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Constructing Gratitude Among Parents of Children with Special Needs: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study in Javanese and Sundanese Cultural Contexts

Lisnawati[1*], Zidni Immawan Muslimin[1], Fitriana Widyastuti[1], Badriyyah Nur Azizah[1], Imay Siti Maesaroh[1]
[1]Psychology Study Program, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Indonesia
*e-mail: *lisnawati@uin-suka.ac.id*

Abstract / *Abstrak*

This study explores how parents of children with special needs experience and interpret gratitude within Javanese and Sundanese cultural contexts. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), four purposively recruited parents participated in in-depth interviews. Four group experiential themes emerged: acceptance as a dynamic psychological process, spiritual meaning-making, active coping (*ikhtiar*), and social and relational support. Gratitude was expressed through varied interpretations of religious beliefs, caregiving responsibilities, and supportive relationships. However, acceptance, coping, and social support did not necessarily constitute expressions of gratitude. Javanese and Sundanese cultural concepts served as contextual interpretative resources rather than independently established experiential themes. Given the small, context-specific sample, the findings do not establish representative cultural differences. The study provides preliminary insights into gratitude as a culturally and spiritually situated experience, highlighting the relevance of culturally sensitive psychological support for parents of children with special needs.

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana orang tua anak berkebutuhan khusus mengalami dan memaknai kebersyukuran dalam konteks budaya Jawa dan Sunda. Dengan menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), penelitian ini melibatkan empat orang tua yang dipilih secara purposif dan diwawancarai secara mendalam. Analisis menghasilkan empat tema pengalaman kelompok, yaitu penerimaan sebagai proses psikologis dinamis, pemaknaan spiritual, koping aktif (ikhtiar), serta dukungan sosial dan relasional. Kebersyukuran dimaknai melalui pengalaman yang berkaitan dengan keyakinan religius, tanggung jawab pengasuhan, dan hubungan yang mendukung. Namun, penerimaan, koping, dan dukungan sosial tidak selalu menunjukkan kebersyukuran secara langsung. Konsep budaya Jawa dan Sunda digunakan sebagai sumber interpretasi kontekstual, bukan sebagai tema pengalaman yang berdiri sendiri. Mengingat jumlah partisipan yang terbatas dan kekhususan konteks penelitian, temuan ini tidak menunjukkan perbedaan budaya yang representatif. Penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman awal mengenai kebersyukuran sebagai pengalaman yang terkait dengan konteks budaya dan spiritual serta pentingnya dukungan psikologis yang peka terhadap kedua konteks tersebut.

Keywords / *Kata kunci*

Gratitude; Parents of Children with Special Needs; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Cultural Meaning-Making; Spiritual Meaning-Making

Kebersyukuran; Orang Tua Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus; Pemaknaan Budaya; Pemaknaan Spiritual

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Introduction

Raising a child with special needs may involve substantial emotional, social, and practical demands, including caregiving burden, uncertainty, and concerns regarding the child's development and future (Asa et al., 2021; Chen & Yu, 2024; Rakap & Vural-Batik, 2024). Existing studies have frequently examined parents' experiences in relation to stress, caregiving burden, uncertainty, and coping (Asa et al., 2021; Chen & Yu, 2024; Rakap & Vural-Batik, 2024). Nevertheless, parents may also construct positive meanings in response to caregiving challenges. Previous studies have associated gratitude with psychological well-being, happiness, subjective well-being, and lower parenting stress among parents of children with special needs (Hizbullah & Mulyati, 2022; Laili et al., 2022; Musri et al.,

2024; Purbasetya et al., 2024; Ulfasari & Trimulyaningsih, 2024; Yuniar et al., 2023; Zellawati et al., 2026). These findings indicate the psychological relevance of gratitude, while offering more limited insight into how parents themselves experience and make sense of gratitude within particular cultural and spiritual contexts.

Gratitude can be conceptualized as an affective and cognitive orientation involving the recognition and appreciation of positive or meaningful aspects of experience (Wood et al., 2010). Beyond its individual psychological functions, gratitude also has an important relational dimension because it emerges and operates within interpersonal relationships (Algoe, 2012). Within Islamic psychological perspectives, gratitude is not limited to positive affect but may involve cognitive, affective, spiritual, and behavioral orientations toward recognizing blessings and responding to God (Rusdi et al., 2021). Although these perspectives share an emphasis on recognizing and appreciating what is valued, they are not conceptually identical. Psychological gratitude does not necessarily involve religious attribution, whereas Islamic *shukr* explicitly situates thankfulness within a person's relationship with Allah.

In demanding caregiving contexts, religious and spiritual meanings may provide resources through which parents interpret their experiences and responsibilities (Abdul Rahim & Jaafar, 2025; Çaksen, 2025; Miquel et al., 2024). Islamic scholarship offers several potentially relevant concepts for understanding responses to caregiving challenges, including *shukr*, *sabr*, *takdir*, *amanah*, and *ikhtiar*. These concepts provide a broader theoretical vocabulary, although their relevance to participants' experiences must be established through the interview accounts rather than assumed in advance.

In this context, *shukr* (gratitude) and *sabr* (patient perseverance in adversity) may be understood as related but distinct interpretative concepts: *shukr* concerns acknowledgment of blessings, whereas *sabr* concerns how hardship is endured and responded to. In al-Ghazali's conceptualization (Al-Ghazali, 2016), *shukr* encompasses *'ilm* (recognition of blessings), *hal* (an appreciative inner state), and *'amal* (actions expressing gratitude). Their possible relationship to *takdir* (divine decree), *amanah* (a responsibility or trust entrusted by God), and *ikhtiar* (purposeful effort) provides a conceptual vocabulary for discussing caregiving without assuming that participants explicitly used all these terms. This distinction is important because patience, acceptance, and active coping should not automatically be classified as expressions of gratitude (Mutia et al., 2023; Rusdi et al., 2021).

