



Gratitude, Forgiveness and Subjective-well-being among college going students

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Abstract

Background: Gratitude is held in high esteem by virtually everyone, at all times, in all places. From ancient religious scriptures through modern social science research, gratitude is advanced as a desirable human characteristic with the capacity for making life better for oneself and for others. Though gratitude is associated with pleasantness and highly desirable life outcomes, it is certainly not an easy or automatic response to life situations. Forgiveness is a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender. Most scholars view this an intentional and voluntary process, driven by a deliberate decision to forgive. This process results in decreased motivation to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender despite their actions, and requires letting go of negative emotions toward the offender. Subjective well-being can be defined as quality of an individual's life with regard to both the presence and relative frequency of positive and negative emotions over time and one's overall satisfaction with life. The emergence of positive psychology in the 1990s has brought a paradigm shift in understanding human behavior from human weaknesses and ailments to human strengths and resources. This paradigm has implications not only in physical but also in behavioral and emotional health in terms of speedy recovery, prevention and promotion of health. Purpose: The aim of the present study was to examine gratitude,

forgiveness and subjective well-being among college going students. Methods: The main objectives of the current study were to (i) Examine gratitude among college going students (ii) Examine forgiveness among college going students (iii) Examine subjective well-being among college going students (iv) Examine the gender differences in the mentioned variables and (v) Examine relationships among the mentioned variables. A sample of 219 college going students were taken for the current study after having taken written informed consent from them using convenience sampling from one of the private universities at Jaipur City. The mean age of the sample was 24 years with SD of 2.31. The number of boys was 131 and the number of girls was 88. The measures used were Gratitude Questionnaire-6 Item version (GQ-6, Emmons & McCullough, 2003), Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Scale-18 Item Form (TRIM-18, McCullough, Root & Cohen, 2006) and Subjective Well-being scale (Diener, 1985). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics like mean, SD, inferential statistics like independent "t" test was used to examine gender differences and correlational analysis was used to examine the relationships among the variables. Results: The findings of the current study indicated significant differences in boys and girls on the measures of gratitude and forgiveness. Girls scored higher on these two measures from which it can be inferred that they are more forgiving and having more gratitude than that of boys. However,

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significant gender difference was not found on the measure of subjective well-being. In terms of the association among these variables, no significant association/correlation was found among gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being in a group as a whole. Conclusions: The study highlights the importance of exploring possible factors for gender differences that have emerged in the current study. Incorporating positive psychology constructs like gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being have implications for health enhancements.

Key words: Gratitude, forgiveness; subjective well-being

INTRODUCTION

Gratitude is held in high esteem by virtually everyone, at all times, in all places. From ancient religious scriptures through modern social science research, gratitude is advanced as a desirable human characteristic with the capacity for making life better for oneself and for others. Though gratitude is associated with pleasantness and highly desirable life outcomes, it is certainly not an easy or automatic response to life situations. Resentment and entitlement often seem to come naturally. Gratitude is typically described by researchers as the state that follows after a desired benefit is received from another person who is perceived as intentionally giving the benefit [1]. This type of interpersonal transfer of a benefit from a beneficiary to a benefactor is being called as *benefit-triggered gratitude*. In addition to this traditional type of benefit-triggered gratitude, a broader type of gratitude has been identified that includes being grateful for all sorts of gifts in life, including the presence of cherished others in one's life (rather than for particular benefits conferred by those others). It is being called as *generalized gratitude* and defined it as an "emotion or state resulting from a having an awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself". Gratitude has been no less of a challenge than forgiveness to define. Disposition toward gratitude is defined as "as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains" [2]. Later, [3] noted broader conceptualizations of gratitude as "an

emotion, an attitude, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, or a coping response". They posit that gratitude has both cognitive and emotional components. Gratitude was defined as being thankful for: (a) people, situations, and circumstances in life, (b) what you have received, experienced, and learned, (c) spiritual source/resources within, (d) abundance within, (e) what you give and forgive, (f) your inner qualities, and (g) future positive experiences, prosperity, and blessings.[4] [5].

