

CAN UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES IMPROVE THEIR LEVELS OF HAPPINESS BY BEING GRATEFUL AND LIVING A PURPOSEFUL LIFE?

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ABSTRACT

Gratitude has been linked with normal human functioning and well-being yet, its association with happiness and life satisfaction remains understudied among non clinical samples in collectivist cultures. Most studies on gratitude are focused on clinical settings and in individualist cultures. This study investigates the predictive strength of gratitude and purpose in life on life satisfaction among university undergraduates in Nigeria. Using a cross sectional research design, 390 university students were selected from 2 (public and private) universities. A questionnaire on socio-demographic profile, gratitude scale($r=0.84$), purpose in life scale($r=0.96$) and life satisfaction scale ($r=0.90$) was administered to participants. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis at 0.05 level of significance. Three hypotheses were tested. The results revealed that gratitude and purpose in life jointly and independently predicted life satisfaction ($R^2 = .24$; $F = 62.56$; $p < .05$). Being grateful and having purpose are crucial for a comprehensive examination of life satisfaction.

Keywords: Gratitude, Purpose in life, Happiness, Cultural differences, Undergraduates, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Gratitude has been conceptualized differently by various authors. Some have viewed gratitude as an emotion, an attitude and a moral construct, while others have conceived it as a personality trait, a coping strategy and a habit (Lambert, Graham & Fincham, 2009). Emmons and McCullough (2003) conceive gratitude as the understanding of positive outcomes, which one does not deserve but are due to the actions of other people. McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang (2002) describe gratitude as differences in how individuals frequently experience grateful moods. Wood, Froh, & Geraghty (2010) refer to gratitude as a broader attitude towards recognizing and appreciating the positivity in life. Many researchers define gratitude as a positive emotional response to gifts or benefits received from other people (Roberts, 2004). However, most definitions of gratitude do not describe the state and trait aspects of gratitude. McCullough et al. (2002), noted that the trait aspect of gratitude is the practice of gratitude as part of one's daily life while the state dimension is the feelings experienced by individuals expressing gratitude (Watkins, Van Gelder, & Frias, 2009). A broader attempt therefore is to view gratitude as being grateful for things considered valuable and meaningful and being in a general state of thankfulness.

A number of studies have linked gratitude to happiness, life satisfaction and well-being. (Dickerhoof, 2007; Chen & Kee, 2008; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008; Yurkewicz & Kashdan, 2009). Kong, Ding & Zhao (2014) noted that highly grateful people tend to be happy, optimistic, and possess high self-esteem. Szczesniak and Soares (2011) asserted that grateful individuals are less likely to take revenge on others and they do not believe that negative events

are permanent. Stoeckel, Weissbrod & Ahrens (2014) indicated that gratitude is not associated with mental health problems among college students. Lyubomirsky, King & Diener (2005) reported gratitude as an integral part of life satisfaction. Park, Peterson & Seligman (2004) averred that gratitude has one of the strongest relationships with life satisfaction when compared with other traits and Emmons & McCullough (2003) contended that the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction is a cause and effect relationship.

Gratitude has also been extensively reported to be associated with happiness and well-being among clinical samples. Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010) suggested that gratitude is relevant in clinical settings and beneficial for well-being. In clinical settings, it has been found to be related to more positive coping and better sleep (Wood, Joseph, Lloyd, & Atkins, 2009). Gratitude predicts reduction in the level of depression over time through positive life events (Disabato, Kashdan, Short, & Jarden, 2016). Gratitude causes reduced symptoms in impaired mental health populations (Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010) and improved mental health in health care practitioners (Cheng, Tsui, & Lam, 2015). Gratitude was associated with less depressed mood in individuals with breast cancer and heart failure (Mills et al., 2015; Ruini & Vescovelli, 2013), and enhanced quality of life in a mixed chronic illness people (Eaton, Bradley & Morrissey, 2014). Consequently the relationship between gratitude and well-being is considered causal (Wood et al., 2010). However, not all studies are in agreement concerning the association between gratitude and well-being (Kashdan, Uswatte & Julian. 2006: Henrie, 2007: Ozimkowski, 2008).