In the present study, gratitude was approached as the central experiential phenomenon, informed by the psychological understanding of gratitude as recognition and appreciation. The Islamic concept of *shukr* served as a contextual *sensitizing concept* for interpreting religiously situated expressions of thankfulness. Neither perspective was treated as a predetermined coding framework or assumed to characterize all participants' accounts. Instead, consistent with IPA, the analysis prioritized participants' expressed meanings and distinguished gratitude from related experiences such as acceptance, patience, spiritual coping, and active caregiving efforts.

Gratitude is also situated within local cultural contexts. Within Javanese cultural contexts, *nrimo ing pandum* has been interpreted in relation to *syukur* (gratitude), *sabar* (patience), and *nrimo* (acceptance of one's circumstances) (Mutia et al., 2023), while communal traditions such as *wiwitan* have been described as connecting gratitude, sharing, kinship, and religious-cultural meaning (Maimun et al., 2020). In Sundanese cultural contexts, *narima* may refer to acceptance of circumstances, whereas *mulang tarima* has been discussed in relation to gratitude, acknowledgment, and reciprocity (Sukmadewi et al., 2022). Although *nrimo* and *narima* share an emphasis on acceptance, they belong to different linguistic and cultural contexts and should not be treated as interchangeable or assumed to carry identical meanings.

Importantly, these cultural references originate from contexts other than parenting children with special needs, including market trading, communal traditions, and textual interpretation. Their relevance to the present study is therefore conceptual and interpretative rather than direct empirical evidence of how Javanese and Sundanese parents experience gratitude. These concepts are treated as culturally available interpretative resources rather than fixed characteristics that determine individual experience.

What remains less understood is how parents of children with special needs themselves

experience and make sense of gratitude at the intersection of caregiving, spirituality, relationships, and cultural meaning. An idiographic approach is particularly appropriate for examining how individuals interpret significant life experiences within their particular contexts (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, this study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how four Javanese and Sundanese parents of children with special needs experienced and made sense of gratitude within their caregiving lives.

The central research question was: How do Javanese and Sundanese parents of children with special needs experience and make sense of gratitude within their everyday caregiving lives? Specifically, the study aimed to: (1) explore how parents experience and make sense of gratitude while raising a child with special needs; (2) identify interconnected experiential themes within participants' accounts; and (3) interpret how cultural and religious meaning resources appear within these experiences.

The inclusion of parents from Javanese and Sundanese backgrounds was intended to provide variation in the sociocultural contexts within which gratitude might be experienced and interpreted, rather than to establish a comparative design. Consistent with the idiographic orientation of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study focused on participants' individual experiences before considering patterns of convergence and divergence across accounts. Accordingly, the study does not seek to characterize Javanese and Sundanese parents as homogeneous cultural groups or establish population-level cultural differences.

Method

This study employed a qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how parents of children with special needs experience and make sense of gratitude within their everyday caregiving lives. IPA was selected because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences and the meanings attributed to those experiences rather than to establish population-level cultural differences.

Consistent with its phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic foundations, IPA attends closely to how individuals experience significant life circumstances and make sense of those experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The study adopted an idiographic orientation by examining each participant's account in depth before considering patterns of convergence and divergence across cases. The interpretative process involved the double hermeneutic characteristic of IPA: participants sought to make sense of their experiences, while the researcher sought to interpret participants' sense-making.

Participants and Recruitment

Four parents of children with special needs participated in the study, comprising one father (P1) and three mothers (P2, P3, and P4). Participants were purposively recruited through personal networks accessible to members of the research team. Potential participants were identified through individuals known to the researchers or their acquaintances and were approached based on the relevance of their caregiving experiences to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were: (a) being a biological parent or primary caregiver of a child with special needs; (b) being actively involved in the child's everyday care; and (c) self-identifying as Javanese or Sundanese. Two participants identified as Javanese and two as Sundanese.

All four participants identified as Muslim. Although Muslim religious affiliation was not established as a formal inclusion criterion during recruitment, it constituted an important contextual characteristic of the sample, particularly given the religious meanings expressed in participants' accounts. Accordingly, the interpretation of Islamic gratitude (*shukr*) is situated within these participants' experiences rather than assumed to represent parents from other religious backgrounds.

The sample was considered sufficiently focused for an idiographic exploration of a shared phenomenon: parents' experiences of caring for children with special needs and making sense of gratitude within their caregiving lives. However, homogeneity was defined at the level of this shared caregiving experience rather than identical demographic or family characteristics.

Participants differed in parental role, their children's reported conditions, educational circumstances, and regional and cultural backgrounds. These variations were acknowledged as potentially relevant to how participants interpreted their experiences and were not assumed to be explained by cultural identity alone.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Participant	Parental Role	Child's Condition	Educational Stage	Cultural Background	Religion	Interview sessions
P1	Father	Down syndrome	Primary school	Javanese	Islam	1
P2	Mother	Down syndrome	Primary school	Javanese	Islam	2
P3	Mother	Intellectual disability	Primary school	Sundanese	Islam	1
P4	Mother	Down syndrome	Junior High School	Sundanese	Islam	1

The small sample was consistent with IPA's emphasis on detailed examination of individual experiences rather than statistical representation (Smith et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of the sample limited the extent to which shared patterns could be interpreted as arising from comparable caregiving circumstances. The analysis therefore prioritized individual accounts and treated cross-case patterns as interpretative connections rather than evidence of homogeneous experiences across participants. P1 and P2 were married and shared one family caregiving context. Their accounts were considered separately during idiographic analysis while recognizing that they did not represent independent family contexts. Thus, the four participants represented three family contexts.

