

Gratitude and Forgiveness as Predictors of Subjective Well-Being Among Young Adults in Pakistan

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The present study was aimed to explore the impact of gratitude and forgiveness in predicting subjective well-being in young adults. The sample for the study included 300 participants between the ages of 18 and 24 years who were conveniently selected from a university in Karachi city. Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002), Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005) and Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) were used as the measures to collect data. Multiple linear regression analysis revealed gratitude to be nonsignificant predictor of subjective well-being, whereas, forgiveness was found to be a significant predictor of subjective well-being. Further, weak positive relation of gratitude with subjective well-being ($r = .14$), and forgiveness with subjective well-being ($r = .34$) has been found. However, the explanatory power of this model was revealed to be significant ($R^2 = .12$), suggesting that the variables share an important association which needs further extensive study. This study implies that forgiveness and gratitude may be effectively used in psychotherapy and substantially integrated in general counselling for young adult clients.

Keywords. Gratitude; forgiveness; subjective well-being ; young adults; Pakistan

The general perception of one's life as purposeful, worthy and valuable with experiences of joy, contentment, or positive well-being is characterized as subjective well-being (Bono & McCullough, 2006). The significance of subjective well-being has been a topic of

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The earlier version of this article has been presented in the 7th International conference titled "Positive Psychology: Developing A Flourishing Community" (November 29-30, 2018) organized by National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

discussion from the early era of Greeks and keeps on receiving due consideration today in a variety of disciplines. In spite of the fact that the term “happiness” is normally utilized, various other related terms for example, subjective well-being, personal satisfaction, life-fulfillment, are among others that define well-being (Park & Seligman, 2004). The conceptualization of happiness or subjective well-being in psychology is referred to mostly as “well-being”.

There are various methods for characterizing well-being. A portion of the prior definitions in psychology concentrated on well-being as a definitive objective of life. These definitions likewise were inclined towards the emotional aspect of well-being. Further, it was demonstrated that it was the fundamental congruence between positive and negative impacts which constructed the imperative segment of success. It has also been shown by research that among the significance of positive and negative influence, an independent aspect of well-being also exists (Sirgy & Pavot, 2006). The tripartite model of success has received much support, keeping in mind different conceptualizations of success that have been studied; few seem to have been as generally acknowledged. As per this research, subjective well-being is defined as “the respondent's self-perceived success in important areas such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism” (Diener. et al., 2010, p. 143).

It is a universally acknowledged fact that gratitude and forgiveness are traits in a human being that endear the possessor to all and sundry. Although, no two human beings possess these qualities in an equal measure, those gifted with these character strengths tend to display a healthier physical and psychological makeup. These are interpersonal strengths that generate psychological health through a consolidation of positive emotions, reflections, and adaptive social behaviors and relationships that facilitate well-being. Therefore, gratitude and forgiveness, studied as character strengths, separately from strengths, are a main focus for the psychologists (Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, & Fincham, 2010).

The definitions of gratitude have evolved over time. Initially, gratitude was defined as a tendency to perceive and respond, in the most positive outcomes and experiences, with content feelings for an individuals' altruism in a manner that one attains” but later, it was noted that extensive conceptualizations of Gratitude could be defined as “a state of mind, an ethical control, an emotion an adapting response or personality trait (Bartlett, 2006). Consistent to this, more extensive conceptualization was given by Emmons, McCullough, and Tsang (2003) as they explained that Gratitude incorporates segments of both cognitive and emotional factors. On the other hand, Watkins

(2004) concentrated on gratified traits and grateful trait responsible for inclination of a person towards experience of gratitude. Primarily, Watkin explains, that people with gratitude have a feeling of being fulfilled. Moreover, grateful people acknowledge the role of other people in contributing to their subjective well-being and they value the joys of life.

Gratitude has also been considered as a human strength by behavioral scientists. The inclination towards gratitude is often shown in response to help offered by another person or by any kind of aid offered to the individual (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). For the establishment of inner peace and for its attainment, gratitude is also considered to play a great part, as it is not necessary for the indebted individual to feel anything for the other person other than being grateful or thankful or even honored (Friedman, 2008).

