



Subjective Well-Being and Trait Gratitude Among Chinese University Postgraduates

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to explore whether trait gratitude correlates with subjective well-being (SWB) among Chinese university postgraduates as well as gender and only-child differences in the mean scores on measures of SWB and gratitude. A sample of 50 Chinese postgraduates participated in the research including the measurements of trait gratitude and subjective well-being. The findings indicate that gratitude was not associated with all items of SWB. However, the results find that gratitude was significantly and negatively correlated to negative affect, besides, satisfaction with life was positively correlated to the lack of deprivation and the gratitude to society. And the level of gratitude could be different in terms of gender and only child. The results indicate that female and not only-child reported higher levels of gratitude in comparison with male and only-child postgraduates respectively.

Keywords: subjective well-being (SWB); trait gratitude; gender; only-child; postgraduates.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there are many studies focusing on gratitude in psychology research (Bartlett and Desteno 2016; Kong et al. 2015a; Williams and Bartlett, 2015). The experience and expression of gratitude are regarded as enhancing an individual's personal and relational well-being, and therefore beneficial for both individuals and society (Harpman, 2004). There are two different approaches to gratitude (i.e., trait gratitude and state gratitude). As a trait, gratitude is "part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world" (Wood et al. 2008). As a state, gratitude is "a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life" (Emmons and Shelton 2002, p. 460). Many researches have shown that trait gratitude plays an important role in physical health and mental health (Cheng et al. 2015; Hill et al. 2013; O'Connell et al. 2016). Therefore, the present study focused on the relationship between trait gratitude and subjective well-being (SWB) of postgraduates.

1.1 Trait Gratitude

Gratitude has been depicted as an emotion, a mood, a moral virtue, a habit, a motive, a personality trait, a coping response, and a way of life. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines gratitude as "the quality or condition of being thankful; the appreciation of an inclination to return kindness" (p. 1135). Klein viewed gratitude as a developmental achievement and hallmark of emotional maturity that "underlies the appreciation of goodness in others and in oneself" (Klein, 1957). In general, gratitude involves an acknowledgement of having benefited from someone else's actions. By showing this appreciation, individuals recognize others' benevolence (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). However, gratitude can also extend to something larger, such as a higher power, for example, God or nature. Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) further proposed that gratitude is a broad life orientation whereby the positive aspects of life are noticed and appreciated. In addition, there are many factors that can influence people's gratitude such as disposition, self-concept, justice belief, family environment, social support, etc.

1.2 Subjective Well-being (SWB)

SWB is often defined as individuals' overall evaluations of their lives and emotional experiences (Diener et al., 2017). Diener believes that subjective well-being mainly includes two parts: cognitive evaluation and emotional experience. Cognitive evaluation refers to the individual's satisfaction evaluation of the overall quality of life; Emotional experience refers to the positive emotions (happiness, excitement, pride, love, etc.) and negative emotions (sadness, anger, jealousy, etc.) in individual life (1999) also proposed the structure of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2017). If a person has high overall life satisfaction and experiences more positive emotions and less negative emotions, he will have strong subjective well-being. Yin Xiayun and Li Zhihua (2015) believed that positive emotion and negative emotion are independent of each other. Among the three factors, life satisfaction is the easiest to change. Given the key role of SWB in positive developmental outcomes, understanding its correlates is important to develop strategies to promote optimal functioning among youth. One such correlate is gratitude.

1.3 Trait Gratitude and Subjective Well-being (SWB)

Previous studies have believed that the youth group is a crucial period for the formation and development of gratitude (Yu Chengfu et al., 2011) and it continues to improve with age (Wang Jianping, Yu Chengfu, Zeng Yiyin, Ye Ting, Zhang Wei, 2011; Froh et al., 2009). Firstly, in the theoretical construction of the formation of subjective well-being, scholars have always attached great importance to the important role of gratitude. The theory of positive emotion expansion and construction holds that gratitude, as a positive emotion, can broaden people's thinking mode and construct positive and lasting social and psychological resources, so as to improve individual subjective well-being (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005); Broaden-and-build theory states that positive emotions such as gratitude can help people build lasting resources that contribute to well-being (Fredrickson, 2004). Besides, many empirical studies have shown that trait gratitude is positively related to subjective well-being (Alkozei et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2010). Specifically, many studies have found that trait gratitude has a positive relationship with positive effects and life satisfaction (Froh et al., 2008; Gan, 2009; Liu, 2012). In contrast, prior research on the link between trait gratitude and negative affect seemed to show inconsistent results. For example, some research found there was a weak correlation between trait gratitude and negative affect (Chan, 2013). In addition, some studies attempted to explore the predictive causality link between trait gratitude and SWB in two ways. On the one hand, several studies used gratitude interventions to increase levels of trait gratitude and SWB, thus indicating that trait gratitude has a beneficial effect on SWB (Chan, 2010; Froh et al., 2008;). However, these studies did not demonstrate the predictive causality link between trait gratitude and SWB, because the effects might reflect the common mechanisms related to psychosocial interventions. On the other hand, just one study used a prospective longitudinal method to investigate the predictive causality link between trait gratitude and SWB. The above research shows that gratitude is closely related to subjective well-being. However, gratitude stimulates different subjective well-being at different ages (Watkins et al., 2003). Therefore, the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being may be different in different age groups, so more research is needed to be done.