Information regarding the children's special needs was obtained through parental reports during recruitment and interviews. Participants described their children's conditions based on diagnoses they reported having received from professionals. The research team did not independently verify these diagnoses through medical records, diagnostic reports, or school documentation. Accordingly, the reported conditions are presented as parent-reported professional diagnoses rather than independently confirmed clinical classifications.

The inclusion criteria did not restrict participation to parents of primary-school-aged children. Instead, eligibility was based on participants' caregiving roles, their involvement in everyday care, and their self-identified Javanese or Sundanese cultural backgrounds.

The participants' parental roles, children's reported conditions and educational circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and religious affiliations are summarized in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted primarily in Indonesian by members of the research team in Yogyakarta and Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia. Participants occasionally used regional or colloquial expressions, including Javanese and Sundanese terms, which were retained in the original transcripts.

The interview guide was developed collaboratively by three researchers with academic backgrounds in psychology. Each researcher initially drafted potential questions individually, which were subsequently discussed and consolidated into a shared semi-structured guide. The shared guide provided a common framework across interviewers while allowing flexible follow-up questions to explore participants' individual experiences.

The interview process was supported by two undergraduate student members of the research team, who assisted with conducting interviews and preparing verbatim transcripts. The shared semi-structured interview guide provided a common framework for data collection across team members.

Four participants took part in five interview sessions. P1, P3, and P4 were interviewed once each, whereas P2 was interviewed twice to supplement information obtained during the first interview. Individual sessions lasted approximately 65–150 minutes (estimated). With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. No systematic field notes or separate observational records were collected; therefore, nonverbal expressions were not treated as an independent source of data in the analysis.

The interview guide focused on participants' caregiving experiences, emotional responses, challenges, coping strategies, factors shaping their perspectives, and perceived impacts on everyday life. Illustrative questions included: "What challenges have you experienced in raising a child with special needs?", "What do you do to cope with difficulties associated with raising a child with special needs?", and "What factors have

shaped your current feelings and perspectives on life?" The guide did not explicitly prescribe religious or cultural concepts as interview topics. The original semi-structured interview guide, translated into English, is provided in Supplementary Material.

Selected excerpts were translated into English by members of the research team. The translations were reviewed and discussed collaboratively in relation to the original Indonesian accounts to preserve their contextual meanings. Original-language excerpts were retained alongside the English translations to enhance transparency.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the idiographic and interpretative principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Initial analysis was undertaken by a researcher who had not conducted the interviews. The researcher examined the transcripts individually, made preliminary analytical notes and coding annotations in the Word transcript documents, and developed initial interpretations of participants' experiences. These interpretations were subsequently discussed with other members of the research team, including those involved in data collection. These discussions were intended to review and refine the interpretations rather than to establish formal agreement among researchers. No formal disagreement-resolution protocol or systematic record of disagreements was maintained.

During the refinement of the analysis, individual transcripts were revisited to develop experiential statements and personal experiential themes (PETs). Patterns of convergence and divergence across the four individual accounts were subsequently examined to develop group experiential themes (GETs), which are presented in the Results section.

The analysis distinguished participants' expressed meanings from the researchers' interpretative perspectives. Cultural concepts such as *nrimo ing pandum*, *narima*, and *mulang tarima* were considered contextual interpretative resources rather than participant-generated themes unless directly articulated in the interviews. Cultural meanings were considered throughout the interpretative process, while the resulting thematic structure is presented in the Results section.

The refined PET–GET structure represents a subsequent interpretative synthesis of the original interview accounts rather than a claim that the final theme labels appeared verbatim in the initial transcript annotations. The analysis sought to maintain interpretative coherence while remaining grounded in participants' individual experiences.

Methodological Integrity

Methodological integrity was supported through repeated engagement with individual interview transcripts and collaborative examination of emerging interpretations within the research team. Team discussions focused on whether the interpretations were consistent with participants' accounts, whether participants' expressed meanings were sufficiently distinguished from researchers' assumptions, and whether patterns of convergence and divergence across cases were adequately represented. These discussions provided opportunities for critical reflection and interpretative refinement rather than formal independent verification.

The original transcript documents contained preliminary analytical annotations, although their completeness varied across participants and did not constitute a comprehensive formal audit trail. Independent double coding, formal inter-rater agreement procedures, member checking, and a systematic reflexive diary were not undertaken. The analysis and reporting were informed by Smith's (2011) IPA quality criteria, particularly idiographic detail, interpretative depth, and grounding in participants' accounts, alongside the transparency principles emphasized in JARS-Qual (Levitt et al., 2018). These criteria informed the presentation of findings without implying that additional credibility procedures had been implemented.

Researcher Reflexivity and Interpretative Rigor

The research team comprised five members: three researchers with academic backgrounds in psychology and two undergraduate students who assisted with interviews and transcription. All team members identified as Muslim and represented Javanese and Sundanese cultural backgrounds. One researcher had professional experience in teaching courses on children with special needs and individual psychological assessment, providing counseling services related to children with special needs, and conducting research in this field.

Participants were recruited through existing personal networks, and some were previously known to members of the research team as

Table 2
Group Experiential Themes and Their Interpretative Meanings

Group Interpretative Theme	Experiential Focus	Interpretative Meaning
Acceptance as a Dynamic Psychological Process	Emotional adjustment, uncertainty, and changing expectations	Acceptance emerged as an evolving and sometimes ambivalent experience.
Spiritual Meaning-Making	Divine determination, faith, surrender, and thankfulness	Religious beliefs provided frameworks for interpreting caregiving experiences.
Active Coping and Ikhtiar	Information seeking, therapy, education, and caregiving efforts	Practical efforts could coexist with acceptance and spiritual surrender.
Social and Relational Support	Family assistance, emotional encouragement, and social responses	Relationships shaped caregiving experiences and, in some accounts, expressions of gratitude.