Gratitude is the appreciation experienced by individuals when somebody does something kind or helpful for them. It has been defined more specifically as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift is a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty. Gratitude is also conceptualized as an emotional trait, mood or emotion. Researchers [6] proposed that gratitude serves three moral functions. It serves as a *moral barometer* for beneficiaries by signalling the value of the relationship with the benefactor for the gift bestowed upon them; as a *moral reinforcer* by increasing the probability that the benefactor will bestow gifts again in the future and as a *moral motive* by spurring beneficiaries to respond prosocially toward the benefactor or toward other people.

Forgiveness is a process (or the result of a process) that involves a change in emotion and attitude regarding an offender. Most scholars view this an intentional and voluntary process, driven by a deliberate decision to forgive. This process results in decreased motivation to retaliate or maintain estrangement from an offender despite their actions, and requires letting go of negative emotions toward the offender. Seeking revenge also is so basic that some [7] recently posited it to be one of 15 fundamental human motivations. The tendency to retaliate or seek retribution after being insulted or victimized is deeply ingrained in the biological, psychological, and cultural levels of human nature. People have devised a variety of potential solutions to the corrosive effects of interpersonal transgressions [8]. One mechanism that can interrupt the cyclical nature of avoidance and vengeance is forgiveness, an approach whereby people quell their natural negative responses to transgressors and become



increasingly motivated to enact positive ones instead.

Seven criteria was used for defining forgiveness [9,10]: (a) a shift in perception and vision, (b) a shift in beliefs and attitudes, (c) a shift in affects, (d) a shift in self-empowerment and self-responsibility, (e) a shift in choice, decision and intention, (f) a shift from duality consciousness to oneness consciousness, and (g) a shift in the recognition of the core qualities of a person. From this perspective forgiveness occurs when a person lets go of emotionally backed judgments, grievances, attack thoughts and beliefs toward themselves and others so that they can perceive the goodness, worth, magnificence, innocence, love, and peace in both themselves and another person simultaneously.

Some consensus has emerged about what does not constitute forgiveness [11]. Some investigators [12] have distinguished forgiveness from similar activities such as pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying, and the distinctions inherent in their definitions are generally accepted. Forgiveness was defined as [13]: a motivation to reduce avoidance of and withdrawal from a person who has hurt us, as well as the anger, desire for revenge, and urge to retaliate against that person. Forgiveness also increases the pursuit of conciliation toward that person if moral norms can be re-established that are as good as, or even better than, they were before the hurt.

The meaning of happiness has been a topic of discussion since the time of the ancient Greeks and continues to receive a good deal of attention today in a variety of disciplines. Though the term "happiness" is commonly used so are a number of other related terms such as: "well-being," "subjective well-being," "quality of life," "life-satisfaction," among others. Our conceptualization of well-being lies close to the notion of "subjective wellbeing" frequently discussed in psychology and we refer to it generally as "well-being." There are a number of ways of defining well-being. Some of the earlier definitions in psychology and sociology focused on well-being as the ultimate goal of life [14]. These definitions also tended to focus on the affective nature of wellbeing, and Bradburn is often credited for initially demonstrating the relative independence of positive and negative

affect in a general population sample. He further showed that it was the critical balance between positive and negative affect that was an important component of well-being. Research has also shown that in addition to the importance of positive and negative affect, an independent aspect of well-being is cognitive evaluations. This tripartite model of well-being has enjoyed much support and popularity, and while other conceptualizations of well-being have also been considered [15, 16, 17] has been as widely accepted. Subjective well-being can also be defined in terms of general emotional functioning which is conceptualized within the construct of subjective well-being having high positive affect, low negative affect and high satisfaction with life. Subjective well-being can be defined as quality of an individual's life with regard to both the presence and relative frequency of positive and negative emotions over time and one's overall satisfaction with life [18]. Subjective well-being/ life satisfaction tends to be stable over time and is strongly related to personality traits. One of the researchers [19] has argued that changing one's external circumstances has a temporary effect on life satisfaction but engaging in physical or mental activities that enhances life satisfaction can lead to lasting improvements in satisfaction in life.