1.4 The Present Study

The present study aims to explore the relationship between trait gratitude and subjective well-being of postgraduates as well as gender, only-child, and family place differences in the mean scores on measures of SWB and gratitude. Though many studies have estimated that they have a strong correlation, and with positive correlations between all facets except negative affect at home and abroad, there are no such studies that their participants are postgraduates. Gratitude stimulates different subjective well-being at different ages (Watkins et al., 2003). Therefore, the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being may be different in different age groups. Hence, this study tries to research the gap through change the participants. This study's hypothesis is that there exists a strong correlation between trait gratitude and subjective well-being of postgraduates, and life satisfaction, positive affect has positive relations with all facets of subjective well-being, while negative affect converse.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants and Data Collection

An amount of 50 Chinese postgraduates from three universities participated in the study. In the sample, 33 were females (66%), and 17 were males (34%). In regards to the population group, most participants were grade-one students ($n = 33$, 66%), grade two ($n = 12$, 24%), and grade-three ($n = 5$, 10%). Among them, 22 (44%) were the only child of family, 28 (56%) were not. And 34(68%) of them were from rural, 16 (32%) urban. All participants of this study volunteered for the present study, and then a multi-section questionnaire was completed through WeChat, which contained the measurements of trait gratitude and subjective well-being. The questionnaire was released by the application named Sojump. They were assured that the data would be kept confidential, and would be used for research purposes only. These participants were from Shanghai University of International Business and International, Hunan Normal University, and Changsha University of Science and Technology.

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire included questions concerning participants' gender, grade, only-child, and family-place.

2.2.2 The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT Scale)

Trait gratitude was assessed by the GRAT (Watkins, Philip C., et al., 2003). This GRAT was shown to relate positively to various measures of SWB. Sun (2010) and others revised the scale. In order to adapt to the Chinese people, the newly revised scale has modified some questions of the original scale, with a total of 34 items. This 34-item scale assesses three different facets of grateful disposition that includes the lack of deprivation, gratitude to society, and gratitude to natural. It has been demonstrated that the Chinese version of the GRAT has great reliability and validity (Cronbach's $\alpha = .914$; KIEU, 2017). In completing the scale, participants were requested to indicate their judgment of whether the

statement in each item was descriptive of him or her on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (least like me) to 5 (most like me). A total score can be obtained by summing the thirty-four item responses (13 items are reverse scored), with higher scores reflecting greater dispositional gratitude. In the current research, the Cronbach alpha coefficients of the GRAT were .884.

2.2.3 Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWB Scale)

Subjective well-being was assessed by the subjective well-being questionnaire (Diener, Ed, et al., 1999). Yan, Zheng (2003) and others revised the scale. It includes four subscales, general well-being scale (GWB), satisfaction with life scale (SWLS), and Positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS). The GWB includes five items on a 9-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 9=strongly agree). In the present research, the SWLS had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .805. The SWLS was used to assess the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The scale includes 5 items on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). The scale has shown fine reliability and validity in Chinese culture (Kong et al. 2015b; Kong and You 2013). In the present research, the SWLS had a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .872. The PANAS was used to evaluate the affective component of SWB (Diener et al., 2010). It includes 6 items for positive affect (e.g., 'positive' and 'joyful') and 8 items for negative affect (e.g., 'negative' and 'sad'). Participants were asked to assess the items on a 9-point Likert scale (1=very slightly or not at all; 9=extremely). In the current research, the Cronbach alpha coefficients of the PA and NA subscale were .892 and .931.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study utilized SPSS 23.0 to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, correlation coefficients, and *t*-tests for independent samples were used to analyze the data. First, a correlation analysis was adopted to examine the correlations among the major variables. Then we explored the gender and only-child differences in the mean scores on measures of SWB and gratitude through independent *t*-tests.