Table 3
Personal Experiential Themes Across Participants and Their Contributions to Group Experiential Themes

Group Experiential Themes	P1 — Javanese father	P2 — Javanese mother	P3 — Sundanese mother	P4 — Sundanese mother
1. Acceptance	Adjusting expectations while maintaining responsibility	Developing patience in everyday caregiving	Negotiating sadness and future uncertainty	Moving toward acceptance and appreciation
2. Spiritual meaning-making	Divine determination and human responsibility	Thankfulness amid caregiving challenges	Surrendering outcomes while continuing efforts	Child as a blessing and source of gratitude
3. Active coping and ikhtiar	Therapy, schooling, and future planning	Information seeking and practical interventions	Professional assistance and educational opportunities	Sustained educational and daily caregiving
4. Social and relational support	Sibling involvement and limits to inclusion	Family cooperation and social stigma	Emotional encouragement from husband	Appreciation of family assistance

Note. PETs are interpretative summaries rather than verbatim participant expressions. The matrix illustrates contributions to the four GETs without implying equal thematic prominence across cases. P1 and P2 belonged to the same family. Cultural meanings informed the interpretation of individual accounts but were not established as a separate GET.

neighbors. These relationships may have facilitated rapport while also influencing participants' disclosures and the researchers' interpretations. The team acknowledged that its disciplinary training, religious and cultural backgrounds, and professional experiences could provide contextual understanding while introducing assumptions about parental adjustment, gratitude, and coping.

Initial analysis was conducted by a researcher who had not participated in the interviews. Emerging interpretations were subsequently discussed within the research team to consider alternative understandings and distinguish participants' expressed meanings from researchers' psychological, religious, and cultural assumptions. Consistent with IPA's double-hermeneutic orientation, these discussions supported collaborative interpretative reflection rather than formal independent verification. No systematic reflexive diary, formal bracketing procedure, independent double coding, or investigator triangulation was undertaken.

Although the interview guide did not explicitly introduce specific religious or cultural concepts, questions concerning gratitude, caregiving experiences, and factors shaping participants' perspectives may have influenced the accounts elicited. Accordingly, spiritual and cultural meanings were interpreted in relation to both participants' narratives and the interview context, rather than assumed to emerge independently of the researchers' interpretative involvement. Cultural concepts were treated as contextual interpretative resources rather than predetermined or independently established experiential themes.

Methodological Integrity

Prior to data collection, all four participants provided written informed consent after receiving information about the study's objectives, interview procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and participant rights. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. Written permission for audio recording was also obtained from all participants.

The interviews were conducted with attention to participants' comfort, privacy, and emotional

well-being. Rapport was established to facilitate open communication, and participants were allowed to pause, skip questions, or discontinue the interview at any time. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of anonymized participant codes and the removal of identifying information from research reports.

Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained prior to data collection. Following a subsequent institutional review, the Research and Publication Ethics Committee of the Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM), Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, issued an ethics exemption letter (Reference No. 6592/Un.02/L3/TL/11/2026, dated November 3, 2026), confirming that the research protocol qualified for exemption from the requirement to obtain ethical approval. As this determination was issued after data collection, it is reported transparently as a subsequent exemption decision rather than as prospective ethical approval.

Results

The analysis identified four group experiential themes (GETs) through which participants interpreted their caregiving experiences in relation to gratitude: (1) acceptance as a dynamic psychological process, (2) spiritual meaning-making, (3) active coping and *ikhtiar*, and (4) social and relational support. These themes represent interconnected dimensions of participants' experiences rather than sequential stages or causal pathways. Acceptance, coping, and supportive relationships were not treated as synonymous with gratitude; instead, their relationships to gratitude were interpreted cautiously within each individual account. Table 2 summarizes the experiential focus and interpretative meaning of each GET, while Figure 1 presents their conceptual interrelationships.

Acceptance as a Dynamic Psychological Process

Participants' accounts suggested that acceptance was not necessarily an immediate or fixed response to their children's conditions. The narratives reflected sadness, uncertainty about the future, and the reconsideration of developmental expectations, alongside efforts to make sense of ongoing caregiving experiences.

> *Kalo pas tau tuh sedih ya neng sedih. ... Iya, kok yang lain mah udah pinter kok anak aku nggak. Jadi ibu teh sedih aja gitu ya sedih bari jeung mikir nanti ke depannya gimana. (P3, Sunda)*
>
> When I first learned about it, I felt sad, very sad. ... I wondered why other children were already progressing while mine was not. I was sad and kept thinking about what the future would be like." (P3, Sundanese)
>
> *Alhamdulillah sekarang saya sudah karena udah pasrah sama Allah jadi saya bahagia mungkin karena anak saya yang berkebutuhan khusus ini membawa berkah untuk saya dan sampai teteh-tetehnya juga sampe sayang sekali sama anak saya ini. (P4, Sunda)*
> Praise be to God. Now that I have surrendered to God, I feel happy. Perhaps my child with special needs has brought blessings to me; even the older sisters have become very loving toward this child. (P4, Sundanese)

P3's account illustrates the emotional difficulty of recognizing differences between her child's development and that of other children, particularly her uncertainty about the child's future. Her narrative reflects sadness and concern rather than an explicitly stated experience of shock. By contrast, P4 describes her caregiving experience through *Alhamdulillah*, surrender to God (*pasrah*), happiness, and the perception of her child as a blessing. These contrasting accounts illustrate different ways of making sense of caregiving circumstances rather than a shared or linear progression from distress to acceptance or gratitude.

The meaning of *pasrah* in P4's account warrants particular attention. Rather than assuming that it represents either active acceptance or passive resignation, her narrative suggests a religiously informed reinterpretation of her circumstances, accompanied by appreciation of the affection shown by her child's older siblings. However, this quotation alone does not establish whether *pasrah* was accompanied by continued active coping; such an interpretation would require consideration of her broader caregiving account. From an idiographic perspective, P4's expression of *Alhamdulillah* provides a more explicit indication of gratitude, whereas P3's sadness should not, in isolation, be interpreted as gratitude. Thus, acceptance and gratitude may be related within individual experiences but should not be treated as equivalent psychological processes.