Gratitude, in this study, has been considered as an emotional characteristic that is called “the grateful disposition”, which is defined here as “a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with thankful emotion on the roles of other people’s altruism through positive experiences and outcomes” (McCullough, 2004, p. 112).

Where gratitude ensures mental health by promising higher levels of positive emotions and optimism, Forgiveness ensures inner peace (Breen et al., 2010). The significance of forgiveness has been a topic of discussion in various disciplines such as theology, philosophy, and psychology. Forgiveness, generally, is considered as an act of taking no revenge over the mistake of others. According to Hall and Fincham (2005), the best feature of forgiveness is that the forgiver gives up the anger, bitterness and resentment to which he has a right and consequently offers the gift of consideration and kindness to which the offender has no right. Forgiveness was also described as a liberation of negative feelings towards someone or something that has transgressed against the individual (Thompson et al., 2005). Consequently, one’s social life is deeply influenced and one begins to feel more connected to society. Changes in perception, convictions, affects, in inner strength, decision making, sense of choice and goals, from biased opinions to clear vision and a change in the acknowledgement are discussed as the core characteristics defining forgiveness (Berry, 2005). From this perspective, forgiveness happens at the point when a man relinquishes emotionally supported judgments, grievances, assault contemplations and convictions towards themselves as well as other people with the goal that they can see integrity, worth, greatness, virtue, affection, and harmony in themselves and someone else at the same time.

An additional perspective of forgiveness is also that its procedure is initiated when an individual settles on a careful decision/choice to forgive (view things in an unexpected way) and hands over the accountability to a greater authority/Self (e.g., God). Amid this process, responsibilities are projected, claimed and discharged, replacing them with the feelings of peace and harmony (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). At the end of the day, forgiveness depends on believes of oneself as an apparent victim may be just as essential as convictions about how associations with the apparent transgressor must unfold later on (Bono & McCullough, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, Forgiveness is defined as “the framing of a perceived transgression such that one’s responses to the transgressor, transgression, and sequel of the transgression are transformed from negative to neutral or positive. The source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, may be oneself, another person or persons, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone’s control” (Thompson et al., 2005; p. 318;).

When gratitude and forgiveness ensure mental health, they become an indirect reason for physical well-being as well. Theories strengthen the idea that gratitude and forgiveness are associated with improved subjective well-being, and this association is likely mediated by cognitive affective changes (Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough, 2004; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Experiential and pragmatic work on gratitude, forgiveness, and success is increasing and mostly supports the conclusion that these variables are related (Bono & McCullough, 2006; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). Then again, it is interesting that gratitude and forgiveness have been caught under the broader terminology of positive psychology variables, as has well-being, yet moderately little research has been done with the focus on association between gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being resulting in literature gaps especially in terms of Asian and Pakistani researches. However, numerous research examinations have demonstrated that forgiveness and gratitude are negatively linked with harmful conditions, for example, anxiety and depression. Ultimately, with couple of special cases (Musick, & Everson, Toussaint, Williams, 2001; Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003; Emmons et al., 2003) most of the studies conducted concentrates on the potential of gratitude and forgiveness to keep the negative rather than increase the positive side of life. In addition, when positive well-being results are incorporated, they have had a tendency to be measured in exceptionally restricted ways.

A qualitative research found forgiveness to be significant in increasing life satisfaction and subjective well-being of adults from different professions in a Pakistani society (Gull & Rana, 2013). Another study (Ramzan & Rana, 2014) investigated the association of the variables of gratitude and well-being in a population of professors of a university in Lahore, Pakistan. The results showed significant understanding about the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being and supported the hypothesis that those who hold higher level of gratitude also have higher level of life satisfaction. Little to none research, however, can be found on examining the variables in a young adult population. It should also be noted that most research on gratitude and forgiveness have been done in western countries with mostly Christian populations.