3. Results

Table 1 reflects the descriptive statistics for all measures. The results indicated that gratitude was not associated with all items of SWB ($p > .05$). However, gratitude was significantly and negatively correlated to NA, besides, SWLS was positively correlated to the lack of deprivation and gratitude to society, as evident from Table 2. Two *t*-tests for independent samples were implemented to examine possible differences in gratitude and SWB among male and female postgraduates, as represented in Table 3. No differences emerged between males and females regarding subjective well-being, general life satisfaction, and positive and negative affect, whereas differences emerged in gratitude and satisfaction with life. Gender is positively correlated to gratitude ($p < .05$) and the degree of female ($M = 3.64$, $t = -2.226$, $p = .021$) is higher than the degree of male. In addition, females reported higher scores in SWLS ($t = 4.660$, $p = .000$), compared with male postgraduates. Two independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences in gratitude between only-child and not-only-child postgraduates. Table 4 indicates that no only-child reported higher levels of gratitude ($t = -4.062$, $p = .000$) in comparison with only-child postgraduates.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Measure	n	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
GWB	50	6.00	1.40	-1.25	1.12
SWLS	50	4.86	1.11	-1.19	1.54
PA	50	5.97	1.54	-.94	-.13
NA	50	4.90	1.91	-.06	-1.48
Lack_Depri	50	3.03	0.92	.21	-1.31
Social_Grat	50	3.83	0.81	-1.40	1.56
Natural_Grat	50	4.07	0.91	-1.45	1.42
SWB	50	5.39	1.06	-.06	-1.25
GRAT	50	3.53	0.52	.62	.03

Note. GWB = General Well-being Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; PA = Positive Affect Scale; NA = Negative Affect Scale; Lack_Depri = the Lack of Deprivation Scale; Social_Grat = the Gratitude to Society Scale; Natural_Depri = the Gratitude to Nature; SWB = Subjective Well-being Scale; GRAT = The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix for All Measures.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. GRAT						-.42**			
2. SWB	.13								
3. GWB									
4. SWLS							.28*	.29*	
5. PA									
6. NA	-.42**						-.46**		
7. Lack_Depri				.28*		-.46*			
8. Social_Grat				.29*					
9. Natural_Grat									

Note. GWB = General Well-being Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; PA = Positive Affect Scale; NA = Negative Affect Scale; Lack_Depri = the Lack of Deprivation Scale; Social_Grat = the Gratitude to Society Scale; Natural_Depri = the Gratitude to Nature; SWB = Subjective Well-being Scale; GRAT = The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Table 3 Significance of Differences in SWB and GRAT Between Male and Female Postgraduates.

Measure	gender	n	M	SD	F	t	p
GART	male	17	3.32	.42	4.493	-2.406	.031
	female	33	3.64	.53		-2.226	.021
SWB	male	17	5.56	1.25	3.991	.811	.421
	female	33	5.30	.95		.742	.465

GWB	male	17	6.28	1.65	.863	.994	.325
	female	33	5.87	1.26		.911	.370
SWLS	male	17	5.59	.54	4.675	3.772	.000
	female	33	4.48	1.15		4.660	.000
PA	male	17	5.63	1.97	6.773	-1.131	.264
	female	33	6.15	1.26		-.985	.335
NA	male	17	5.04	2.10	1.222	.360	.721
	female	33	4.83	1.84		.345	.733

Note. GWB = General Well-being Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; PA = Positive Affect Scale; NA = Negative Affect Scale; SWB = Subjective Well-being Scale; GRAT = The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4 Significance of Differences in SWB and GRAT Between only-child and not only-child Postgraduates.

Measure	only-child	n	M	SD	F	t	p
GART	only	22	3.26	.29	13.469	-3.782	.000
	not only	28	3.75	.56		-4.062	.000
SWB	only	22	5.69	1.17	2.884	1.869	.068
	not only	28	5.14	.91		1.812	.078
GWB	only	22	5.85	1.77	7.335	-.724	.473
	not only	28	6.12	1.04		-.681	.501
SWLS	only	22	5.24	.77	3.183	2.233	.030
	not only	28	4.56	1.25		2.361	.023
PA	only	22	5.93	1.86	5.395	-.154	.879
	not only	28	6.00	1.27		-.147	.884
NA	only	22	5.72	1.93	.266	2.864	.006
	not only	28	4.26	1.66		2.813	.007

Note. GWB = General Well-being Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; PA = Positive Affect Scale; NA = Negative Affect Scale; SWB = Subjective Well-being Scale; GRAT = The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test. ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