Spiritual Meaning Making

Religious beliefs provided an important interpretative context for participants' caregiving experiences. However, references to divine determination, spiritual responsibility, and reward were not automatically interpreted as expressions of gratitude. Their relationship to gratitude was examined in relation to how participants described and evaluated their experiences.

> *Jadi apa yang semua kejadian yang ada di muka bumi itu kan 50.000 tahun sudah ditetapkan oleh Allah. Jadi ya dijalankan saja apa yang ditetapkan oleh Allah. (P1, Jawa)*
> Everything that happens on this earth has already been determined by God 50,000 years ago. So, I just live according to what God has already decreed. (P1, Javanese)

> *Alhamdulillah ya Allah ladang pahala kalo kita bisa…(P3, Sunda).*
> Alhamdulillah, O God, this can become a source of spiritual reward if we are able to live through it... (P3, Sundanese).

P1's account emphasized divine determination as a way of understanding and responding to circumstances beyond personal control. His statement that events had already been determined by God suggests an orientation toward accepting the circumstances of caregiving. Nevertheless, this excerpt does not explicitly express gratitude. Its relevance to the study lies in providing a religious context within which gratitude may be understood, rather than serving as direct evidence of gratitude itself.

P3's account offered a more explicit connection between religious meaning and gratitude. Her expression of *Alhamdulillah*, alongside the possibility of caregiving becoming a source of spiritual reward (*ladang pahala*), suggests that gratitude was experienced not simply as satisfaction with her circumstances but also through the recognition of spiritual value within a demanding caregiving role. The conditional expression *"kalau kita bisa"* ("if we are able to") is particularly important because it indicates that spiritual reward was understood as a possibility rather than an assured outcome. This interpretation preserves the difficulty of caregiving while acknowledging the positive religious meaning P3 attached to it.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate different relationships between religious meaning-making and gratitude. P1's statement primarily reflects an understanding of divine determination, whereas P3's account more directly connects thankfulness with the perceived spiritual significance of caregiving. Accordingly, spiritual meaning-making is interpreted as a context that may contribute to experiences of gratitude, rather than as an equivalent or universal expression of gratitude across participants.

Active Coping and Ikhtiar

Participants described practical efforts to respond to their children's needs alongside their experiences of acceptance and religious meaning-making. The theme *Active Coping and Ikhtiar* was developed as an interpretative synthesis of these experiences rather than as a deductively applied category from coping theory. The term *ikhtiar* was explicitly used by P1, whereas P2 described information-seeking as a way of understanding her child's condition and organizing subsequent caregiving decisions.

> *"Akan tetapi kita juga mesti punya ikhtiar, dalam arti ikhtiarnya adalah ketika Allah ngasih ujian-ujian itu bukan berarti ya sudah e dibiarkan seperti itu, tetapi ada ikhtiar-ikhtiar yang kita lakukan seperti fisioterapi, kemudian menyekolahkan, terus..." (P1, Jawa)*
> "However, we must also make efforts. When God gives us trials, that does not mean we should simply leave things as they are; there are efforts we make, such as physiotherapy and sending [our child] to school..." (P1, Javanese)

> *"Tapi ya tadi, akhirnya searching itu Mba nyari informasi kenapa bisa, penyebabnya apa, kaya gitu Mba, lebih kesitu kalau saya loh sifatnya seperti itu. ... Jadi bisa lebih menata, apa yang harus dilakukan lebih tertata."(P2, Jawa)*
> "But as I said, I ended up searching for information about why this happened and what caused it. That is how I tend to respond. ... It helped me organize what needed to be done." (P2, Javanese)

P1 framed *ikhtiar* as a responsibility accompanying acceptance of God's will. His account explicitly rejected the idea that religious surrender meant leaving the child's needs unattended. Physiotherapy and education were presented as concrete expressions of continued caregiving responsibility. In contrast, P2

emphasized information-seeking as a means of understanding her child's condition and organizing practical responses.

A further passage from P2's interview provides a more explicit connection between caregiving efforts and gratitude. Recalling her efforts to obtain therapeutic assistance when her child experienced difficulties with feeding and early development, she stated:

> *"Alhamdulillah disana itu belum ada 1 bulan Mba, udah bisa nenen. ... Ya alhamdulillah disana engga ada sebulan lah, mulai dari terapi 1,5 bulan, umurnya 2 bulan lebih dikit udah bisa nangis, udah bisa nenen dikit-dikit. Progresnya bagus sih. Alhamdulillah itu." (P2, Jawa)*
> "Alhamdulillah, in less than a month there, my child was already able to breastfeed. ... Alhamdulillah, within less than a month of receiving therapy, when my child was just over two months old, my child began to cry and breastfeed a little. The progress was good. Alhamdulillah." (P2, Javanese)

This account offers a more direct experiential link between practical caregiving efforts and gratitude. P2's repeated expression of *Alhamdulillah* occurred while she described improvements that she perceived in her child's development following therapeutic assistance. Her gratitude appeared to be directed toward the child's progress rather than toward the caregiving effort itself. Thus, information-seeking and therapeutic engagement formed part of the experiential circumstances in which she recognized and expressed thankfulness.

Taken together, P1's and P2's accounts illustrate different meanings of continued caregiving efforts. For P1, *ikhtiar* represented responsibility within a religious understanding of life, whereas P2's experience more directly connected practical action, perceived developmental progress, and gratitude. These accounts suggest that gratitude could emerge within experiences of active caregiving without implying that coping and gratitude were equivalent or that the same relationship characterized every participant.

