvivo 12 software and thematic analysis to analyze the data and present the findings [48]. Participants were recruited through purposive, referral-based sampling. Specifically, congregational leaders were contacted and asked for referrals of exemplary families who actively participated in their religion. This procedure allowed the recruitment of participants who were regarded as highly religious through nominated expert sampling, resulting in an exemplar sample [49]. IRB approval was received from the university and participants provided informed consent. Participants were interviewed jointly in their homes using a semi-structured interview schedule that explored the nexus of religion and family relationships. (Full questionnaire available upon request). Where approved, children ( $n = 80$ ) were also interviewed. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of a little more than two hours. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked.

### 2.3. Analyses

During the interviews, no direct questions on gratitude were asked. However, when systematically analyzing the transcripts, coders noted that participants had repeatedly mentioned gratitude. To explore gratitude further, systematic analyses were conducted through multi-phase, team-based, thematic coding procedures [50]. In the first phase, relevant data was extracted using NVivo 12 qualitative software [48]. In the second phase, a team-based coding approach was used to conduct open coding and axial coding [50]. In the final phase, selective coding was conducted.

The coding team was comprised of three undergraduate researchers enrolled in a semester-long research practicum. Each member of the team individually coded from the exported document and met together to discuss coding patterns [50]. These measures were taken to ensure a methodological approach, promote and maintain inter-rater reliability, and to foster integrity throughout the qualitative analysis [51].

#### 2.3.1. Broad Coding

In the first stage, we used a manifest analysis scheme to extract broad codes. Manifest analysis implies an approach to “stay close to the text, use the words themselves, and describe the visible and obvious in the text” [52]. To achieve this, the first author conducted a systematic search for keywords using Nvivo 12. Search terms included gratitude, thankful, appreciation, and related terms using wildcard function (apprec\* or grat\* or thankful\* or thanksgiving). The results from the text search query were from 133 interviews with 365 references. Using the custom coding function, 60 words around each reference (i.e., 30 words before the occurrence and 30 words after) were selected and exported.

#### 2.3.2. Open Coding

In this stage, a team-based coding strategy was used [50]. A team of three coders independently created codes through line-by-line analysis. Through weekly meetings, the coders consulted with each other and discussed identified, emergent themes. These included: (a) relationship with God, (b) blessings, (c) prayer, (d) teachings, (e) marriage, (f) children, (g) compliments, (h) service, and (i) expressions of gratitude. Open coding was performed until theoretical saturation was reached. Inter-rater coding reliability was > 0.90.

#### 2.3.3. Categorical Coding

In this stage, codes were organized under developing categories [53]. For example, *spouse*, *child*, and *parent* were categorized together in a category titled *relationships*. Through coder consensus, three major categories were formed: *religion*, *relationships*, and *virtue*. Only major categories that had sufficient replication were finalized and analyzed further.

#### 2.3.4. Selective Coding

In the final stage, selective coding was performed. Using codes and categories developed through open coding and categorical coding, another iteration of in-depth coding was conducted by the first author. Three thematic findings were developed based on the intersections between the categories (*religion*, *relationships*, and *virtue*), namely: (a) aspects of gratitude, (b) expressions of gratitude, and (c) the influence of gratitude. For example, with the intersection of religion and relationships, gratitude was manifested as expressions to family as well as to a deity. Similarly, the practice of gratitude as a virtue influenced family processes and consequently had relational implications.

### 3. Findings

The central findings are organized around three themes: (a) aspects of gratitude, (b) expressions of gratitude, and (c) influence of gratitude. Analyses indicated that religious beliefs and practices reportedly encouraged and facilitated gratitude. Further, gratitude was an influential aspect of individual and relational processes. Transactional relationships are evident among and across the three themes. Consistent with our aim of featuring participants' own voices, more than 30 verbatim quotes are presented to illustrate and evidence the themes.

We note we have intentionally constructed our sample to include persons in racial/ethnic minorities and religious minority faiths. Therefore, about half the sample is white and the other half is divided among several racial and ethnic minorities. In our publications, to avoid using the designator “White” so often, we typically identify members of various racial/ethnic groups but do not identify the white participants by race. This is not to center

or privilege the white participants, but rather to highlight minority persons who have been excluded or marginalized in much previous social science research on religion.

### 3.1. Theme 1: Aspects of Gratitude

In this theme, two aspects of gratitude, *functional* and *directional*, are presented. The functional aspect of gratitude involves the purpose of gratitude. In other words, this theme was informed by participants' reports regarding what they were grateful "for." Generally, participants were grateful for family, for their religious faith, for blessings, and for God's influence in their lives and relationships. Eric, (all names are pseudonyms) a Presbyterian son mentioned that he was grateful for his parents' examples:

I really feel like I am very open and willing to model the behavior that I've seen in my parents. And the consistency of a positive relationship . . . . It's made me aware of how thankful I am to have two parents who, even on bad days and even when they might feel like they just want to tear each other's hair out, are still committed to having a stable relationship for the sake of their kids.