The present study aimed to widen the research in this domain by empirically exploring the impact of gratitude and forgiveness in predicting subjective well-being among young adults in Pakistan. It also aimed to identify the relationship of gratitude and forgiveness with subjective well-being. Keeping in view the above mentioned literature, the present study will be based upon the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses

1. There will be a relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being of young adults.
2. There will be a relationship between forgiveness and subjective well-being of young adults.
3. Gratitude and forgiveness will predict subjective well-being in young adults.

Method

Participants

Based on convenient sampling, a total of 300 participants (100 males and 200 females) were included in the final sample for the present study. Their age was kept between 18 and 24 years, with at least intermediate as the required education level. Prior history of any psychological/psychiatric problem(s) was used as an exclusion criterion where those individuals with such history were not taken as part of the sample.

Measures

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005). Dispositional Forgiveness was measured by using The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). It is an 18 item self-report inventory, which measures the general predisposition of an individual to forgive. The HFS consists of the Total Forgiveness Score and three subscales scores (Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, and Forgiveness of Situations), each consisting of 6 items with 7 point Likert scale where 1 means „*Almost always false of me*’ and 7 „*Almost always true of me*“. Scores are calculated by adding across appropriate items. Items 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, and 17 are reverse scored. Scores for the Total Forgiveness are ranged from 18 to 126, and for each subscales from 6 to 42. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale has high acceptable reliability of $\alpha = .72, .87$ and convergent and discriminant validity with a number of relevant constructs for instance other measures of forgiveness, mental health, beliefs, etc. Cronbach’s alpha generated for the scale in the present study was .78.

Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010). Flourishing Scale (also previously known as Psychological Well-being scale), is an 8-item short summary scale that measure the respondent's self-perceived achievement in important areas like relationships, self-worth, perseverance, and positivity. Each item is answered on a 1-7 scale that ranges from *Strong Disagreement* to *Strong Agreement* with scores ranging from 8 to 56. Higher the scores, higher the respondents positive perception of themselves in various fields of life. The test has a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and a temporal stability over one month of .71. Cronbach’s alpha generated for the scale in the present study was .77.

Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002). The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ) is a concise, self-report scale of ones character to show gratitude; it usually takes 5 minutes to complete. The scale has 6 items which are rated from 1 to 7, 1 being „*strongly disagree*“ and 7 being „*strongly agree*’. To prevent response bias, two items are reverse scored. The total score is between 6 which can be the minimum score and 42, the maximum score. The GQ has strong internal reliability, with coefficient alpha ranging from .82 to .87. Cronbach’s alpha generated for the scale in the present study was .51.

Procedure

Permission was taken by the concerned authorities of the University for collecting data within university premises. Data were collected in a group setting. Participants were first introduced to the

study by the researcher and were briefed about all the benefits and risks involved. They were informed that their participation is completely voluntary. Once they agreed to participate in the study, the demographic information form was provided to them. Then they were presented with self-report questionnaires, each with its own set of instructions at the top of their respective sections. The questionnaires for the measured variables were presented in this order; Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005): Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010): Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002). Results obtained were analyzed using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) to test their statistical significance of the relationship between the variables.

Keeping in view the ethical implications for the participants, their anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed. The questionnaires took almost 30 minutes to be filled with the participants free to stop for a short break if they want to. Willingness to participate in the study was also taken in consideration. The participants were given ample information regarding the study so as to provide them with information regarding the aims and objectives of study without influencing their responses. They were also informed of the process through which they can access the results of the study and its completion if they so wished.