Methodology

Aim The aim of the present study was to examine Gratitude, Forgiveness and Subjective well-being among college going students.

Objectives

1. To examine the following in a sample of college going students:
 - (i) Gratitude among them.
 - (ii) Forgiveness among them.
 - (iii) Subjective well-being among them.
2. To examine gender differences in the above-mentioned variables.
3. To examine interrelationships among the above- mentioned variables.

Sample

The sample consisted of 219 college going students from one of the Private Universities of



Jaipur City. Of the total sample 131 were boys and 88 were girls. The mean age of the sample was 24 years and the SD was 2.31. The students were taken from different courses (Management, Engineering and Law) of the University employing convenience sampling approach. 95 students belonged to the Management, 69 belonged to Engineering and 55 belonged to Law course. Permission from the University administration and written informed consent was taken from all students. Data were taken in a group.

Measures administered

- 1) **Socio Demographic Data Sheet.** It was developed by the investigator indicating subject's sociodemographic variables like name, age, gender, course and year of study.
- 2) **Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6)** [20] It is a 6 item seven point rating scale in which the subjects have to respond as "strongly disagree", "disagree", "slightly disagree", "neutral", "slightly agree", "agree" and "strongly agree" and the scoring being 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 respectively. For the negatively cued items (item3 & 6), the scoring is reversed. The higher the score, the higher the gratitude.
- 3) **Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale--12-Item Form (TRIM-18)**, [21]. It is a 18 item five point rating scale in which the subjects have to respond as "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree" and "strongly agree" and the scoring being 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 respectively. The three dimensions of forgiveness namely avoidance motivation, revenge motivation and benevolence motivation will be tapped by the scale.
- 4) **Subjective well-being scale SWB**, [22]. The subjective well-being of the students will be assessed with the help of Satisfaction with Life Scale by Diener. It is a 5 item scale with seven point rating consisting of five global statements about life satisfaction. The subjects have to respond as "strongly disagree", "disagree", "slightly disagree", "neither agree nor disagree", "slightly agree", "agree" and "strongly agree" and the scoring being 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 7 respectively. Thus, the minimum score is 5 and the maximum score is 35. The score above 21 on this scale indicates above average satisfaction with life.

Analysis of data The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics like mean, SD, inferential

statistics like independent "t" test was used to examine gender differences and correlational analysis was used to examine the relationships among the variables.

Results & Discussion

Table 1 (a): Distribution of students according to course

Sl. No.	Class	Students	
		Frequency	Percent
1	Management	95	43.37 %
2	Engineering	69	31.50 %
3	Law	55	25.11 %
	Total	219	100%

Table 1 (b) Distribution of students according to gender

Sl. No.	Gender	Students	
		Frequency	Percent
1	Boys	131	59.81 %
2	Girls	88	40.18 %
	Total	219	100.0%

Table1(c): Mean, SD, t-value of Gratitude in boys and girls

S.No	Mean	SD	t
Boys (N=131)	22.34	6.54	2.92**
Girls (N=88)	25.27	9.60	

** Significant at 0.01 level (p < 0.05)

As shown in table no 1 (c), when boys and girls are compared on the measure of Gratitude,



t- value (2.92) has been found to be significant. It is, therefore, inferred from this that boys and girls differ on the measure of Gratitude. The mean score of girls is more than that of boys indicating thereby that girls are having more gratitude than boys.