Devon, a 17-year-old Baptist son, was grateful for his parents' granting of autonomy:

One of the key things that my parents did, which I am very grateful for, is they give us . . . a good amount of freedom to think, to process things without them . . . . [W]e've been taught to really think things through [on] our own.

Hasan, an Arab-American, Muslim father, said:

We try and take every situation that they face, the children, and show them the faith perspective of each thing that happens, good or bad, and to remind them when something good happens, that this is from God and how they should be thankful to Him. And when something happens by way of a trial, how to be patient and also to be assured that there's going to be good in that too.

Some participants even expressed gratitude for challenges, explaining that challenges helped them gain new meaning and appreciation. Michelle and Russell, a Catholic couple illustrate this:

*Michelle:* Knowing that you have God in your life through the ups and downs, I think helps you with the downs and just makes the ups that more enjoyable.

*Russell:* Appreciate. You appreciate more.

*Michelle:* Yeah, you're thankful. You're grateful . . .

Thomas, a Presbyterian Christian father, said, "I'm really thankful for our marriage in that I think it's a blessing from God." Several participants were also grateful to God for material needs and life in general. For example, Talib, an Arab-American, Muslim father said:

My understanding of faith is to recognize God, because He is the one who created everything, He always continuously [provides] things: water, physical existence, whatever . . . God is helping us to continue our life so we should be grateful to God all the time, that's the prime criteria for me . . . I definitely want my son to recognize God.

The directional aspect of gratitude involved the target person, to *whom* participants were grateful. Specifically, participants reported they were grateful to their spouse, parents, children, and to God. For example, BreAnna, a Black Christian mother, said:

Whenever there is a need for me to eat, [to heal from] sickness, [or to take] medicine, Ted [my husband, is] always seeing to me taking my medicine, giving it to me . . . when I don't do it. He'll always see to me eating. He always wants my natural needs to be met, and the same thing with the boys. Even when I was going through [my illness] . . . "Mom, you ate?" "You need to eat something." . . .

So, I thank God for my sons and my husband . . . I know that [they] love me and they take care of me regardless [of the hardships] . . . I see that they're always there for me, [to do] whatever I need.

The functional and directional aspects of gratitude were sometimes interlinked. For example, Dustin and Erin, an Episcopalian Christian couple mentioned that they were grateful *to God for* each other:

*Dustin:* I'm thankful to God . . . that I've got Erin . . . and that . . . I've got a very special lady, so I'm thankful.

*Erin:* I think we both feel extremely lucky and . . . I think we both feel really blessed. . . . And I certainly feel very lucky that Dustin and I are a couple, and that we found each other the first time around. We have lots of friends who have not had stable marriages, or whose marriages now are in trouble, or who are on their second or third marriage.

### Summary

Participants were reportedly grateful for their partners, children, parents, and for God's providence and influence. Many expressed gratitude to each other and to God. The functional and directional aspects of gratitude were often interconnected. These accounts of gratitude represent both the contextual and motivational dimensions. In Theme 2, we explore the behavioral dimension of gratitude.

### 3.2. Theme 2: Expressions of Gratitude

In this theme, we explore *how* the participants expressed gratitude. As reflected in Theme 1, participants were grateful for various aspects of their lives and relationships. Often, gratitude for these "blessings" was expressed in explicitly religious ways. In Theme 2, we encounter reports of participants experiencing and expressing gratitude to other family members but also to God. Here, we present the participants' expressions and observe how gratitude was often a relational practice involving two or more family members, influenced or expressed through shared religious practices. Indeed, religious practices such as prayer were reportedly important in expressing gratitude. Prayers included saying grace before meals and having regular family prayers, and such prayers often involved elements of thankfulness.

Shawn and Emily, a Baptist couple, had the following exchange about expressing gratitude and appreciation in their interactions:

*Shawn:* We're careful what we say and [try to say] . . . things that are up-building.

*Emily:* Yeah, what you focus on [matters]. Are you focusing on building one another, encouraging one another? . . .

*Shawn:* Being thankful.

*Emily:* Yeah, being thankful, appreciative and expressing that [gratitude].

Justin, a Presbyterian father, said:

= The practice we have at dinner of saying grace and saying a blessing and what you are thankful for. . . . And we generally take turns and . . . that is a time to reflect. We are very blessed for what we have, where we live, the things that we're able to do. It's been a nice practice for us every day to at least say, okay, [let's] stop and recognize that.

Heidi, a Latter-day Saint mother said:

It's neat to hear each other pray for each other's concerns, and pray for help in different things, and [to express] gratitude. I think praying for gratitude's sake brings strength to your marriage. Praying to be thankful for one another. [Expressing that we are] thankful for the things we do for each other.