Results

In order to study the relationship between variables Pearson Product Moment Correlations and for prediction Multiple Linear Regression Analysis was done.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Gratitude Questionnaire, Subscale of Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Flourishing Scale for Subjective Well-Being (N= 300)

Measures	<i>k</i>	<i>α</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	Skew
Gratitude	06	.51	31.26	5.87	9	73	-.92
Forgiveness of Self	06	.52	27.01	5.10	10	42	.11
Forgiveness of Others	06	.60	26.89	5.84	9	42	-.25
Forgiveness of Situation	06	.55	25.98	5.30	6	42	-.02
Forgiveness	18	.78	79.88	11.45	42	117	.10
Subjective Well-being	08	.77	44.71	8.04	14	112	1.31

Table 1 represents the mean, standard deviation, minimum as well as maximum values of all three measures and their subscales, Gratitude, Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Others, Forgiveness of Situation, Forgiveness and Subjective Well-being among ($N = 300$) young adults in the sample frame. The data set is lightly positively skewed for the variable Subjective Well-being indicating that the data is clustered at the negative end.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of All Study Variables (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SW	-					
2. GR	.14*	-				
3. FoS	.26***	.18**	-			
4. FoO	.22***	.08	.27***	-		
5. FoSi	.23***	.13*	.23***	.22***	-	
6. FoGn	.34***	.18**	.69***	.73***	.68***	-

Note. SW= Subjective Well-being; GR= Gratitude; FoS=Forgiveness of Self; FoO= Forgiveness of Others; FoSi= Forgiveness of Situation; FoGn= Forgiveness.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2 shows the bivariate correlation matrix of all study variables. Gratitude has a weak yet significant positive relationship with Subjective Well-being, suggesting that an increase in levels of Gratitude increases Subjective Well-being. Forgiveness also demonstrates a weak positive relationship with Subjective Well-being. The magnitude of correlation ranges from .08 to .73.

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Showing Gratitude and Forgiveness as Determinant of Subjective Well-being (N = 300)

Variable	<i>Subjective Well-Being</i>			
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Gratitude	.11	.08	1.55	.12
Forgiveness	.22	.32	5.88	.01***
F	20.98			
R ²	.12			
ΔR^2	.11			

*** $p < .00$.

Table 3 demonstrates that a unit change in the predictor variable of Forgiveness leads to a significant change in criterion variable of Subjective Well-being. The explanatory power of this model is

revealed to be significant ($R^2 = .12$), suggesting that the variables share an important association. Variables showed a significant amount of variance $F(2, 297) = 20.98, p < .001$. Results indicate that gratitude is not a significant predictor of subjective well-being ($\beta = .08, t = 1.55, p = < .12$) whereas Forgiveness is a significant predictor of subjective well-being ($\beta = .32, t = 5.88, p < .001$).

Discussion

This research aimed to quantitatively analyze the relationship of Gratitude and Forgiveness with Subjective Well-being as well as determining the effectiveness of the two variables in predicting Subjective well-being. The first hypothesis of the study was supported with statistically significant results, empirically establishing that an increase in gratitude leads to an increase in subjective well-being. The support for this hypothesis is shown in the Bivariate results in Table 2. Association of gratitude and subjective well-being was statistically significant and consistent with previous studies (Emmons & McCullough 2003; McCullough et al., 2002; Safaria, 2014). The results suggest that an increase in the levels of gratitude would significantly increase the levels of subjective well-being. Keeping in view the cultural and religious upbringing in Pakistan, this result seems credible, as an overview of the demographic information of the present research sample showed that out of the 300 participants, 297 were Muslim.

Recent studies have also shown that religiousness is deeply interconnected with aspects of positive psychology. A research which established Muslim Experiential Religiousness as an effective index of Muslim spirituality by showing its positive correlation with the dimensions of Meaning in Life and with the Life Satisfaction and Mood Level elements of General Well-Being (Khan et al., 2015). Since being grateful to everything that God gives you is one of the core teachings of Islam (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), these teachings can be attributed to our research findings. Also a collectivist cultural background in Pakistan can relate to the research findings. Since youth is the time when one needs the most social support owing to the crucial stage of life one is going through at that time, strong social and family support might also increase levels of well-being. In a recent study, 427 undergraduate pupils from China were rated on the 3 scales (Gratitude Questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale). Investigation of the results showed that social support was observed to highly influence the relationship among

variables of Gratitude and subjective well-being. The distinguished model additionally uncovered a critical approach by Gratitude through social support and subjective well-being (Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2015).

