

An Additive Impact of Relationship between Gratitude and Forgiveness: A Review

Bani Narula^{1*}

ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to study gratitude and forgiveness in unison in order to better understand their conceptual links and to confirm the query that how might combining two or more strengths produce additive effects in the pursuit of well-being and happiness in one's life. Most importantly, the population for whom a strengths-based approach seems particularly invaluable is adolescents, who are at a critical development stage of making key choices about their future. Hence, identifying gratitude and forgiveness as a complete 'package' during this stage of life will equip adolescents with both intrapersonal and interpersonal resources which would aid at facilitating adaptive negotiations of the complex adult world.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Forgiveness, Adolescents, Well-Being, Happiness*

Character strengths have a prominent position because the meaning of a happy and a well lived life is strongly connected to human virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It makes sense to include gratitude and forgiveness in the scientific pursuit of adolescent's development precisely because it helps build personal resources for ensuring happiness, well-being, social integration and generativity as they are at a crucial stage in their life where social identity and belonging go hand in hand (Froh & Bono, in press). Character strengths in adolescents have been also associated with desirable outcomes such as such as delay gratification, kindness and altruism (Scales et al, 2000) and also reduction of problems like sexual risk-taking, substance use, alcohol abuse, smoking, violence (Park, 2004b). *Character education provides an antidote to youth depression, serves as a pathway to increased life satisfaction, promotes learning and creativity, enhances social cohesion, and promotes civic citizenship (Waters, 2011).*

Gratitude and forgiveness have much in common. The additive impact of these two character strengths is discussed in the upcoming sections.

- The first and foremost evidence comes from the fact that gratitude and forgiveness are at everyone's disposal. Gratitude is a positive psychological response to interpersonal

¹ DAV College-Sector 10, Chandigarh

*Corresponding Author

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benefits and forgiveness is a positive psychological response to interpersonal harm (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude is a powerful emotion which can release you from a negative bonding (Froh, 2007). Focus on the good things instead of the bad can make you attract great good in your life. But if you are weighted down with un-forgiveness, it is hard to open the door to gratitude. Feelings of revenge, un-forgiveness and blame can linger within us for a long time, filling us with negativity and keeping us away from being good and happy. *If you look at the cycle of grieving, you will see that forgiveness is the fundamental stage to experience gratitude and the joy of life again (Froh & Emmons, 2007).*

- Secondly, human relationship is the central connection between these two constructs i.e. where individuals experience both help and harm (Bono & McCullough, 2006). *Among the different character strengths, gratitude and forgiveness emerge as two important strengths in interpersonal situations (Bono & McCullough, 2006).* Responding positively with forgiveness instead of negatively with avoidance or vengeance when one is wronged, hurt or attacked could help reduce negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, and hostility and replace them with more positive or benevolent attitudes, feelings, and behaviors (McCullough, 2001; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Expressing gratitude or appreciation of adverse life circumstances could be adaptive and would allow one to positively reinterpret stressful or negative life experiences (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).
- Thirdly, gratitude and forgiveness share a common and fundamental component - of *empathy and philanthropic behaviour (Karremans, Van Lange & Holland, 2005).* Beyond the “head” strengths (love of learning, open mindedness, perspective) that are intellectual and self-oriented, *strengths of gratitude and forgiveness are defined as the strengths of the “heart”, i.e. ‘emotional’ and ‘interpersonal’ in nature, which plays an important role and are the key factors in determining youth’s happiness level (Park & Peterson, (2010); Safaria, (2014); Senarighi, (2015).*
- *Fourthly, gratitude and forgiveness are closely related, forgiveness being the flip side of gratitude.* It involves responding positively to transgressions by offering mercy instead of vengeance. Like gratitude, it is outward directed and intentional and recognized as a character strength. Happiness results when energized by magnificent blend of new elixirs i.e. Gratitude and forgiveness, two interconnected positive character strengths (Froh & Emmons, 2007). Gratitude relates to willingness to forgive (DeShea, 2003), which is associated with the absence of psychopathological traits (Maltby et al., 2008), and is integral to positive functioning (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005). *These strengths produce well-being through a combination of reflection, positive emotions, and adaptive social behaviors and relationships that facilitate well-being and happiness (Fredrickson, 2004; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009; Watkins, 2004).*
- Fifthly, Uchida, Norasakkunkit & Kitayama (2004) found evidence that *in Asian countries (Eastern culture) the key word for happiness is relationship or togetherness and they ground their life satisfaction more in interpersonal factors than intrapersonal*

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factors (Suh, Diener, Oishi & Triandis, 1998). Our culture being collectivistic in nature, considers *social support* to be an important factor that can aid an individual in initiating and maintaining a positive activity (Putnam, 2000) and also lays emphasis on *relationships* and relationships are a cause of great distress and of great happiness and majority of qualitative studies have found that the success of interpersonal relationships is an important factor in people's lay understanding of happiness across eastern and western cultures (Pflug, 2009; Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick & Wissing, 2011). *Further, 'gratitude' and 'forgiveness' provide relatedness need-satisfaction and are said to be interpersonal strengths which help strengthen our relationships with our significant others.*

- Sixthly, Fincham & Beach, (2010) illustrated parallels between gratitude and forgiveness. Numerous authors have bemoaned the lack of attention given to gratitude (Solomon, 2004) and forgiveness (Fincham, 2000) by philosophers and social scientists. Thriving empirical literature has emerged in the last fifteen years on gratitude and forgiveness. Each strength is acknowledged to have a rich history extending back to the ancient Greeks. Both constructs describe processes that are ascribed a central role in social life. Gratitude and forgiveness orient the person away from their own selfish interests to the interests of others. Another parallel emphasizes that both are considered to be virtues and has being linked to personal well being. Further, the presumed value of each construct for promoting mental health have given rise to numerous interventions designed to increase their occurrence (Nelson, 2009; Wade, Johnson & Meyer, 2008).
- The seventh evidence comes from Peterson & Seligman (2004) while working on Values in Action Inventory of Strengths – i.e. at the outset gratitude and forgiveness was categorized under the virtue of '*Transcendence*' and '*Temperance*' respectively. However, today, taking a closer look at the classification of these character strengths reflected on an emerging trend i.e. these two strengths are now 'packaged' together. Recently, Macdonald, Bore & Munro, (2008) reached a consensus that the strengths of gratitude and forgiveness be conceptualized together under the same cluster or factor i.e. the factor of '*Niceness*'. Further, Brdar & Kashdan, (2010) added gratitude and forgiveness to '*Interpersonal*' factor thereby reflecting the importance of the shared impact of gratitude and forgiveness on relationship processes and well-being (*happiness being its component*).

In light of the above parallels, it is believed that the emergence of interest in gratitude and forgiveness can be traced to the rise of positive psychology movement and also that these common heritage points to another feature i.e. focus on the individual.

Final Remark!

Thus, gratitude and forgiveness are conceptually linked as positively valenced, pro-social, empathy-based character strengths associated with psychological and physical health. Hence by cultivating these strengths, begins a cycle that actually attracts healthy self esteem, a positive attitude and good things into one's life.

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The above stated similarities suggest that gratitude and forgiveness are likely to have a shared impact on other relationship processes and outcomes and that they need to be considered specifically in the relationship context (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Likewise, both can be conceptualized within a framework of emergent goals and have links to general well-being. *Therefore, active engagement of strengths of character appears to be a viable exercise for increasing and promoting happiness and well-being (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006a).*

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