Participants indicated how religious processes included expressions of gratitude. Ezra, a Jewish father, said, “We’re thankful for having our kids, and we tell them [this] . . . especially around the time of the Sabbath when we [are] together as a family.” Gabriella, a Jewish mother said:

I always say a prayer of thanks for my children, depending on what’s going on in our lives, a really private prayer. It means that at least once during the week, and certainly there are more times too, but at least once I’m having a moment of thankfulness where no matter what else is going on that may not be good, I [am] very focused at that time on what I’m thankful for. Rather than doing it once a year at Thanksgiving, it’s a weekly kind of thing.

Elizabeth, a Lutheran mother, said of an everyday practice: “There’s the around-the-table-before-meals prayer and [then] we go around the table before dinner and always say what we’re thankful for, which kind of gives us all a chance to go through our days.”

Diana, an Evangelical Christian mother said:

A couple of traditions at Thanksgiving, we have some stories. It’s very small. We have four children: 21, 16, 14, and 10 . . . we would cut out three feathers for each member of the family and they were supposed to write on it something that had blessed them, that they were thankful for, from that previous year. I think we all look forward to doing that every year.

Anoki, an American Indian husband likewise said: “As often as we can, we like to eat as family, and we always try to say a blessing, to be thankful for what we’ve been blessed with. . . .”

Expressing gratitude was also mentioned as a way of sharing faith with children. Hakim, an Arab-American Muslim father, said:

The best way to convey the faith to the children is by practicing it . . . to be a role model for them. . . . If we go to do something fun, okay, we have fun, you say, “We should be thankful to God that we are healthy and have all of that fun.” If we go and eat a good meal . . . you should be thankful to God for that . . . we can afford to eat this good meal.

Similarly, Charlotte, a Presbyterian mother, said it was vital “to be thankful for what we have and to keep God as part of your life, not to forget . . . there’s a greater Being than you”.

### Summary

The participants expressed gratitude through private and family religious practices such as prayer, which provided a regular opportunity to express gratitude to God as well as to express gratitude for family. Having explored what participants were grateful for (Theme 1) and how they tended to express gratitude (Theme 2), we now turn to our third and final theme and explore how gratitude reportedly influenced family relationships and religious faith.

### 3.3. Theme 3: The Influence of Gratitude

In this theme, we explore the influence of gratitude on individuals. Two prevalent and recurring influences were noted in participants’ reports: (a) gratitude prompts positive re-evaluation of relationships and (b) gratitude reinforces religious faith. These two sub-themes will be presented with supporting primary data from participants’ interviews.

#### 3.3.1. Theme 3, Sub-Theme A: Gratitude Prompts Positive Re-Evaluation of Relationships

Many participants reported positive evaluations of their family relationships that accompanied expressions of gratitude. For example, when asked, “Has your relationship with God influenced your relationship with each other?” Ruth and Efrem, a Jewish couple, said this:



*Ruth:* One of the reasons I want to believe in God is because I want to thank God for Efrem.

*Efrem:* Oh, how sweet!

*Ruth:* Oh, I'm sweet, what can I say? (laughter) . . . I mean, I think the best thing that ever happened to me in my life was meeting Efrem. There're other good things too. Having my kids, being part of the family I'm part of, I mean there's lots of good things. But that is the main thing and that's why I believe in God. . . . [B]ecause I think I've been so blessed.

*Efrem:* I don't see myself as someone who believes in God, but I do believe there is something going on that's larger than us and is ultimately good on some level. And I guess I have faith in that which really helps me I think appreciate what I have in our relationship and also gives me the strength to sort of get up tomorrow and do it again.

Ryan, an Episcopalian teenage son, connected prayer with gratitude:

When I was younger, I remember we used to pray before I went to bed. And I always liked that, not necessarily because we were praying, but [because it was] just time when I was with my Mom and with my Dad just talking and being thankful.

Erin, a Latter-day Saint wife said: "My basic sense of gratitude affects the way I interact with people and [it] affects my marriage." Robert, a Christian father said:

We held family prayer just about every night, and we would trade off, and the children would take their turns being the voice for the family, and saying thanks for whatever they were thankful for, and asking for help for whatever problems or situations they were facing, and I think that helps to add stability and appreciation of our mutual faith.

Eli, a Jewish husband said:

I'm luckier than I could ever have imagined I would [be] . . . and that strengthens me. Every day I thank God for Hannah [my wife]. Everyday. And all my children too. She's the best. So, knowing that on a daily basis and every time I *daven* (pray) . . . I thank God for this marriage; so it's hard to . . . think bad of her.

Raashid and Fadilah, a Muslim couple, also discussed religion and gratitude in relational harmony:

*Raashid:* In our marital life we are very appreciative of each other. . . . We believe that kindness and being good to your spouse and taking the spouse as a trust from God, that['s] all part [of] the religion. But we do [express that we] appreciate each other a lot, sometimes multiple times in a day . . . because it is important to us. Even the earlier part of our marriage, from the first day, I have a tradition that after each meal I . . . thank her for feeding me.