A significant relationship between forgiveness and subjective well-being of young adults was also verified in light of the present results. A statistically significant relationship was seen between forgiveness and subjective well-being indicating that an increase in levels of forgiveness led to an increase in subjective well-being. Associations between forgiveness and well-being was also consistent with previous work done on the variables (Maltby & Barber, 2005; Sastre & Mullet, 2003).

Forgiveness is an important inter as well as intra-personal asset of a psychologically healthy individual. Young adults in Pakistan mostly live with their parents, siblings, in-laws or often in joint family systems where harmonious relationships are attributed to the ability to forgive transgressions by others, whether major or minor. Several researchers have found that people are inclined to be more forgiving towards close relatives, than transgressors which are not closely related. Path-analytic evidence showed that not only does forgiveness come easily in close relations but that it actually facilitates the restoration of relational closeness following a transgression. Thus, people who forgive their transgressors are more likely to restore positive relations with them; in comparison, people who cannot forgive those who hurt them probably exhaust their relationships at a much quicker rate (McCullough et al., 1998). This also signifies the value of forgiveness in a Pakistani culture. Because the lack of positive, supportive relationships have been linked to nearly every psychological and physical malaise from suicide to immunosuppressant, forgiveness could also be associated with general well-being because of its quality of retaining and maintaining stable and supportive interpersonal affiliations.

The religious teachings which prevail in Pakistani society also teach people to be forgiving towards others as God is forgiving towards them. Both Islam and Christianity, which are the major religions of the society, preach forgiveness in order to live a harmonious and peaceful life. These teachings are inculcated in children from childhood and greatly influence youth. But as youth is a time of high and low tides, the individuals might face circumstances where forgiveness is not an option for them. This might explain why a weak relationship was seen in the research results.

The assessment of the effectiveness of Gratitude and Forgiveness as predictors for subjective well-being in young adults showed

gratitude to be insignificant but forgiveness to be significant in predicting subjective well-being (Table 3). These results confirm past results where researchers found that forgiveness is important in predicting well-being. In 2007, Worthington and his colleagues also found forgiveness to be positively related with well-being. In 2001, Witvliet, Ludwig and Vanderlin found forgiveness to be essential in decreasing negative feelings, diminishing stress and in improvement of physical health. In their study, emotional forgiveness seemed to swap negative feelings with positive feelings and also seemed to affect the physical health, bringing encouraging effects on person's fitness and well-being.

Gratitude, however, was established to be insignificant in predicting well-being. This result contradicts several previous studies (Froh, Yurkewicz, & Kashdan, 2009; Sapmaz, Yıldırım, Topçuoğlu, Nalbant, & Sızır, 2015; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009) which showed a positive effect of gratitude in improvement of well-being .

Conclusion

An analysis of variables, results and discussion warrants a conclusion that neatly sums up the objective and findings of this research. Gratitude and forgiveness are among those facets of positive psychology which are being studied in Pakistan and thus this research presents new insights for research by providing empirical support for its incidence in Pakistani society. The findings show that gratitude and forgiveness are significantly linked to subjective well-being among young adults. Forgiveness was also found to be a significant predictor of well-being whereas gratitude contradicted previous findings of being an effective predictor, making it imperative to further study the variables to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of working of these variables.

Limitations

Following limitations should be kept in mind when understanding the results of this research. Restrictions can be posed on the generalizability of the findings given that only undergraduate students were recruited as participants for the study. The use of self-report measures might also have caused some social desirability bias in the data. Also, causal inference cannot be established between the variables due to the cross sectional nature of the study.

Recommendations

Future studies can take an experimental approach of research which can differentially examine the effects of the given variables. Other methodologies can also be explored which can help establish a causal relationship of gratitude and forgiveness with subjective well-being. Researches should be done on Asian cultures and various religions and questionnaires should be developed in accordance with the culture/religion to ensure valid information gathered for further studies. It is also suggested for further researches to study, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, the differential effects of these and other positive psychology variables on domains of subjective well-being as well as gender differences on the variables of gratitude and forgiveness.

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Received 09 January 2019

Revision received 21 May 2020