Research findings have also identified purpose in life as being related to well-being and life satisfaction. Purpose in life, like gratitude, has been viewed differently by many researchers. Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) conceptualize purpose as a stable intention to achieve something meaningful for oneself that links one to some aspects of the world beyond the self. It has been referred to as an important component of human flourishing (Seligman, 2002). For McKnight and Kashdan (2009), purpose is the core aspect of an individual's identity that sets continuous targets for one to pursue. For Kashdan and McKnight (2009), purpose is a compass that provides direction to life. Rockind (2011) describes purpose as a unique way in which individuals have impact in the world while Keyes (2011) conceive purpose as a determination to achieve certain end. Researchers have argued that, generally, individuals do not always know their purpose, however, it is suggested that, purpose must be found, created, or learned (Park, Park, & Peterson, 2010). Frankl (1959) noted that having purpose in life will enable individuals to endure the difficulties of life.

Erikson's (1994) theory of psychosocial stages of development is in support of the notion that younger people search for identity and purpose in life. Erikson identified eight stages of psychosocial development and suggested that stage five which comprises people within the ages 13 and 21 is the period when young people search for identity and if they get it wrong at that stage, it may result in role confusion. Erikson (1968) reported that having purpose in life will enable young people to deal with their identity problems.

Several studies have associated purpose in life with life satisfaction and wellbeing. French & Joseph (1999) have linked purpose to greater levels of happiness. Debats (1998) indicated that having purpose in life is negatively associated with psychological distress. Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer (2013) revealed that purpose is linked with self esteem. Similarly, Heisel & Flett (2004) have reported that the absence of purpose in life is linked to psychological ill-being. Research evidence has revealed that individuals with purpose in life tend to possess self acceptance and higher levels of self-confidence compared to those who lack purpose

(Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969; Yarnell, 1971). Reker and Cousins (1979) also noted that individuals who reported having purpose in life were likely to have more positive expectations of the future than those who lack purpose and also be more satisfied with their lives. Harlow, Newcomb, and Bentler (1986) found that having purpose in life led to greater levels of happiness (Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983).

Despite the empirical evidence that gratitude is important for normal functioning, it remains one of the most understudied emotions in social research (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007). Research evidence also indicated that gratitude had been studied extensively in clinical settings, which has led to the development of important clinical interventions (Bono, Emmons, & McCullough, 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This may be an indication that most studies on gratitude and well-being are focused on clinical populations. In addition, most of this research on gratitude and life satisfaction were carried out in individualist cultures, while only a few studies have examined gratitude and life satisfaction in collectivist cultures (Chen, Kee & Chen 2014; Sun, Jiang, Chu & Qian, 2014) such as Nigeria. Kitayama et al. (2000) noted that cultural differences exist between collectivist and individualist countries. In collectivist nations, pride is generally discouraged while success is determined by an individual's ability to give and receive social support as well as promote social harmony. On the other hand, individualist countries, are characterized by autonomy, independence and personal achievement. Similarly, Uchida & Ogihara (2012) argue that life satisfaction in Europe and America is viewed from the individualistic perspective while it is connected to the availability of social relationships in African culture. Furukawa et al. (2012) also revealed that children in collectivist countries had a higher tendency to experience guilt while children in individualist countries reported a higher tendency to experience pride. Therefore, the cultural differences may influence the relationship between the variables of interest.

The authentic happiness theory of subjective wellbeing similarly suggests a link between gratitude, purpose in life and life satisfaction. According to the theory, happiness comes from a life characterized by meaning, engagement and pleasure but not completely based on pleasure (Lyubomirsky, King and Diener, 2005). This theory maintains that life will only appear meaningful and satisfying to individuals, if peoples' goals in life are selfless and possesses intrinsic value. In order to be able to pursue such goals adequately, it is necessary for individuals to possess characters such as gratitude, humility and forgiveness (Petersen and Seligman, 2004).

The present study investigates the joint and independent predictive strength of gratitude and purpose in life on life satisfaction. In this study, well-being is used as synonyms of life satisfaction, subjective well-being and happiness ((Diener, 1985; Schwarz & Strack, 1999, Veenhoven, 2009). The study is relevant in emphasizing the significance of being grateful and having purpose in life in the investigation of the level of happiness and life satisfaction. The following research questions are raised: Can gratitude predict life satisfaction? Can purpose in life predict life satisfaction? Can gratitude and purpose in life jointly predict life satisfaction? Three hypotheses were tested:

1. Gratitude will significantly independently predict life satisfaction.
2. Purpose in life will significantly independently predict life satisfaction.
3. Gratitude and Purpose in life will significantly jointly predict life satisfaction