Social and Relational Support

Participants' experiences of gratitude were also situated within relationships with spouses, families, communities, and social environments.

> *Tapi bapaknya nguatin, udah ibu jangan gitu yang lain juga banyak lebih dari anak kita. ... sedih aja gitu neng suka sedih ngebayangin gimana kalau kita kalo ini kan kalo umur gak ada yang tahu, ibu Cuma sedih aja tapi udah kesini-kesininya ada Alhamdulillah ya Allah ladang pahala kalo kita bisa ininya. (P3, Sunda)*
> But my husband encouraged me, saying not to think that way because many others face more difficult circumstances than our child. ... I still felt sad thinking about the future, because no one knows how long we will live. But more recently I have said, praise be to God, this may be a field of spiritual reward if we can manage it." (P3, Sundanese).

P3's account illustrates how emotional adjustment to her child's condition was situated within a marital relationship rather than solely within an individual psychological process. Her husband's encouragement provided an important relational context as she continued to navigate sadness, uncertainty, and caregiving responsibilities. Her subsequent expression of Alhamdulillah suggests that gratitude was articulated alongside, rather than in place of, these ongoing emotional challenges. Nevertheless, the account does not establish that her husband's support directly caused her experience of gratitude.

P4 described practical help from family members:

> *Saya juga kebantu oleh kakaknya, jadi mau sekolah suka diantar, mau mandi dimandiin, mau makan disuapin jadi oh saya Alhamdulillah oh ternyata ada yang membantu terus yang memberi support juga ayahnya ayo sekolah ayo yang rajin Alhamdulillah.(P4, Sunda)*
> I also received help from the older sibling. When [my child] needed to go to school, [the sibling] would take [my child] there; when [my child] needed bathing, [the sibling] helped with that; and when [my child] needed feeding, [the sibling] helped too. So I said, praise be to God, there is someone helping. The father also gives encouragement: come on, go to school, study diligently. Praise be to God. (P4, Sundanese)

In this account, P4 explicitly linked expressions of gratitude (*Alhamdulillah*) with practical assistance from an older sibling and

encouragement from the child's father. This provides direct evidence of gratitude expressed in relation to family support, rather than treating support itself as synonymous with gratitude

Cultural Context Across Individual Accounts

Cultural contexts were considered as interpretative resources for understanding participants' experiences rather than as independently established group experiential themes. Although participants identified as Javanese or Sundanese, the analysis did not assume that their cultural backgrounds determined how they experienced gratitude, acceptance, or caregiving responsibilities.

The interview accounts did not provide sufficient evidence to establish specific cultural concepts, such as *nrimo ing pandum*, *narima*, or *mulang tarima*, as participant-generated experiential themes. In particular, expressions of religious acceptance and appreciation of family assistance could not, by themselves, establish the presence of culturally specific meanings or reciprocal practices associated with these concepts.

Accordingly, Javanese and Sundanese cultural perspectives were treated as contextual interpretative resources rather than explanatory categories imposed on participants' accounts. Their potential relevance is considered further in the Discussion in relation to existing cultural scholarship. Given the small and heterogeneous sample, the findings do not establish distinctive or representative patterns of gratitude among Javanese and Sundanese parents.

Idiographic and Cross-Case Patterns

The idiographic analysis revealed both convergence and divergence in how the four participants interpreted their caregiving experiences. Emotional adjustment, religious meaning-making, active caregiving efforts, and relational support emerged as recurring experiential concerns, although their meanings and prominence differed across individual accounts. These dimensions were not consistently or explicitly associated with gratitude by every participant.

Within the same Javanese family, P1 and P2 demonstrated different experiential emphases. P1 understood caregiving through the coexistence of divine determination and continued responsibility, particularly in seeking therapy and educational opportunities for his child. His account emphasized *ikhtiar* within a religious understanding of caregiving, without explicitly identifying these efforts as gratitude. P2, by contrast, emphasized developing patience, seeking information, and organizing practical responses to her child's needs. Her expression of *Alhamdulillah* when describing perceived developmental progress following therapeutic assistance provided a more direct indication of gratitude. Their accounts illustrate how individuals sharing the same family circumstances may construct different meanings from caregiving experiences

Among the Sundanese participants, P3 described sadness and uncertainty about her child's future while continuing caregiving efforts and entrusting outcomes to God. Her account reflected the coexistence of emotional vulnerability, active coping, and spiritual meaning-making. P4, in contrast, more explicitly associated gratitude with religious acceptance, perceiving her child as a blessing, and appreciating practical assistance and encouragement from family members. These differences illustrate how gratitude-related meanings varied even among participants sharing a broad cultural background.

Across cases, acceptance, spiritual meaning-making, active coping, and relational support were interconnected but not interchangeable. Religious acceptance did not necessarily imply the absence of distress, and continued caregiving efforts were not automatically interpreted as expressions of gratitude. Similarly, social support provided a relational context for meaning-making, but its connection to gratitude was most evident when participants explicitly acknowledged and appreciated assistance received. The analysis therefore suggests that gratitude was embedded in diverse caregiving experiences rather than following a uniform or linear psychological process.

Four group experiential themes (GETs) were developed through cross-case interpretation: Acceptance as a Dynamic Psychological Process, Spiritual Meaning-Making, Active Coping and Ikhtiar, and Social and Relational Support. Table 2 summarizes their experiential focus and interpretative meanings, while Table 3 presents the personal experiential themes (PETs) contributing to each GET. Together, these tables illustrate patterns of convergence and divergence without implying that all themes were equally prominent across participants. P1 and P2 were

analyzed as separate individual accounts while acknowledging their shared family context.

Interpretative Model

Figure 1 presents an interpretative synthesis of the four group experiential themes identified across participants' accounts. The model illustrates how acceptance, spiritual meaning-making, active coping and *ikhtiar*, and social and relational support were interconnected within participants' experiences of caregiving and gratitude. These relationships are interpretative rather than causal or sequential, and their meanings and prominence varied across individual accounts.