*Fadilah:* Yes. He did that today. Every single meal, he has to thank me. And our daughters have learned that [even] if I just take a pizza from the freezer, put it in the oven and give it to them, they would eat it and even the little one would come to me and sa[y], 'Mom, thank you for the lunch.' It is great. And I will say that is my husband's reflection.

Having shared several participant examples of how expressing gratitude positively influenced family relationships, we now turn to illustrations of how gratitude reportedly reinforced faith.

### 3.3.2. Theme 3, Sub-Theme B: Gratitude Reinforces Religious Faith

In addition to a positive re-evaluation of relationships, many participants also reported gratitude as part of religious processes that established and reinforced religious faith. Deshaun, a Black Christian father, said:

God is the reason that we're who we are and that we're thankful. . . . All things come through Him, and we should always be thankful . . . that He gives us the strength to endure. Those are our beliefs . . . He'll provide for us. He has provided for us [and] we should be thankful.

Banafsha, an East Indian Muslim mother, said:

I cannot thank God enough for what I see in my children. I don't like to say this in public, but there is one thing they all have: When something good happens, they always say, '*Alhamdo Ilillah*' [a special prayer for Allah only]. . . . They always say that. We taught them, and they learned it, and they mean it. I think that is the most important thing. I would like to see them remain humble, and they are at this point . . . . [T]hat is a blessing from God.

Some participants expressed gratitude for God and family in the context of major life events, which reportedly strengthened their relationships. Nate, a Black Baptist husband, said:

I promised I would always serve [God] if He would bring me out of [my hardest time]. If it wouldn't be for [God] at that time, I don't know where I would be . . . that was the change in my life. And ever since then . . . [there's been a] big, big difference in my life. It changed me . . . and I knew that's what it was, and I can't be more grateful for that right there. That was the biggest change in my life, and also finding my wife.

Reflecting on overcoming a major health challenge, Steven, a Latter-day Saint father, said:

To know that there was someone in heaven that cares about you, aware of what you do, and you feel that presence, even in the darkest times when you don't know what's happening . . . . Looking back, I am grateful for that. It made me a stronger person. And I think it made our family stronger.

Finally, some participants reported gratitude in conjunction with daily spiritual growth. For example, Jocelyn, a Black Christian wife, replied:

There are some [spiritual] practices that are important to me. . . . I think that those are the things that strengthen you. . . . [I]t's a growing process and I'm . . . by no means, where I would like to be, but thank God I'm not where I used to be, and I like to think that I am growing [in] grace every day.

### 3.3.3. Summary

Participants reported how gratitude was part of their daily lives. Gratitude reportedly had a multi-dimensional relational and spiritual influence that was generally intertwined. Participants mentioned that religion had a positive influence in their relationships, which were further reinforced and revalued through gratitude. These processes reportedly occurred in conjunction with positive attributions of God's influence and renewed appreciation for relationships. For some, gratitude facilitated a reframing of challenges as positive experiences or blessings. Taken together, religious and relational processes of gratitude seemed to reinforce positivity and relational strength in participants' lives.

## 4. Discussion

In the present study, two aspects of gratitude, directional and functional, highlighted the two-dimensional aspect of gratitude. Based on participant reports, gratitude was directed *to* a family member or God and described *for* a particular benefit. The directional

aspect established an interpersonal connection that set the context for benefit-triggered gratitude, whereas the functional domain encapsulated generalized as well as specific, relationship-focused gratitude [14]. Our findings inform the need to examine types of gratitude based on the type of relationship.

Religious beliefs and practices (e.g., prayer) were reportedly important motivators for gratitude. For instance, some participants reported a desire to be grateful for “everything,” including their existence, and for “blessings” as well as “challenges.” This finding adds support for previously posited connections between religion and gratitude [6]. Particularly, through benefit finding and positive religious coping, religious persons and families may “sanctify” challenging times as opportunities for growth—and responsively cope through fostering and expressing gratitude—even during difficult times [13].

Religion also reportedly promoted practices that facilitated expressions of gratitude. Prayer was a central way in which families expressed gratitude together (see [54]). This shared experience of gratitude is expressly relational and may have different properties in contrast to experiencing gratitude individually. Moreover, religious practices were regular sacred rituals requiring reverence that provided a salient time for gratitude expression. As religious individuals tend to attribute physical and spiritual benefits as blessings from God, they might potentially have “a long list of things to be grateful for,” thereby providing and reinforcing a perpetual practice for expressing gratitude. When these attributions and practices come together in a joint context, gratitude may be experienced as transcendent. This finding contributes to the literature by suggesting the need to study the experience of shared gratitude. In couple and family research, this might be an important aspect that can help spouses, parents, children, and siblings experience appreciation and self-transcending emotions together, which may help foster unity and togetherness.