METHODS

Design and Participants

The study was a cross sectional research design. The criterion variables investigated were gratitude and purpose in life while the outcome variable was life satisfaction. Participants were selected across 4 academic levels (100-400) in both public and private universities. The sample size of the study consists of a total number of 390 university students. The age of the sample ranged between 16 and 60 years with a mean of 22 and a standard deviation of 4.6. One hundred and eighty three (46.9%) males and 207 (53.1%) females participated in the study. On the institution of learning, one hundred and ninety five students (50%) were sampled from a federal university and one hundred and ninety five students (50%) were sampled from a private university. Sixty six participants (16.9%) were in year one, one hundred and six (27.2%) were in year two, ninety (23.1%) were in year three, and one hundred and twenty eight (32.8%) were in year four.

Research Instrument

The main instrument for sourcing information for this research was a structured questionnaire which consists of four sections: A, B, C and D. Section A consists of the social demographic characteristics of participants such as age, gender, marital status, name of institution, level of education, etc. Section B was a six item gratitude questionnaire developed by McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002). The six item scale was used to assess gratitude both as a trait and a disposition. It assesses all four dimensions of the grateful disposition such as intensity of gratitude, frequency of gratitude, span of gratitude and density of gratitude. Responses ranges from 1-7 likert format with 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. Original Cronbach's Alpha reported ranged from .76 to .84. The Cronbach's Alpha recorded for this study was .65. Two items were reverse scored. The mean score for this scale is 29.66 with a standard deviation of 5.14 and skewness of -1.77. Participants with higher scores on the scale were considered more grateful, thankful and appreciative of benefits and gifts received compared to their counterparts who scored below the mean on the gratitude scale. Section C was a 20 item scale of purpose in life (PIL) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholic (1964). The scale was developed to measure an individual's sense of meaning. The scale is a 5-point likert format scale. The mean score is 11.99, standard deviation is 13.56 and skewness is -.13. Scoring involves adding all the scores of participants together and those who scored low were considered as lacking purpose while those who scored high were said to have a high sense of purpose. Cronbach's Alpha reported ranged from 0.68- 0.96. Section D was a 40 item multidimensional student's life satisfaction scale (MSLSS) developed by Huebner (2001). The scale provides a profile of students' satisfaction with important specific domains of life, assesses participants general overall life satisfaction. The MSLSS can be administered to both children and young people either individually or in groups. It reveals a replicable factor structure indicating the meaningfulness of the five dimensions and it has been used effectively with students across age and ability levels. Internal consistency ranges from .70 to .90. and test-retest coefficients are reported to be mostly in the range of 0.70-0.90 over intervals of 2-4 weeks (Huebner, 2001). The Cronbach's Alpha recorded for this study was .69. The mean score is 12.00, standard deviation is 19.47 and skewness is -.89. High scores by participants represent high levels of life satisfaction and vice versa.

Procedure for data collection

Having obtained the necessary permission from the university authorities, participants were told that the purpose of the research was purely academic and they were asked to respond to the questions honestly. Having been assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, participants' consents were sought and obtained. The questionnaires were

administered to students who were available and participants were not given any incentive for participation. All questionnaires were administered in English. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered at both universities but only 390 students adequately completed and returned their questionnaires for scoring and analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1.1: Summary of the descriptive data showing the distribution of the study participants.

	Freq.	%
Gender		
Male	183	46.9
Female	207	53.1
Institution of Learning		
University of Ibadan	195	50
Lead City University	195	50
Academic Level		
100 Level	66	16.9
200 Level	106	27.2
300 Level	90	23.1
400 Level	128	32.8

Table 1.2: Summary table of correlation between gratitude, purpose in life, and life satisfaction.

S/N		Life satisfaction	Purpose in Life	Gratitude
1	Life satisfaction	-		
2	Purpose in life	.39**	-	
3	Gratitude	.40**	.32**	-

Table 1.2 shows that purpose in life has a significant positive relationship with life satisfaction ($r = .39$, $p < .05$) and gratitude has a significant positive relationship with life satisfaction ($r = .40$, $p < .05$).

Table 1.3: Summary table showing independent and joint prediction of gratitude and purpose in life on life satisfaction.