Consisting findings found that women experience and express more gratitude than men [23,24,25]. The similar findings were obtained by other researchers [26]. The current study also found the same results. Similar findings were obtained by others [27] in their study on gratitude and subjective well-being in a group of 812 adolescents at Gauteng City of South Africa. Gender differences in the prevalence of gratitude arise from differences in the way men and women appraise gratitude-inducing events. The experience of gratitude is preceded by favorable appraisals regarding the value of the aid received, the cost incurred to the benefactor and the motivation behind the benefactor’s actions.

Women, in comparison to men, were found to appraise benevolent actions from external sources as a more positive event, thus experiences more gratitude [28]. Another plausible socio cultural explanation of why women seem more receptive to grateful feelings than men is that women and men are socialized differently and possess different values. In many cultures, women are expected to express certain emotions more frequently compared with men and this expectation is more imperative for intense positive emotions. Some researchers [29] argue that women are expected to understand and improve their relationships, be tolerant and act in a benevolent way toward other people. Such cultural expectations might also be one of the reasons why women report more gratitude than men.

Table 1 (d): Mean, SD, t-value of Forgiveness in boys and girls

S.No	Mean	SD	t
Boys (N=131)	46.65	17.92	11.54**
Girls (N=88)	58.19	20.70	

** Significant at 0.01 level (p < 0.05)

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As shown in table no 1 (d), when boys and girls are compared on the measure of Forgiveness, t- value (11.54) has been found to be significant. It is, therefore, inferred from this that boys and girls differ on the measure of Forgiveness. The mean score of girls is more than that of boys indicating thereby that girls are having more forgiveness than boys.

The results of the current study are consistent with some other research done in this area. The results revealed that girls were more forgiving than boys. The researchers [30] examined forgiveness as a multidimensional, inter-relational variable that may have differential associations with depression in women and men in sample of 1,423 adults, ages 18 years and older. The results indicated that women reported higher levels of forgiveness than men. Women tend to score higher than men on the measures of forgiveness [31]. The possible reasons of this are the differences in socialization practices with respect to gender. Most cultures encourage men to suppress most emotions except anger and women are expected to respond to offenses with compassion, understanding and empathy. These differential gender based socialization might develop a cognitive set among women to be nurturing and forgiving.

There have been mixed results, however. In a community based study on 311 couples found that men reported greater forgiveness than their female counterparts [32]. Reviewing the literature on forgiveness in group interventions showed that women are no more likely to forgive more than men. Meta-analysis was done with 53 articles reporting 70 studies that addressed gender and forgiveness. The mean d was 0.28 indicating that females are more forgiving than males [33]. These inconsistent findings can be because of various factors like differences in methodology and the scale used to measure the construct of forgiveness. The construct of forgiveness is understood differently in different cultures. So, there is a strong need to develop indigenous scales to understand the various psychological constructs before reaching a final conclusion.

Table 1 (e): Mean, SD, t-value of Subjective well-being in boys and girls

S.No	Mean	SD	t
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Boys (N=131)	21.47	6.51	0.70
Girls (N=88)	20.76	7.47	

As shown in table no 1 (e), when boys and girls are compared on the measure of Forgiveness, t- value (0.70) has been found to be insignificant. It is inferred from that gender differences are not found on the measure of Subjective well-being.

The studies on subjective well-being in relation to gender show mixed results. Investigators [34] examined physician and self-ratings of health, neuroticism and subjective well-being in a group of men and women. They found that men and women do not differ on the measure of subjective well-being. The findings of the current research are consistent with this study. There have been studies in which women reported poor subjective well-being as they report more negative emotions than men[35,36]. There are two models which attempted to explain these differences. One is biological model which posits that women are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression because of estrogens and progesterone hormones [37]. Hence their subjective well-being is relatively low compared to men. Another model which explains this difference is socio-cultural paradigm. Powerlessness, lack of access to resources that pervade women’s life, gender inequity, imbalance of power structure often leads to poor subjective well-being of women [38,39]. Some studies showed that women report more positive affect and subjective well-being [40]. Investigators[41] in their review article reported that women report greater happiness and subjective well-being than men in most of the review studies.