When participants talked about gratitude in family life, they also typically expressed admiration and appreciation for family members or specific people such as their spouse or children. We interpreted this process as a positive re-evaluation of their relationship. This is in line with the find–remind–bind theory of gratitude [43]. Gratitude cognitions that included recognition, appreciation, and admiration reminded participants of the positive valence of their relationship and the partner. In addition, gratitude expressions reportedly had a relationally binding influence. Together, cognitions and expressions of gratitude provided positive attributions that appeared to reinforce and revalue already established relational bonds. In addition to the influence of gratitude on reminding and binding effects [25], gratitude may have a bonding effect in the strengthening relationships.

Another way that gratitude influenced relationships was through the reinforcement of religious faith. For religious families, religion was often reported as a shared bond that held relationships together [55]. When gratitude reportedly strengthened religious faith, we might expect an indirect influence in relationships. In previous research, Brelsford and Righi [19] observed that parents who viewed their relationships as sacred also had high levels of gratitude even after controlling for parent–child relationship quality and personal religiousness. For the participants in the present study, gratitude reportedly helped sustain religious and personal growth during hardships. As growth is an important aspect of relationship flourishing [56], persons and families may acknowledge experiences that strengthen them, express gratitude for such experiences, and as a result renew their religious faith and commitment. In summary, gratitude reportedly reinforced both religious and relational commitment in family life.

#### *4.1. Implications*

This study offers various implications for research and practice. Research on gratitude has predominantly assessed interventions and identified benefits and outcomes. Although this has provided many insights, the research has mostly been assignment-driven with intervention–control group experimental designs. In addition to these experimental methods, we think that it is also helpful to study gratitude in more natural settings. To examine how and why gratitude functions in marriages and families, it can be helpful for researchers

to enter a couple's or family's home, where data can be collected in a more natural setting. Through this approach, we have tried to identify the relational nature of gratitude in family life. One practical research implication can be addressing an important need for precision in measuring gratitude by considering the directional and functional aspects of gratitude. To this end, we recommend that future gratitude measures include open-ended responses to collect data in two-step formats. An example item might be: "I am grateful to . . . for . . .". This may help capture more specific, rich, and thorough data due to honing responses to a target person or persons, as opposed to more general and nebulous approaches [41].

In couple and family therapy settings, gratitude may be integrated through a systemic framework. We theorize that gratitude at the relational level may be helpful in the presence of four conditions: genuine appreciation, clear expression, benevolent reception, and intentional responsiveness. Gratitude is the responsibility of both partners. The first two conditions are the expressor's responsibility and the third and fourth conditions are the benefactor's responsibility. Another implication is that gratitude as a shared experience may be a beneficial experience for couples. When couples experience gratitude for common benefits, and when this experience is mutually fulfilling, couples and families can enhance their relational unity. However, therapists and clients need to be aware of the limitations of gratitude interventions in harmful contexts such as abusive relationships [27].

In family life education settings, gratitude can be an effective and practical intervention. Previous interventions have taught children to "notice-think-feel-do" [34]. Although this has been found to be effective, the relational experience of the receiver of gratitude may be equally important. For instance, how people receive and respond to gratitude expressions can help with the gratitude experience. In this regard, gratitude can be experienced in a system of an interconnected expressor-benefactor, where notice-think-feel-do is connected to *receive* and *respond*. This systemic approach can account for asymmetrical cycles and be an important step to foster healthy reciprocal and mutually enhancing relationship processes.

#### 4.2. Strengths and Limitations

We were able to use a large, diverse, qualitative sample of participants that suited the exploration of gratitude. Systematic team-based thematic analyses of data provided an inductive exploration of gratitude. The joint interviewing of participants in their homes provided a further degree of naturalistic observation in addition to spontaneous triangulation of data. We strived to minimize the influence of bias by employing a team-based coding methodology with integrated checks and balances [50]. Even so, there are several limitations.

As our scope was limited, we did not examine gratitude with follow-up questions, which would likely have provided more in-depth data. Even so, the fact that gratitude emerged from the data as a "spontaneous" theme, even without any directly related probing questions, is indicative of the salience of gratitude for the participants [50].

We note that although the sample was national, it was not nationally representative, and due to the religious nature of participants, our findings are not generalizable to other populations. We also did not examine differences across or among racial, ethnic, or religious groups because our focus was exploring commonalities.

The findings from this study highlight how gratitude may be beneficial in the context of stable, high-functioning families. Although the findings from the study show gratitude in a positive light, it is also important to be cautious about unhealthy ways of practicing gratitude. Unhealthy forms of gratitude may include: (a) too much emphasis on benefit finding, (b) forcing meaning from life events, (c) using gratitude as an exclusive coping mechanism, and (d) encouraging hierarchical social comparison. Furthermore, when practiced in unhealthy ways, gratitude may perpetuate negative outcomes in the context of negative religious coping. Future research may focus on the contexts and conditions of gratitude and better identify when gratitude can perpetuate relational harms versus providing relational benefits.

