

Gratitude and Forgiveness as Predictors of Happiness among Undergraduate students

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Happiness is one of the key aspects of human existence. In the pursuit of happiness, gratitude and forgiveness can be explored as potential psychological strengths. The present study aims to explore the relationship among gratitude, forgiveness, and happiness, identify gender differences and determine gratitude and forgiveness as predictors of happiness. The sample for the study consists of 200 undergraduate college students in the age range of 18-22 years (94 males and 106 females) selected through quota sampling. The Gratitude Questionnaire, Heartland Forgiveness Scale and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire were used to collect data. The survey method was used with a quantitative analysis to obtain results. The results show significant and positive correlations between gratitude & happiness ($r = 0.55, p < 0.01$), between gratitude & forgiveness ($r = 0.37, p < 0.01$) and between forgiveness and happiness ($r = 0.49, p < 0.01$). Both gratitude and forgiveness are significant predictors of happiness, explaining 39.6% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.396$) in happiness, with gratitude and forgiveness ($\beta = 0.430, p = 0.00$) to levels of happiness as compared to forgiveness ($\beta = 0.334, p = 0.00$). The t-test value reveals a statistically significant difference as a function of gender on the construct of gratitude ($t = 2.193, df 198, p < 0.05$) but gender differences on forgiveness and happiness are not significant. The study provides important implications to India as a collectivistic culture to capitalize on the psychological strengths of gratitude and forgiveness for social harmony, individual happiness, and healing relationships.

Keywords: Happiness, gratitude, forgiveness, undergraduate students

Positive Psychology largely considers happiness as one of the key aspects of human existence. Happiness, also known as subjective wellbeing, is characterized by the experience of frequent positive affective states and life satisfaction. There are two main approaches to happiness: Hedonia and Eudaimonia, which explain what makes people happy. Both hedonic and eudemonic behaviors contribute to wellbeing, and each is vital to maximize happiness. Research studies have revealed that happy people tend to have a higher and better quality of social relationships and life satisfaction (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005); better mental health (Diener & Seligman, 2002) and longevity (Xu & Roberts, 2010). Theories of happiness have been divided into three types: Need/ Goal Satisfaction theories focus on happiness as an outcome of satisfaction of a need or achievement of a goal; Process/ Activity theories focus on experience of flow

in daily life leading to happiness; Genetic/ personality predispositions emphasize on personality based or biologically determined happiness. Studies on the biological/genetics determinants of happiness have found that 40% of positive emotionality and 55% of negative emotionality are genetically based (Tellegen et al, 1988). About 50% of the variance in happiness is not explained by biological components. Hence, a thorough understanding of happiness necessitates an examination of other variables. The level of happiness experienced depends on several factors as indicated by empirical research: life satisfaction, positive emotions, and satisfying relationships (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005) and degree of forgiving (Maly & Barber, 2005). Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade (2005) proposed that happiness levels are determined by three major factors: a genetically determined set point for happiness, relevant circumstantial factors that lead to happiness,

and happiness relevant activities and practices that suggest that 50% of population variance on happiness is accountable to genetics, 10% to life circumstances and 40% to intentional activity. This study leaves room for volition and self-generated goals that lead to happiness. Seligman (2002) suggests that a pleasant and meaningful life can be built on happiness that results from using our psychological strengths. They are universal and across time, place and culture, most people have developed and refined extraordinary qualities that promote adaptation and the pursuit of a better life.

The present study will capitalize on gratitude and forgiveness as important strengths in the pursuit of happiness. Peterson, Park & Seligman (2005) have classified forgiveness and gratitude as human virtues and strengths. Forgiveness is a positive psychological response to interpersonal harm and gratitude is a positive psychological response to interpersonal benefits (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Gratitude is defined as a state of thankfulness for others, self, Almighty and mother nature. It is a part of happy life (Stephens & Wardle, 2005). Gratitude related research studies state benefits of good health (Seligman et al., 2005), grateful workers are more efficient, productive, and responsible (Algoe, 2012) and foster adaptive coping (McCanbies et al 2018). Neuroscience research has identified a "Gratitude brain" that consists of more volume of grey matter, which excites the feel good hormones, a natural antidepressant leading to better immune system. Forgiveness is voluntary and intentional, focused towards change in attitude and feelings towards the offender. It consists of two components: decisional – choice to replace ill with good will and emotional - from anger, vengeance, resentment to mercy and compassion. Forgiveness is not erasure, but its value and challenge lie in changing reactions to hurtful memories. Forgiveness related studies using observational and randomized trials have revealed health benefits: lower levels of depression, anxiety, hostility, and higher levels of self-esteem & life satisfaction.