Gender –differentiated prior experiences cause men and women to have somewhat different skills and attitude which in conjunction with gender roles, cause sex differences in social behavior and emotions. Social enactment as expectations of the society might lead women to experience and express more of positive emotions including reporting higher subjective well-being.[42] These disparities in the findings could be because of differences in measurements

and understanding of the construct like well-being in different ways across cultures. Anthropological and cross-cultural psychology is expected to help researchers to reach on final conclusion regarding gender differences in subjective well-being. The interdisciplinary approach needs to be followed in future research to reach on final conclusion in this domain of research.

Intero relations among the variables

Table 1 (f): Correlations among Gratitude, Forgiveness and Subjective well-being

	Gratitud e	Forgivenes s	Subjectiv e well- being
Gratitude	1	+0..30	+0.45
Forgivenes s	-	1	+0.86
Subjective well-being	-	-	1

Correlational analysis among the variables as shown in Table 1(f) showed that the correlation between gratitude and subjective well-being, correlation between forgiveness and subjective well-being and the correlation between gratitude and forgiveness have been found to be insignificant. Though the relationships among all these variables are found to be positive, yet it does not make any meaning because these are not to be found significant. The possible factors for this result might be the specific demographic characteristics of the sample. The further investigation needs to be done to explore the possible reasons of this result.

Conceptually, gratitude and forgiveness have been positively associated with subjective well-being. The link between gratitude and subjective well-being was examined in a sample of adults and found positive correlation between them[47]. Researchers also found in their population of psychotherapy clients that there were statistically significant, large correlations between gratitude and measures of well-being most correlations ranged from 0.51 to 0.69[42].



Studies have examined associations between forgiveness and negative affective states, as well as positive outcomes such as life satisfaction, quality of life and well-being. In a national probability sample of 1,423 US adults, that forgiving oneself and others was negatively related to psychological distress and positively related to subjective well-being. Forgiving others was negatively related to depressive affect, depressive somatic symptoms and death anxiety and positively related to life satisfaction in older adults. Research findings consistently found out that forgiveness is positively associated with well-being quality of life, life satisfaction, gratitude, optimism, hope, trust, self-worth and positive beliefs and affects; and negatively associated with emotional distress and negative affective states such as depression, anger, vengeance, anxiety, somatic symptoms, guilt and vulnerability.

The research on the relationship between gratitude and forgiveness is limited. However, in recent years empirical work on these two variables have gain momentum. He [42] found in his psychotherapy population a substantial correlation (ranging from 0.53 to 0.66) between the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) total score and 3 measures of gratitude (GQ6, GRATS-R and GRATS-Sh).

The current study did not show any significant correlation among these measures. Though, the association among them have been found to be positive, yet there do not throw much light on the possible link among them because statistically they are not significant. It is a question of significant concern why the current study did not show any correlation among gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being. There could multiple factors that might have resulted this. There are a number of factors that may influence the measurement of and associations between gratitude, forgiveness and well-being. The possible contributing factors might be population being measured, socio-cultural variables, age and socioeconomic status. In addition, though forgiveness and gratitude may contribute unique variance to levels of well-being they may also be related to a larger construct related to beliefs/attitudes or affects. These variables of belief/attitudes and affect (which themselves tend to be highly correlated) may then be higher order constructs that at least

partially subsume constructs of forgiveness and gratitude. Another significant factor that might contribute to this is the person doing the rating. Most measures of gratitude and forgiveness are self-report measures. Researchers [41,42] used others rating of gratitude giving behaviour of the respondents. Frequent observer ratings by different people (spouses, parents, siblings, friends, employers, employees etc.) would be a significant contribution for understanding these variables. In addition behavioural observations of people in situations where they have the opportunity to forgive or be grateful would be very beneficial whenever possible. The figure 1 connects forgiveness variable with positive and negative affective states like gratitude, well-being, psychological distress etc.