Gratitude is yet to be fully explored in the family context, particularly in parent–child and sibling relationships. More qualitative research with clinical and nonclinical populations can inform measurement, theory, and better situate lived experiences in context. Future quantitative research can significantly provide more insights using family-level data to identify predictors, covariates, and outcomes of gratitude. Studies could also examine the trajectories of gratitude, as little is known about the development of gratitude in children and couples. As the scope of this paper was limited to exploring gratitude in religious families, we did not examine differences among faith communities and relationship types. One of the major findings of this paper, namely the directional aspect of gratitude, suggests that it is important to consider differences and commonalities based on relationship types. We hope future research can examine gratitude in these relationships in depth.

## 5. Conclusions

Gratitude can have important relational implications. The findings from this study indicate the significance of gratitude in family relationships, particularly in religious families. Gratitude was generally reported as a positive experience in family life. However, caution should be maintained as gratitude in families is much more complex in family systems, where individual and relational experiences intersect. In the field of child and family studies, careful research and systemic practice of gratitude holds promise for developing well-functioning and flourishing relationships.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/psych5030048/s1>, Table S1: Additional Details on Race/Ethnicity.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.M.C., L.D.M., D.C.D. and D.B.A.; Methodology, J.M.C., L.D.M. and D.C.D.; Software, J.M.C.; Formal Analysis, J.M.C.; Investigation, L.D.M. and D.C.D.; Data Curation, J.M.C. and H.H.K.; Writing—Original Draft, J.M.C.; Writing—Review and Editing, L.D.M., H.H.K., and D.B.A.; Supervision, L.D.M. and D.C.D.; Project Administration, L.D.M. and D.C.D.; Funding Acquisition, L.D.M. and D.C.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Data used in the manuscript were gathered following procedures approved by institutional review boards at Brigham Young University and Louisiana State University.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Ter Kuile, H.; Kluwer, E.S.; Finkenauer, C.; Van Der Lippe, T. Predicting adaptation to parenthood: The role of responsiveness, gratitude, and trust. *Pers. Relatsh.* **2017**, *24*, 663–682. [CrossRef]
2. Amaro, L.M.; Miller, K.I. Discussion of care, contribution, and perceived (in)gratitude in the family caregiver and sibling relationship. *Pers. Relatsh.* **2016**, *23*, 98–110. [CrossRef]
3. Barton, A.W.; Futris, T.G.; Nielsen, R.B. Linking financial distress to marital quality: The intermediary roles of demand/withdraw and spousal gratitude expressions. *Pers. Relatsh.* **2015**, *22*, 536–549. [CrossRef]
4. Algoe, S.B.; Gable, S.L.; Maisel, N.C. It's the little things: Everyday gratitude as a booster shot for romantic relationships. *Pers. Relatsh.* **2010**, *17*, 217–233. [CrossRef]
5. Gordon, C.L.; Arnette, R.A.M.; Smith, R.E. Have you thanked your spouse today? Felt and expressed gratitude among married couples. *Pers. Individ. Dif.* **2011**, *50*, 339–343. [CrossRef]
6. Emmons, R.A.; Kneezel, T.T. Giving Thanks: Spiritual and Religious Correlates of Gratitude. *J. Psychol. Christ.* **2005**, *24*, 140–148.
7. Olson, R.; Knepple Carney, A.; Hicks Patrick, J. Associations between gratitude and spirituality: An experience sampling approach. *Psycholog. Relig. Spirit.* **2019**, *11*, 449–452. [CrossRef]
8. Krause, N.; Evans, L.A.; Powers, G.; Hayward, R.D. Feeling grateful to God: A qualitative inquiry. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2012**, *7*, 119–130. [CrossRef]
9. Alfieri, S.; Tagliabue, S.; Marta, E.; Aresi, G.; Lanz, M.; Pozzi, M. Gratitude as a Variable of Mediation between Parental Support and Self-Esteem in Adolescence. *J. Child Fam. Stud.* **2018**, *27*, 1394–1401. [CrossRef]