Several studies have tried to explore the connections of gratitude and forgiveness with happiness. Triantoro and Safaria (2015) found that gratitude is a crucial factor that contributes

to happiness among undergraduate students, but forgiveness has no significant relationship to happiness; Modi, Ritu, Gokhale, Meenakshi (2019) incorporate the constructs of forgiveness and gratitude in connection to the subjective well-being that have implications for health enhancements. Sapmaz, Fatma & Yıldırım, Musa & Topcuoğlu, Pınar & Nalbant, Duygu & Sızır, and Uğur (2015) conducted a study on university students and found that gratitude and happiness were found to positively correlate but only one dimension of forgiveness- forgiveness of situations significantly predicted happiness; Singh, Megha (2022) focused on the effect of gratitude on happiness among older adults using a pre-post experimental design with a two-week gratitude intervention. The results showed that gratitude affects happiness, and no significant differences were found on happiness and gratitude among males and females. Shkēmbi, Fleura & Treska, and Valbona (2022) found a statistically significant relationship between gratitude and happiness -more the gratitude increases greater the happiness. The present study will add to the existing body of knowledge on happiness, gratitude and forgiveness and explore gender differences on these constructs.

Aim:

To explore the relationship among gratitude, forgiveness, and happiness, identify gender differences and determine gratitude and forgiveness as predictors of happiness.

Method

Participants:

200 college students in the age range of 18 years – 22 years (94 males and 106 females), undergraduate students in Goa state were selected through quota sampling. Four undergraduate colleges in Goa were selected and a fixed quota of 50 students were selected from each college using voluntary sampling technique.

Variables:

Gratitude, Forgiveness, Happiness as measured by the selected tools in the study.

Gender: Male and female undergraduate college students.

Study tools: The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) developed by McCullough and Emmons (2002) was used to measure levels of gratitude. It has adequate internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.76 -0.87), discriminant validity of 0.31- 0.53 with related constructs and convergent validity with peer reports of dispositional gratitude. The maximum score on the scale is 42 and the minimum score is 07. The higher the score, the higher the level of gratitude.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) developed by Thompson, Snyder, and Hoffman (2005) was used to measure levels of forgiveness. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.72 -0.87) and test-retest reliability were in the range of 0.68 - 0.77. The score range is from 18 to 126, higher score indicates higher levels of forgiveness.

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) developed by Argyle and Hills (2002) was used to measure levels of happiness. It has 29 items and follows a six-point Likert scale. The scale has adequate internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach alpha 0.81) and the content validity. It is a well-known scale used in empirical research all over the world.

Procedure:

The study used a survey method. Permission was obtained from heads of the selected colleges in goa and the tools of the study in print form were distributed to students who volunteered to participate in the study. Informed consent was taken, and the purpose of the study was explained. The participants responded to the survey in the classroom during lecture hours. After completion, the participants were thanked for their participation.

Data Analysis:

Pearson Product Moment Method, Regression, and t-test analysis were used.

Results and Discussion

The results obtained after data analysis are presented in tables and explained under each subhead as follows:

Correlations among Gratitude, Forgiveness and Happiness.

Table 1. indicates Pearson Product Moment correlation coefficients.

Variables	r
Gratitude & Happiness	0.55**
Gratitude & Forgiveness	0.37**
Forgiveness & Happiness	0.49**

**Correlation is significant at 0.01 level of significance (2 tailed).

It can be observed that correlations among the study constructs are positive and significant. This shows us that the relationship between the two variables increase exponentially with each other among the participants of the study. Hence, gratitude, forgiveness and happiness are closely and significantly interconnected with each other. Comparable results were observed in India by Kumar & Dixit (2014) among research scholars, Rajan & Veena (2012) among high school students, in Michigan by Witvliet et al (2018) among college students. This study also confirms the interconnections between the study constructs providing societal implications for enhanced harmony and stability, moral imperatives of a caring humankind and a socializing value structure of child rearing practices incorporating training in gratitude and forgiveness. Cultivating gratitude and forgiveness and capitalizing on these strengths has the potential to boost happiness. Practising forgiveness and gratitude could be interventions analogous to psychotherapy, intended to promote a positive life.

Gratitude and forgiveness as predictors of happiness.

Table 02. indicates the Regression model summary.

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error
0.634	0.402	0.396	15.198

It is observed in table 02, that the regression model predicts a relationship between gratitude and forgiveness with happiness, explaining 39.6% of the variance (Adjusted R² = 0.396).

Model	B	SE	Std. Coefficient B	t	p
Constant	21.014	8.680	-	2.421	0.016
Gratitude	1.661	0.229	0.430	7.263	0.00
Forgiveness	0.545	0.097	0.334	5.630	0.00

Table 03. Indicates Mean, SD, t-test, and significance.