Life Satisfaction	R	R ²	F	P	B	t	P
Purpose in Life					.30	6.45	$p < .05$
Gratitude	.49	.24	62.56	$p < .05$.30	6.59	$p < .05$
T							

Table 1.3 shows that there is a significant joint influence of purpose in life and gratitude on life satisfaction ($R^2 = .24$, $F(2, 387) = 62.56$, $p < .05$), per unit change in gratitude and purpose in life brings about 24% explanation of the variability of life satisfaction. Also, purpose in life has 30% significant independent influence on life satisfaction ($\beta = .30$, $t = 6.45$, $P < .05$); gratitude has 30% significant independent influence on life satisfaction ($\beta = .30$, $t = 6.59$, $P < .05$).

Regression analysis was used to predict the influence of gratitude and purpose in life on happiness both independently and jointly and to also examine the contributions of each criterion variable to the outcome variable. All the stated hypotheses were confirmed.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated that gratitude and purpose in life jointly and independently significantly predicted life satisfaction among the participants of study. This implies that participants who were thankful/appreciative with a high sense of purpose in life reported that they were more satisfied with their lives than their counterparts who reported being low on gratitude and with a lack of purpose. This conclusion is similar to the findings from other studies. Wood, Maltby, Gillett, Linley, & Joseph (2008) found among student samples that gratitude led to better well-being over a period of time. Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski & Miller (2009) also reported a similar association among college populations. Similarly, Sun et al. (2014) identified gratitude with higher levels of school well-being. Hill and Allemand (2011) hinted that gratitude improves satisfaction with life, positive mood, subjective well-being and reduces materialism (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009).

Research evidence has also reported a positive correlation between purpose in life and subjective well-being. Park, et al. (2010) reported that purpose is related to happiness and less negative mood. Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan (2009) suggested that purpose is associated with life satisfaction. Bonebright, Clay, & Akenmann (2000) indicated that purpose in life is related to overall well-being and Hill & Turiano (2014) hinted that purpose is linked to robust physical health. Seligman (2002) provided a possible explanation for the relationship between purpose in life and happiness. Seligman suggested that one of the three ways to be happy is to have a meaningful life, which involves targeting a path in which a cause provides a sense of commitment to something greater than oneself. In this way, being concerned about the world beyond the self is necessary for achieving the most lasting form of well-being. Having a purpose in life involves dimensions of both the good life and the meaningful life, and in this way, purpose is indirectly linked to subjective well-being.

An attempt has been made by many researchers to explain the prediction of life satisfaction by gratitude. McCullough, Emmons & Tsang (2002) argued that gratitude should predict life satisfaction based on the fact that gratitude makes individuals feel positive about the events in their lives and such positive feelings bring about life satisfaction. Furukawa, Tangney and Higashibara (2012) indicated that the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction in collectivist cultures is important because, individuals in these cultures may experience a combination of gratitude and indebtedness in response to acts of kindness and generosity of other people. Watkins (2004) views the predictive strength of gratitude on life satisfaction as being based on viewing positive events as blessings. According to him, viewing positive events in one's life as blessings may improve life satisfaction and such positive thoughts may also reduce the effects that negative events might have on such individuals. Watkins also suggested that gratitude serves as a coping strategy which individuals adopt when experiencing difficulties, as they can cast their minds back to remember their pleasant memories which will enable them to switch from a feeling of deprivation to that of appreciation. He maintained that being grateful and thankful on a regular basis will make individuals focus on the positive activities in their social environments, and focusing on positive activities will in turn, improve life satisfaction (Watkins, 2004).

The broaden and build theory has also been used to explain the gratitude well-being association. The theory suggests that positive feelings broaden people's thinking and attention. Fredrickson (2004) noted that gratitude expands an individual's thinking through exchange of things for mutual benefits, which in turn boosts personal resources and consequently enhances individual life satisfaction. According to Fredrickson (2013), gratitude is able to influence life satisfaction because when individuals are thankful, they have a tendency to expand their thoughts and recognize that the role of other people is important in life. Sheldon & Kashdan (2011) argued that since gratitude is an attitude of appreciating and acknowledging the pleasant events of life, it tends to be related to factors that are equally indicative of positive results such as well-being and life satisfaction. Froh & Bono (2008) view the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction as being based on gratitude helping in building resources such as purposefulness, intrinsic motivation and so on, for well-being. Algoe, Gable, & Maisel (2010) in support of the Broaden and Build Theory noted that the tendency of grateful individuals to thank those who have been of help to them and forgive others is capable of strengthening interpersonal relationships, leading to forming and preserving new relationships and relationship satisfaction. Wood et al. (2010) observed that viewing life as something to be thankful for is strongly associated to well-being. According to him, individuals who report low levels of life satisfaction usually attribute their success to factors that are beyond their control and due to actions of other people. This sort of attribution results in anxiety and negative feelings. Wood, Joseph, and Linley (2007) noted that grateful individuals often make use of three major coping strategies which have been reported to mediate the relationship between gratitude and stress. The coping strategies include seeking instrumental and emotional social support, dealing with problems through active coping, and benefit-finding and engaging in adaptive behaviour. These strategies explain how gratitude enhances mood stability and reduces the effects that stressful life events might have on grateful people.