10. Emmons, R.A.; Crumpler, C.A. Gratitude as a Human Strength: Appraising the Evidence. *J. Soc. Clin. Psychol.* **2000**, *19*, 56–69. [[CrossRef](#)]
11. Schnitker, S.A.; Richardson, K.L. Framing gratitude journaling as prayer amplifies its hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, but not health, benefits. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2018**, *14*, 427–439. [[CrossRef](#)]
12. Carlisle, R.D.; Tsang, J.-A. The virtues: Gratitude and forgiveness. In *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research*; Pargament, K.I., Exline, J.J., Jones, J.W., Eds.; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2013; pp. 423–437.
13. Rosmarin, D.H.; Pirutinsky, S.; Greer, D.; Korbman, M. Maintaining a grateful disposition in the face of distress: The role of religious coping. *Psycholog. Relig. Spirit.* **2016**, *8*, 134–140. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Lambert, N.M.; Graham, S.M.; Fincham, F.D. A prototype analysis of gratitude: Varieties of gratitude experiences. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* **2009**, *35*, 1193–1207. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
15. Rosmarin, D.H.; Pirutinsky, S.; Cohen, A.B.; Galler, Y.; Krumrei, E.J. Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2011**, *6*, 389–396. [[CrossRef](#)]
16. Krause, N. Gratitude Toward God, Stress, and Health in Late Life. *Res. Aging* **2016**, *28*, 163–183. [[CrossRef](#)]
17. Mahoney, A. The spirituality of us: Relational spirituality in the context of family relationships. In *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research*; APA Handbooks in Psychology®; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2013; pp. 365–389.
18. Dollahite, D.C.; Marks, L.D. A Conceptual Model of Family and Religious Processes in Highly Religious Families. *Rev. Relig. Res.* **2009**, *50*, 373–391.
19. Brelsford, G.M.; Righi, S.E. Grateful and Sanctified. *J. Fam. Issues* **2013**, *36*, 1575–1594. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Kelley, H.H.; Marks, L.D.; Dollahite, D.C. Perceptions of Nonreligious Parents. *J. Fam. Issues* **2022**, *44*, 2213–2235. [[CrossRef](#)]
21. Cox, M.J.; Paley, B. Understanding Families as Systems. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* **2016**, *12*, 193–196. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Fiese, B.H.; Jones, B.L.; Saltzman, J.A. Systems unify family psychology. In *APA Handbook of Contemporary Family Psychology: Foundations, Methods, and Contemporary Issues Across the Lifespan (Vol. 1)*; APA Handbooks in Psychology®; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2019; pp. 3–19.
23. Gordon, A.M.; Impett, E.A.; Kogan, A.; Oveis, C.; Keltner, D. To have and to hold: Gratitude promotes relationship maintenance in intimate bonds. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **2012**, *103*, 257–274. [[CrossRef](#)]
24. Peterson, C.; Seligman, M.E.P. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*; American Psychological Association: Washington, DC, USA, 2004.
25. Algoe, S.B.; Kurtz, L.E.; Hilaire, N.M. Putting the “You” in “Thank You”: Examining Other-Praising Behavior as the Active Relational Ingredient in Expressed Gratitude. *Soc. Psychol. Personal. Sci.* **2016**, *7*, 658–666. [[CrossRef](#)]
26. Chang, Y.-P.; Li, T.-S.; Teng, H.Y.; Berki, A.; Chen, L.H. Living with Gratitude: Spouse’s Gratitude on One’s Depression. *J. Happiness Stud.* **2012**, *14*, 1431–1442. [[CrossRef](#)]
27. Wood, A.M.; Emmons, R.A.; Algoe, S.B.; Froh, J.J.; Lambert, N.M.; Watkins, P. A Dark Side of Gratitude? Distinguishing between Beneficial Gratitude and its Harmful Impostors for the Positive Clinical Psychology of Gratitude and Well-Being. In *The Wiley Handbook of Positive Clinical Psychology*; Wood, A.M., Johnson, J., Eds.; John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.: Chichester, UK, 2016; pp. 137–151.
28. McNulty, J.K.; Dugas, A. A dyadic perspective on gratitude sheds light on both its benefits and its costs: Evidence that low gratitude acts as a “weak link”. *J. Fam. Psychol.* **2019**, *33*, 876–881. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
29. Algoe, S.B.; Zhaoyang, R. Positive Psychology in Context: Effects of Expressing Gratitude in Ongoing Relationships Depend on Perceptions of Enactor Responsiveness. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2016**, *11*, 399–415. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
30. Reis, H.T.; Clark, M.S.; Holmes, J.G. Perceived partner responsiveness as an organizing construct in the study of intimacy and closeness. In *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*; Mashek, D.J., Aron, A.P., Eds.; Psychology Press: New York, NY, USA, 2004; pp. 201–225.
31. Davis, D.E.; Choe, E.; Meyers, J.; Wade, N.; Varjas, K.; Gifford, A.; Quinn, A.; Hook, J.N.; Van Tongeren, D.R.; Griffin, B.J.; et al. Thankful for the little things: A meta-analysis of gratitude interventions. *J. Couns. Psychol.* **2016**, *63*, 20–31. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
32. Lo, H.H.M.; Kwok, S.Y.C.L.; Yeung, J.W.K.; Low, A.Y.T.; Tam, C.H.L. The Moderating Effects of Gratitude on the Association Between Perceived Parenting Styles and Suicidal Ideation. *J. Child Fam. Stud.* **2017**, *26*, 1671–1680. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Stoeckel, M.; Weissbrod, C.; Ahrens, A. The Adolescent Response to Parental Illness: The Influence of Dispositional Gratitude. *J. Child Fam. Stud.* **2014**, *24*, 1501–1509. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Hussong, A.M.; Langley, H.A.; Thomas, T.; Coffman, J.; Halberstadt, A.; Costanzo, P.; Rothenberg, W.A. Measuring Gratitude in Children. *J. Posit. Psychol.* **2019**, *14*, 563–575. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Rothenberg, W.A.; Hussong, A.M.; Langley, H.A.; Egerton, G.A.; Halberstadt, A.G.; Coffman, J.L.; Mokrova, I.; Costanzo, P.R. Grateful parents raising grateful children: Niche selection and the socialization of child gratitude. *Appl. Dev. Sci.* **2017**, *21*, 106–120. [[CrossRef](#)]
36. Martin, F.; Clyne, W.; Pearce, G.; Turner, A. Self-Management Support Intervention for Parents of Children with Developmental Disorders: The Role of Gratitude and Hope. *J. Child Fam. Stud.* **2019**, *28*, 980–992. [[CrossRef](#)]
37. Timmons, L.; Ekas, N.V.; Johnson, P. Thankful thinking: A thematic analysis of gratitude letters by mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Res. Autism Spectr. Disord.* **2017**, *34*, 19–27. [[CrossRef](#)]

