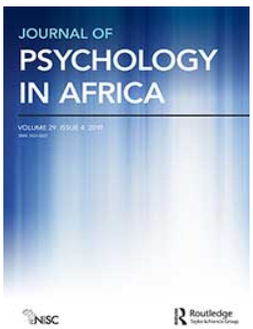

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Gratitude, well-being and psychological distress among South African university students

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This study investigated the associations between gratitude, measures of well-being, and indicators of psychological distress (depression and negative emotion) among South African university students. Data were collected from 198 first-year university students (female = 69.70%; mean age = 20.55 years, SD = 1.70 years) using measures of gratitude, flourishing, well-being, depression, and negative emotion. The results showed that gratitude is positively associated with measures of well-being, and inversely related to indicators of psychological distress. University-based support programmes should consider gratitude interventions to support student success.

Keywords: depression, eudaimonic well-being, flourishing, gratitude, negative emotions, student counselling

Introduction

Traditionally, the concept of student success referred to academic performance and successful completion of university studies (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Scott, 2018). However, some researchers have called for a more holistic conception of student success that encompasses not only academic achievement but also engagement in educational activities and the cultivation of non-cognitive factors such as grit and social intelligence, and the promotion of flourishing behaviour (Anderson, 2016; Nelson & Low, 2011; Sinclair, 2019).

Flourishing refers to high levels of emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being (Keyes, 2016). Persons who report high levels of flourishing behaviour also tend to self-report with high scores on measures of gratitude (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Gratitude refers to a cognitive-affective state that is related to the perception that a person has received a particular benefit that was not intentionally sought after, deserved, or earned; but due to the benevolent intentions of another person (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

The promotion and development of flourishing and gratitude are essential for students to develop the graduate skills required to enter the world of work and positively contribute to national and international challenges (Makola, 2014; Mason, 2017a; Sinclair, 2019). However, research suggests that many university students are not flourishing, but experiencing high levels of psychological distress (Anderson, 2016; Mason, 2017b; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012).

Psychological distress among university students

There is consensus in the literature that students experience a wide range of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013). A South African study established that not only is psychological distress pervasive among young people, but suicidal ideation is higher among university students than among the general South African populace and student populations in international contexts (Bantjes, Kagee, McGowan, & Steel, 2016).

Furthermore, studies have indicated that students tend to interpret stress, which is pervasive in the university context, as a negative experience, are prone to adopt ineffective coping strategies, and struggle to access resources that could enhance well-being (Mason, 2017b; Mudhovozi, 2011; Nelson & Low, 2011). Subsequently, markers of psychological distress, for example depression and negative emotions, could manifest among university students (Cilliers, 2014; Nelson & Low, 2011).

Student counselling services

Student counsellors play essential roles in supporting students to deal with stressors (Cilliers, 2014; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). To date, counselling efforts for university students have predominantly adopted a pathogenic focus through the identification of risk factors for academic failure and psychological distress, accompanied by curative interventions (Dockrat, 2016; Van Zyl & Dhurup, 2018). Consequently, students are not assisted in developing protective psychological resources to proactively address challenges (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Sinclair, 2019). Moreover, curative student counselling interventions, such as individual therapy, are time-consuming and resource-intensive (Cilliers, 2014). This is problematic as student counselling services are generally over-prescribed and under-resourced within an environment where funding efforts are more focussed on enhancing physical access to higher education than on promoting student well-being (Cilliers, 2014).

Whereas curative approaches remain essential in addressing psychopathology, they ought to be augmented by an emphasis on students' inner strengths or psychological resources (Kotzé & Kleynhans, 2013; Van Zyl & Dhurup, 2018; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012). A positive psychology approach aims to assist students in developing strength-based psychological resources that could enhance flourishing in the face of stressors (Anderson, 2016; Mason, 2017b). Studies have suggested that gratitude could serve as a positive psychological resource against various forms of psychological distress,

such as depression and negative emotions (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Stoeckel, Weissbrod, & Ahrens, 2015).