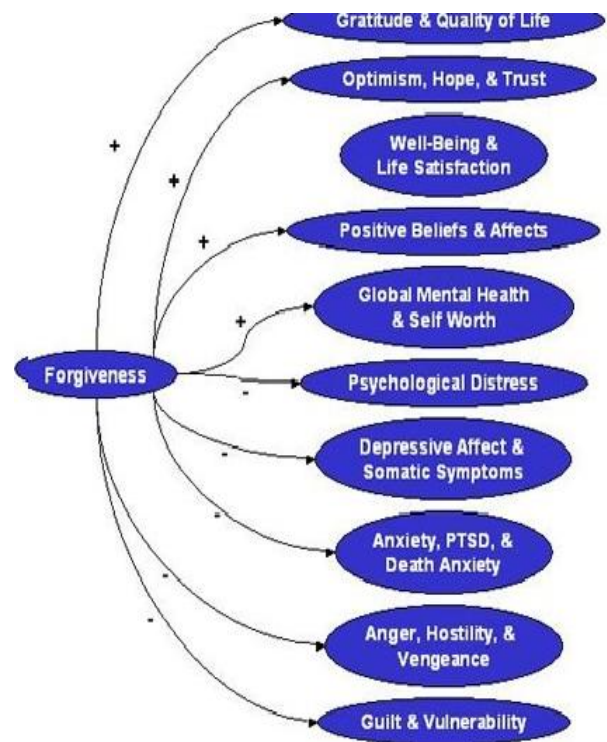


Figure 1. Conceptual model of relationships (+/-) between forgiveness and negative affective states and well-being

Figure 2 describes the link between gratitude and positive and negative psychological states like depression, psychological distress, happiness, well-being etc.

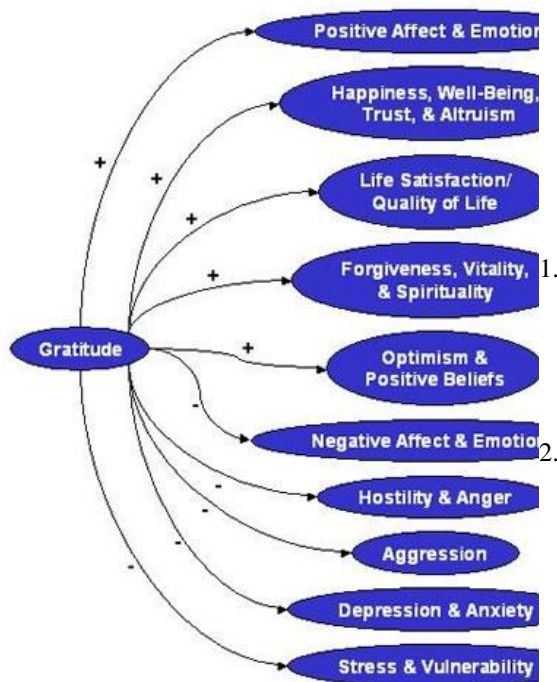


Figure 2. Conceptual model of relationships (+/-) between gratitude and negative affective states and well-being

Conclusions, Implications and Future Directions

From the current study it can be concluded that:

1. Significant gender differences emerged on the measures of gratitude and forgiveness. Girls seemed to have higher gratitude and forgiveness than boys. No significant gender differences were found on the measure of subjective well-being.
2. The correlations among gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being have been found to be positive. Since all these correlations are insignificant, the relationships among these three variables in the current study need to be with caution.
3. There is a strong need to develop interventions which can incorporate positive psychology constructs like gratitude and forgiveness in psychotherapeutic packages that will not only speed up the recovery process but also enhance emotional well-being.
4. Culture specific and indigenous scales of gratitude, forgiveness and similar constructs need to be developed to have a better understand of these variables.
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