38. Emmons, R.A.; McCullough, M.E. Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* **2003**, *84*, 377–389. [[CrossRef](#)]
39. Lambert, N.M.; Clark, M.S.; Durtschi, J.; Fincham, F.D.; Graham, S.M. Benefits of expressing gratitude: Expressing gratitude to a partner changes one's view of the relationship. *Psychol. Sci.* **2010**, *21*, 574–580. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
40. Lambert, N.M.; Fincham, F.D.; Braithwaite, S.R.; Graham, S.M.; Beach, S.R.H. Can prayer increase gratitude? *Psycholog. Relig. Spirit.* **2009**, *1*, 139–149. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Charzyńska, E. It does matter who we are grateful to: A latent profile analysis. *Curr. Psychol.* **2019**, *39*, 1–12. [[CrossRef](#)]
42. Berger, P.; Bachner-Melman, R.; Lev-Ari, L. Thankful for what? The efficacy of interventions targeting interpersonal versus noninterpersonal gratitude. *Can. J. Behav. Sci./Rev. Can. Sci. Comport.* **2019**, *51*, 27–36. [[CrossRef](#)]
43. Algoe, S.B. Find, Remind, and Bind: The Functions of Gratitude in Everyday Relationships. *Soc. Personal. Psychol. Compass* **2012**, *6*, 455–469. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Williams, L.A.; Bartlett, M.Y. Warm thanks: Gratitude expression facilitates social affiliation in new relationships via perceived warmth. *Emotion* **2015**, *15*, 1. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Lambert, N.M.; Fincham, F.D. Expressing gratitude to a partner leads to more relationship maintenance behavior. *Emotion* **2011**, *11*, 52–60. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Lambert, N.M.; Fincham, F.D.; Stillman, T.F. Gratitude and depressive symptoms: The role of positive reframing and positive emotion. *Cogn. Emot.* **2012**, *26*, 615–633. [[CrossRef](#)]
47. Silk, M.; Walsh, A. *One Nation, Divisible: How Regional Religious Differences Shape American Politics*; Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, USA, 2008.
48. Allsop, D.B.; Chelladurai, J.M.; Kimball, E.R.; Marks, L.D.; Hendricks, J.J. Qualitative Methods with Nvivo Software: A Practical Guide for Analyzing Qualitative Data. *Psych* **2022**, *4*, 142–159. [[CrossRef](#)]
49. Patton, M.Q. Expert Sampling. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation*; Frey, B., Ed.; SAGE Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.
50. Marks, L.D. A Pragmatic, Step-by-Step Guide for Qualitative Methods: Capturing the Disaster and Long-Term Recovery Stories of Katrina and Rita. *Curr. Psychol.* **2015**, *34*, 494–505. [[CrossRef](#)]
51. Levitt, H.M.; Bamberg, M.; Creswell, J.W.; Frost, D.M.; Josselson, R.; Suarez-Orozco, C. Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed methods research in psychology: The APA Publications and Communications Board task force report. *Am. Psychol.* **2018**, *73*, 26–46. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
52. Bengtsson, M. How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open* **2016**, *2*, 8–14. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Benaquisto, L. Axial Coding. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*; Given, L.M., Ed.; SAGE Publications, Inc.: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2008.
54. Chelladurai, J.M.; Dollahite, D.C.; Marks, L.D. “The family that prays together . . . ”: Relational processes associated with regular family prayer. *J. Fam. Psychol.* **2018**, *32*, 849–859. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
55. Marks, L.D.; Dollahite, D.C. *Religion and Families: An Introduction*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
56. Fowers, B.J.; Laurenceau, J.P.; Penfield, R.D.; Cohen, L.M.; Lang, S.F.; Owenz, M.B.; Pasipandoya, E. Enhancing relationship quality measurement: The development of the Relationship Flourishing Scale. *J. Fam. Psychol.* **2016**, *30*, 997–1007. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.