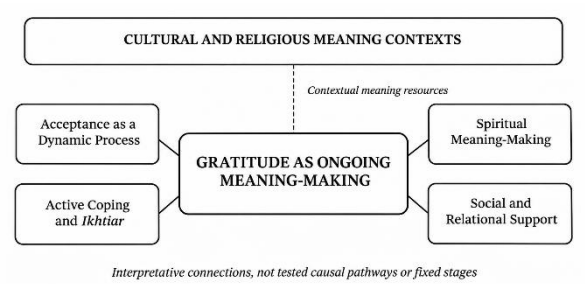


Figure 1. Interpretative Model of Gratitude Meaning-Making Among Parents of Children with Special Needs

Note. The model represents an interpretative synthesis of four group experiential themes (GETs) identified through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The relationships among themes are conceptual and do not imply causal or sequential pathways. The model does not suggest that all themes were equally prominent across participants or that acceptance, coping, and social support necessarily constitute expressions of gratitude.

Discussion

This study explored how four parents of children with special needs experienced and made sense of gratitude in their everyday caregiving lives. Taken together, the four group experiential themes suggest that gratitude was not experienced merely as a positive emotional state but was interpreted within ongoing processes of emotional adjustment, spiritual meaning-making, active caregiving efforts, and relational support. These dimensions were not necessarily direct expressions of gratitude in every account, but they provided important contexts for understanding how gratitude was articulated and experienced.

The participants' accounts suggest that gratitude could coexist with sadness, uncertainty, and continuing caregiving challenges rather than replacing these difficult experiences. P3 described distress and uncertainty about her child's future while also relating caregiving to continued effort and the possibility of spiritual reward. P4 more explicitly connected her expressions of *Alhamdulillah* with surrender to God, happiness, and appreciation of family support. These accounts illustrate different ways in which difficult emotions and appreciative or spiritually meaningful interpretations could be present within caregiving experiences.

This interpretation is more closely aligned with literature on meaning-making in stressful life circumstances than with correlational findings concerning gratitude and psychological well-being. Park's (2010) meaning-making framework provides a useful perspective for understanding how individuals interpret challenging experiences in relation to broader beliefs and sources of meaning. Within the present study, religious beliefs, caregiving responsibilities, and supportive relationships appeared to provide contexts in which participants interpreted their experiences and, in some cases, expressed gratitude. However, the findings do not establish a specific meaning-making sequence, demonstrate benefit finding across all participants, or indicate that gratitude necessarily reduced distress.

Importantly, acceptance, coping, and spiritual interpretation were not treated as equivalent to gratitude. Their relevance depended on whether and how participants expressed appreciative or thankful meanings within their individual accounts. The coexistence of gratitude and difficult emotions is therefore understood as an idiographic interpretative finding rather than evidence of an association between gratitude and psychological well-being.

Spiritual meaning-making was salient but was not interchangeable with gratitude. P1 framed caregiving through divine determination (*takdir*) while emphasizing continued responsibility, P3 described the possibility of spiritual reward, and P4 explicitly connected *Alhamdulillah* with acceptance and happiness. These accounts suggest different ways in which religious interpretations provided a context for understanding gratitude. However, references to divine determination or spiritual reward alone were not treated as direct expressions of thankfulness. Although concepts such as *amanah* and *sabr* are relevant to broader Islamic discussions of caregiving, the present interview evidence does not establish them as participant-generated experiential themes. Accordingly, the interpretation is limited to religious meanings supported by the individual

accounts, particularly divine determination, continued effort (*ikhtiar*), and expressions of gratitude.

Acceptance and active coping were also connected but conceptually distinct from gratitude. P1 explained that divine determination did not preclude physiotherapy and schooling, while P2 described actively seeking information about her child's condition. These passages support an interpretation of caregiving agency in a religiously meaningful context; they do not independently establish gratitude. Read alongside P3's and P4's more explicit appreciative and spiritual language, they illuminate the broader meaning-making context in which gratitude was sometimes articulated (Asa et al., 2021; Abdul Rahim & Jaafar, 2025).

The relational theme similarly requires careful differentiation. P3 described reassurance from her husband; P4 described practical assistance from a family member; and P2 valued a community perceived as welcoming. Such support may provide conditions in which parents experience appreciation, but support itself is not an expression of gratitude. The analysis therefore treats these passages as relational contexts for meaning-making, with the most explicit evidence of thankfulness arising when participants used appreciative language such as Alhamdulillah. This cautious interpretation is compatible with relational accounts of gratitude (Algoe, 2012) and research on family support (Hizbullah & Mulyati, 2022; Laili et al., 2022; Zellawati et al., 2026).

The cultural findings require cautious interpretation. The present study does not establish two distinct cultural forms of gratitude. With only two Javanese and two Sundanese participants, differences across accounts cannot be attributed to cultural background alone. Within Javanese cultural scholarship, nrimo ing pandum has been interpreted in relation to syukur, sabar, and nrimo (Mutia et al., 2023). In Sundanese scholarship, mulang tarima has been described as a culturally meaningful understanding of gratitude and reciprocity (Sukmadewi et al., 2022). In this study, however, these concepts are used as interpretative cultural contexts rather than assumed to characterize participants simply because of their cultural identification.

Across the four accounts, the evidence for gratitude varied in directness. P4 most explicitly associated Alhamdulillah with surrender and happiness; P3 articulated gratitude and spiritual reward alongside worry and her husband's encouragement. P1 foregrounded divine determination and continued caregiving responsibility, while P2 emphasized information-seeking and practical caregiving efforts. However, P2 also explicitly expressed *Alhamdulillah* when describing perceived developmental progress following therapeutic assistance.