Findings from past studies have indicated that SWB and gratitude are strongly correlated, with positive correlations between all measures with the exception of NA, with a negative correlation (Alkozei et al., 2018; Watkins et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2010). The present study finds that gratitude was not associated with all items of SWB ($p > .05$). However, gratitude was significantly and negatively correlated to NA, besides, SWLS was positively correlated to the lack of deprivation and gratitude to society. And the level of gratitude could be different in terms of gender and only child. The results indicate that female and not only-child reported higher levels of gratitude in comparison with male and only-child postgraduates respectively.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study certainly has many limitations. One obvious major limitation must be the small sample size. It could not represent most postgraduates. The present findings were based on an imbalanced gender ratio may be another major limitation. One other limitation of the present study could be the complete reliance on self-report data. Self-reports should be considered the primary source of data for subjective evaluation of well-being and character strengths. However, other sources such as peer reports and behavioural ratings, which could provide convergent and therefore, more compelling evidence, should be considered in future studies. Despite the limitations, this is the first time to explore the relationship between subjective well-being and gratitude among postgraduates as well as gender and only-child differences, although the results are not consistent with the hypothesis, it may still give some implications for future studies.

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Appendix

Questionnaires on Gratitude and Subjective Well-being

Among Chinese University Postgraduates

Dear friends: Hello! Thank you very much for participating in this survey! This questionnaire is anonymous and has no distinction between right and wrong, good or bad answers. It is only for research purposes and we hope to provide answers that are as close to your own situation as possible. Before answering the question, please read the guide carefully. Don't think too much when answering the question, just choose directly.

1. Your gender [multiple choice question]*

male

female

2. Grade [Multiple Choice Question]*

First year of postgraduate school

Second year of postgraduate school

Third year of postgraduate school

3. Is it an only child? [Multiple choice question]*

Yes

No

4. Family Residence [Multiple Choice Question]*

Rural area

Urban area

Please fill out the first part of the "Subjective Wellness Scale" based on your actual situation. 1=very unhappy, 5=uncertain, 9=very happy, the numbers 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 represent the difference in happiness or unhappiness.

5. Overall subjective well-being [matrix scale question]*

love	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
guilty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
shameful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
worry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
stressful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
jealous	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Part 2 Gratitude Scale

8. Please choose the most suitable item based on your actual situation: 1->5 indicates complete non-compliance -->complete compliance [matrix scale question]*

	Strongly disagree	Very disagree	Partly agree	Very agree	Strongly agree
1.I feel that life is unfair to me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2.It seems that others do benefit more from life than I do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3.I seem to have never had the opportunity to think like others before.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4.Life is already beautiful enough for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5.It seems that there have always been “more monks than porridge”, and I have	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

never received my share.					
6.It seems that people often try to hinder my progress.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7.I think there are many beautiful things in life that I deserve, but I haven't received them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8.On my birthday, I receive neither as good nor as many gifts as others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9.I believe I am a very lucky person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10.Due to some experiences in my life, I really feel that the world owes me something.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11.I feel that the bad things I have encountered in life have exceeded what I should bear.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12.Although I believe that I am more virtuous than most people, I have not received the rewards I deserve in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13.I feel that life has left me flawless.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14.I feel that heaven, honor,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

and fate will not favor me.					
15.For some reasons, I never seem to have the advantages that others have.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16.If it weren't for the help of many people, I wouldn't have achieved what I am today.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17.I often think, 'What a great privilege to be alive'.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18.In life, many people have given me valuable wisdom, which is crucial for my success.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19.Although I am basically able to control my life, I can't help but think of those who have always supported and helped me along my path.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20.I sincerely thank my parents for their kindness in raising me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21.Sometimes I think, Why am I so lucky to be born in the family and culture I am currently in?.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
22.I think it is very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

to stop often and list the blessings you have received.					
23. In life, I deeply appreciate everything others have done for me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
24. The simple happiness in life is the greatest happiness.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
25. I think it's important to be grateful for every day of being alive.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
26. I am really grateful to my friends and family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
27. I often marvel at the beauty of the sunset.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
28. I am often impressed by the beauty of nature.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
29. I truly enjoy some beautiful things, partly because I am grateful for them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
30. I think it is necessary to stop and smell the fragrance of flowers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
31. I like to sit and watch snowflakes fall.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32. Every spring, I really	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

enjoy watching flowers bloom.					
33.I believe that enjoying every bit of life is very important.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
34.I like the lush spring scenery.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This is the end of this questionnaire. Thank you very much for your participation.