Erikson' (1994) theory of psychosocial development suggested that between the ages of 13 and 21, young people are expected to develop their identity, through the discovery of oneself and in the course of finding meaning to the person they really are. According to Erikson, before stage five, psycho-social development is about what is done to the young people but at stage five, development depends on what young people do for themselves. Therefore, from stage five, young people must struggle to discover and find their identity and develop a sense of right and wrong. Cultivation of the habit of being thankful to others and having a purpose in life are important to developing a sense of right or wrong. Therefore, the cultivation of gratitude by the younger people at the point they are searching for personal identity and purpose in life may positively influence their well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study found that gratitude and purpose in life independently and jointly predicted life satisfaction among the participants of this study. Identification of gratitude and purpose in life as factors that could enhance life satisfaction is an indication of the importance of those variables in the examination of well-being, particularly among the younger population. This study has therefore contributed to existing knowledge concerning the attitudes of young, non clinical people in a collectivist culture like Nigeria, regarding their expression of appreciation and how it influences their level of happiness and life satisfaction. The findings of the current study on the association between gratitude and life satisfaction is similar to the findings reported in many individualist countries as well as among clinical populations. Therefore, it could be assumed that regardless of the existence of cultural differences between individualist and collectivist countries, gratitude is important to well-being across many cultures and sample

populations. Consequently, the findings of the current study could be applied in counselling the younger population across continents.

Implications and Recommendations

The above findings suggest that participants' attitude of thankfulness for life's events and their sense of purpose in life should be considered in investigating their levels of happiness, life satisfaction or well-being. This outcome implies that the expression of thanks can improve an individual's level of life satisfaction and general well-being. This study has concluded that gratitude is an important feeling that can benefit the lives of participants who practice it. Previous studies conducted in Europe and other cultures/continents have also reported the association between gratitude and well-being. Further, the relationship between gratitude and well-being is considered causal. Therefore, it can be assumed that the practice of gratitude is capable of predicting happiness and life satisfaction in all sorts of settings. The importance of gratitude in improving life satisfaction cannot be overemphasized. The practice of gratitude, among other things, is capable of extending people's thinking and brings about positive emotions, boosts personal resources and allows individuals to appreciate the importance of other people in their lives. It will widen an individual's social network which in turn might improve social support from others which might result in better methods of coping with the stress of life and subsequently, bring higher levels of well-being. These findings have implications for counseling. Gratitude has been shown to improve interpersonal relationships, to broaden individuals' thoughts, promote positive emotions and improve well-being. Counsellors may therefore include gratitude in counseling individuals with poor well-being. They may consider the use of gratitude and purpose in life in addressing the common challenges that young people face, such as, school adjustment problems, relationship and family difficulties, coping with stress and negative life events, personal or social adjustment, identity problems, difficulties relating to other people and so on.

The **benefits of practicing gratitude** are enormous and therefore it should be cultivated, particularly, by the younger population. The practice of gratitude is considered a character strength, which, if not present in individuals, is worth cultivating (Emmons & McCullough 2003) in all cultures. Cultivating the habit of gratitude is capable of enhancing both personal and interpersonal relationship among the young people. Considering the importance of happiness and life satisfaction to human existence, the findings could be used in counselling youths regarding their attitudes towards gifts, benefits, help from other people and life generally. It is therefore recommended that policy makers and counsellors should educate the young ones and create adequate awareness of the significance of cultivating the habit of being thankful to other people and for all positive feelings in order to enhance their level of life satisfaction.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

The first limitation of the study relates to the study participants. The sample used in the current study were university students, but future studies should consider samples outside the university community and across a broader range of participants such as households, prisons, etc. Another limitation of the study is that the results are based on data from one time point, so it is impossible to draw any conclusions about causality. Future studies should use a longitudinal design. Also, since the current study is a quantitative study, future studies should consider using a mixed method approach, so as to explore individual meaning of gratitude and purpose in life in relation to life satisfaction.

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