This distinction illustrates that practical coping and gratitude were not equivalent, although they could be meaningfully connected within an individual account. Such variation represents an important idiographic finding rather than evidence of a uniform gratitude process, and it limits any inference about differences between Javanese and Sundanese participants.

Theoretical Contribution

The study offers three tentative theoretical insights from four idiographic accounts. First, gratitude could coexist with sadness, uncertainty, and continued caregiving effort rather than replacing difficult emotions. Second, the findings suggest that religious meaning-making provided different contexts for gratitude across individual accounts. P1 emphasized divine determination and continued caregiving effort (*ikhtiar*), P3 referred to the possibility of spiritual reward, and P4 explicitly expressed gratitude through *Alhamdulillah* in relation to acceptance and family support. These findings do not establish *amanah* or *sabr* as experiential themes, nor do they suggest that all participants articulated the same religious meanings. Third, cultural concepts may offer contextual resources for interpreting accounts without functioning as fixed scripts or establishing distinct Javanese and Sundanese patterns. These insights are interpretative propositions for further study, not generalizable mechanisms or causal relationships.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest considerations for culturally and spiritually responsive psychological support for parents of children with special needs. Practitioners should not presume that gratitude indicates the absence of distress or that acceptance requires passivity. Instead, they may explore each parent's own understanding of gratitude, religious beliefs, caregiving efforts, and relational resources. Concepts such as *takdir, sabr, ikhtiar, nrimo,* or *narima* should be explored only when meaningful to the individual rather than assumed on the basis of cultural identity. The present study

does not evaluate the effectiveness of any intervention.

Resilience as a Theoretical Implication

Although resilience is relevant to the broader literature on parenting children with special needs, it was not independently assessed in the present study. The findings therefore do not demonstrate that gratitude produces resilience. Participants' accounts nevertheless included experiences theoretically relevant to resilience, such as continued caregiving engagement, reconstruction of meaning, active coping, and use of social and spiritual resources. Resilience should therefore be considered a potential theoretical implication warranting examination in future research rather than an empirically established outcome of this study.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, although the four participants shared the experience of raising children with special needs, the sample was heterogeneous in several respects, including parental role (one father and three mothers), the children's reported conditions and educational circumstances, and regional and cultural backgrounds (two Javanese and two Sundanese participants). These differences may have shaped participants' caregiving experiences and interpretations of gratitude. Although the sample shared a common experiential focus, it was not homogeneous in all relevant caregiving circumstances. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as representing uniform caregiving experiences or systematic differences between Javanese and Sundanese parents. Future IPA studies may benefit from more narrowly defined participant groups to enable deeper exploration of shared experiences within more comparable caregiving contexts.

Second, participants were recruited through personal networks accessible to members of the research team, which may have introduced selection bias. Third, P1 and P2 were married to each other, meaning that the four individual accounts represented only three family contexts. Their shared caregiving circumstances should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Fourth, information regarding the children's special needs was based on parental reports of professional diagnoses, without independent verification through clinical or educational records. Fifth, the study captured participants' experiences at a particular point in their caregiving lives rather than examining changes over time. Sixth, resilience was not independently assessed and should not be interpreted as an empirically established outcome.

Some participant accounts related more directly to acceptance, religious coping, or social support than to explicitly articulated gratitude. Accordingly, gratitude should be understood as a cautious interpretative synthesis of participants' experiences rather than a construct uniformly or explicitly expressed across all interviews. This distinction limits the extent to which the identified themes can be interpreted as direct expressions of gratitude.

Finally, formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained prior to data collection. Although an ethics exemption letter was subsequently issued by the Research and Publication Ethics Committee of the Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM), Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, this subsequent determination does not replace prospective ethical review. This limitation is acknowledged alongside the informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation procedures implemented during the study.

Future studies should obtain formal institutional ethical review before recruitment and data collection. Further research could involve larger and more diverse qualitative samples, particularly a greater number of fathers, to explore a broader range of paternal and maternal experiences of gratitude in caring for children with special needs. Studies involving participants from different family circumstances and sociocultural contexts may also provide a more nuanced understanding of how gratitude is experienced and interpreted in everyday caregiving.

Longitudinal designs could help examine how experiences of gratitude, acceptance, spiritual meaning-making, coping, and social support develop and change over time. Complementary quantitative or mixed-method approaches could further investigate associations among these processes and resilience, while avoiding assumptions about causal relationships that cannot be established from the present findings.

Conclusion

In these four accounts, gratitude was interpreted as an ongoing, culturally situated process of meaning-making that could coexist with emotional difficulty and active caregiving. Acceptance, spiritual interpretations, ikhtiar, and

relational support appeared in distinct ways across participants' experiences.

The cultural concepts discussed in this paper are contextual interpretative resources rather than evidence of fixed differences between Javanese and Sundanese parents. Given the small, relationally connected sample and the interpretative design, the findings offer idiographic insights and questions for future inquiry rather than population-level conclusions or evidence that gratitude causes resilience.

Declaration

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Author Contributions
Conceptualization: L; Methodology: L; Data collection and investigation: B,I; Data analysis: L,Z,A; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: L; Writing—Review & Editing: L,Z,F; Supervision: F,Z.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.

Use of Artificial Intelligence
ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with English language editing, sentence refinement, and manuscript formatting. The research analysis, interpretation of findings, and scholarly conclusions were developed and verified by the authors. The authors reviewed the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

Ethical Clearance
Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Formal institutional ethics approval was not obtained prospectively. Following a subsequent institutional review, the Research and Publication Ethics Committee of LPPM, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, issued an Ethics Exemption Letter (No. 6592/Un.02/L3/TL/11/2026, dated November 3, 2026). This retrospective exemption determination is not presented as prospective ethical approval.

Data Availability
The interview transcripts are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the qualitative data and the need to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

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