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t value	df.	Sig,
Gratitude	Males	94	31.17	4.64	2.193	198	0.05
	Females	106	34.17	5.33			
Forgiveness	Males	94	83.06	12.08	0.748	198	NS
	Females	106	81.79	11.88			
Happiness	Males	94	117.77	19.03	0.897	198	NS
	Females	106	120.25	20.03			

Gratitude makes the biggest contribution to happiness ($\beta = 0.430$ $p= 0.00$) followed by forgiveness ($\beta = 0.334$ $p=0.00$). Both are significantly powerful predictors of happiness. A study by Triantoro and Safaria (2015) found gratitude to be an important contributor to happiness, but forgiveness had no significant relationship to happiness. Another study by Sapmaz et al. (2015) found that gratitude and forgiveness were positively correlated but only one dimension of forgiveness – forgiveness of situations, predicted happiness. Using a quantitative approach Shkēmbi et al. (2022) found that gratitude related intervention had an impact on happiness. In collectivistic cultures like India, gratitude and forgiveness are considered as important virtues to achieve social harmony. Forgiveness is considered as a repair mechanism for the inevitable conflicts that occur in relationships. Often expressing gratitude or thankfulness is an easy task as compared to forgiveness. Replacing anger and vengeance with mercy towards the transgressor involves an ego struggle and is a difficult challenge. Hence forgiveness is considered as Divine - an act that requires compassion, love and other perspective taking. Nonetheless, it is important to note that both gratitude and forgiveness contribute largely to happiness. Learning to cultivate habits of expressing gratitude towards others, self, the creator, and nature are significant steps towards

a happy life. Similarly, training the ego to let go and show mercy, love and understanding has the potential to heal relationships and create a social environment of care and concern leading to humanness in action. Happiness levels may be raised by rewiring our brains to consciously practice gratitude related activities like appreciating yourself and counting your blessings, keeping a gratitude journal, engaging in gratitude visits, and keeping a gratitude buddy. Similarly, one can cultivate the habit of forgiving by using the REACH Method developed by E. Worthington which involves recall, empathy, altruistic gift, commitment and holding elements. Forgiveness is a choice, and its practice has the potential to free the wounded self and respond positively to transgression by offering mercy instead of vengeance. Forgiveness is the flipside of gratitude.

Gender differences on Gratitude, Forgiveness and Happiness.

It is observed that the mean score of the male participants is higher on Forgiveness whereas the mean score of female participants is higher on gratitude and happiness. The t-test value reveals a statistically significant difference as a function of gender on the construct of gratitude ($t = 2.193$, $df 198$, $p < 0,05$) but gender differences on forgiveness and happiness are not significant. This indicates that females

are higher on expressions of thankfulness as compared to males. Contrary to the present findings, Singh and Megha (2022) found no significant differences on gratitude in a sample of older adults. Similarly, studies on small samples found mixed results. Since Indian culture fosters a collectivistic perspective in society, the higher levels of gratitude among female participants of the study may be attributed to socialization practices that encourage thankfulness more in female population as compared to male population. Being humble and expressing gratefulness is also considered as a part of femininity and a moralistic imperative. The study results open a space for training in gratitude practices for male students that will be helpful in enhancing their levels of happiness and contribute to positive mental health and improved interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

Within the limitations of this study, it can be concluded that gratitude, forgiveness, and happiness show positive and significant interconnections. Further, Gratitude and forgiveness are significant predictors of happiness with gratitude contributing more to higher levels of happiness as compared to forgiveness. Significant gender differences are observed on gratitude scores highlighting that female participants show higher levels of gratitude as compared to male participants in the study. No significant gender differences were observed on forgiveness and happiness.

Implications:

In the Indian collectivistic culture, gratitude and forgiveness are viewed as prized human propensities valued in all religions. Cultivating gratitude and forgiveness habits among college students as a part of their study curriculum can be viewed as an excellent opportunity to retain humanness and cultural uniqueness of India.

Societal implications of gratitude and forgiveness in promoting social harmony can play a crucial role in helping groups of people live together with greater stability and interpersonal accord.

Child rearing practices that focus on cultivation of gratitude and forgiveness at early

life can create habits of thankfulness and mercy leading to higher levels of happiness.

Engaging in regular acts of gratitude and forgiveness helps to enhance social relationships and repair relationships that are ruptured due to transgressions. This makes the acts a moral imperative to societal healthy living. Ripple effects in the recipient may be considered as a major highlight for a contagious exchange and communication of thankfulness and mercy.

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