Gratitude and well-being

Gratitude is a social emotion directed towards other persons and includes a proactive acknowledgement that others may have made certain sacrifices for the well-being of a person (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). It is positively associated with a host of psychological benefits, such as positive youth development, quality in life, well-being, and optimism (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009; Ma, Kibler, & Sly, 2013; Stoeckel et al., 2015). Similarly, gratitude is inversely related to markers of psychological distress, such as depression and negative emotions (Emmons & Stern, 2013). In addition to positive associations with indicators of well-being, gratitude is considered to be a crucial social skill that can broaden and build young people's skills repertoires and empower them to navigate through developmental challenges and promote thriving behaviour in education contexts (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; Wilson, 2016).

Empirical findings have indicated that participants' experience and expression of gratitude can be developed using positive psychology interventions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Wilson (2016) found that students who were supported to reflect on gratitude toward learning by educators experienced more significant levels of gratitude. Moreover, their focussed behaviour increased and resilience was strengthened. Consequently, research that investigates the value of gratitude within student counselling contexts appears vital.

Research on the association between gratitude, flourishing, well-being, and indicators of psychological distress (depression and negative emotions) among South African student populations (Guse, Vescovelli, & Croxford, 2019; Van Schalkwyk & Wissing, 2010) is scant. Additionally, more information is needed in assessing gender differences on gratitude (Emmons & Mishra, 2011; Emmons & Stern, 2013; Guse et al., 2019). Therefore, the study of the empirical linkages between gratitude and flourishing as well as depression and negative emotions seems timely and necessary within student counselling contexts. Findings could offer insight into the development of positive psychology-based student counselling interventions, with specific reference to gratitude interventions, within the South African university context.

Goal of the study

The goal of this study was to examine the associations between gratitude, flourishing, well-being, and psychological distress among a sample of South African university students. The study was guided by the following question and sub-questionss:

- What are the relationships between gratitude, flourishing, well-being, depression and negative emotions in a student populatio?
  - Do male and female students report different scores on measures of gratitude, well-being, and psychological distress?
- Do students who report higher levels of gratitude also report higher levels of flourishing and well-being, and lower scores in depression and negative emotions, when compared to students who report a low sense of gratitude?

Method

Research approach and strategy

A descriptive and correlational research design was used to investigate the relationship between gratitude, flourishing, well-being, and psychological distress. Flourishing, well-being, depression, and negative emotions were the dependent variables and gratitude served as the independent variable.

Participants and setting

A purposive sample of 198 first-year university students (mean age = 20.04, SD = 1.33; female = 69.69%) participated in the study. The majority of participants reported Sepedi (24.75%), Setswana (20.71%), and isiZulu (20.20%) as their mother tongue.

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected during the first semester that students were enrolled for university studies in 2016. The students completed measures on gratitude, flourishing, depression, and negative emotions. Additionally, they self-reported on demographic variables. Data were collected in class. The Research Ethics Committee of the university where the sample was drawn granted permission to conduct the study (Ref#: REC2014/03/013) and all participants provided individual, written informed consent. The data collection instruments are described next.

Gratitude Questionnaire

Gratitude was assessed by means of the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), which is a 6-item measure that assesses a person's general grateful affect (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). An example item includes: "I am grateful to a wide variety of people." Answers are rated on on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree. Higher scores represent higher levels of gratitude. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for scores from the GQ was 0.82.

Flourishing Scale

Data on flourishing was collected using the Flourishing Scale (FS). The FS is an 8-item measure of psychosocial flourishing, based on recent theories of psychological and social well-being (Diener, 2013). Example items include: "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life" and "People respect me". Participants indicate response on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 7 = strongly agree. A high score indicates that a person embodies numerous psychological resources and strengths. In this study, the internal consistency reliability index for scores from the FS was 0.74.

Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being

The Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being (QEWB) is a 21-item measure. An example item includes: "I believe

I have discovered who I really am". Participants are requested to indicate their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 0 = strongly disagree, to 4 = strongly agree (Waterman et al., 2010). Total scores range from 0 (low) to 84 (high), with mean scores varying from 54.63 (SD = 10.26) to 56.83 (SD = 10.78). In this study, the internal consistency reliability index for scores from the QEWB was 0.79.

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) is a measure of subjective well-being (SWB: Hills & Argyle, 2002). Participants are asked to respond to 29 items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree, to 6 = strongly agree. Examples of items include "I am intensely interested in other people" and "I feel that I am not especially in control of my life" (reverse scored). Total scores are summed and divided by 29 to offer final scores ranging from 1 = not happy, to 6 = very happy. The Cronbach's alpha for scores from the OHQ in the present study was 0.71.

Short Depression and Happiness Scale

The Short Depression-Happiness Scale (SDHS) is a 6-item statistically bipolar self-report scale that offers measurement of depression and happiness (Joseph, Linley, Harwood, Lewis, & McCollam, 2004). Six items inquire about positive thoughts, feelings, and kinesthetic experiences. Additionally, three items ask about negative thoughts, feelings, and kinesthetic bodily experiences. Respondents are asked to think about how they have felt in the past seven days and to rate the frequency of each item on a 4-point scale: 0= never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = often. For the aim of this study, only items that assess depression (for example: "I felt dissatisfied with my life") were used. Previous studies report scores from the SDHS to be highly reliable and valid for measuring depression and happiness (Joseph et al., 2004). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha score for the SDHS was 0.78.

The Scales of Positive and Negative Experience

The Scales of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) is a 12-item questionnaire that includes six items to assess positive (e.g., joyful), and six items to assess negative (e.g., unpleasant) feelings (Diener et al., 2009). Participants evaluate how often they experienced the listed feelings, over the past four weeks, on a scale ranging from 1 = very rarely or never, to 5 = very often or always. For this study, only the six items that evaluate negative feelings (e.g., sad and unpleasant) were used. The Cronbach's alpha score for the SPANE in the present study was 0.80.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the GQ-6, FS, QEWB, OHQ, SDHS, and SPANE. The strength and direction of the relationships were assessed using the Pearson product-moment correlations (Pearson's *r*). Linear regression analyses were used to investigate whether GQ-6 (independent variable) predicted FS, well-being, and psychological distress (Cohen, 1992; Field, 2013). The independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the differences in gratitude, flourishing, and psychological distress; and to compare male and female scores on the constructs.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive and correlational statistics of the variables investigated in this study. The mean scores on the GQ-6 (mean = 30.77, SD = 6.53), FS (mean = 43.42, SD = 7.82), QEWB (mean = 56.85, SD = 8.82), and OHQ (mean = 4.47, SD = 0.70) are consistent with findings reported elsewhere (Boshoff, 2012; Diener et al., 2009). Participants reported low mean scores on the SDHS (mean = 4.20, SD = 1.91) and SPANE (mean = 15.80, SD = 4.88), indicating that the majority of participants may not struggle with clinical levels of depression or negative affect. These findings are inconsistent with research depicting high levels of depression and distress among students (Bantjes et al., 2016). However, the relatively small, self-selected sample and use of self-report measures in this study could have skewed results towards the more positive end of the spectrum.

The GQ-6 scores were positively associated with scores on the FS ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), QEWB ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$), and OHQ ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, the GQ-6 was inversely related to students' reported data on the SDHS ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) and SPANE ($r = -0.37$, $p < 0\ 001$). Thus, the higher the students' reported levels of gratitude, the greater the probability that they reported high scores related to flourishing and well-being, and the less the chance of reporting depressive symptoms and negative emotions. In earlier research, VanOyen Witvliet, Richie, Luna and Van Tongeren (2018) found that gratitude was strongly associated with well-being measures. Similarly, Emmons and Mishra (2011) found that gratitude is fundamental to well-being as it enables persons to focus on that which is positive and meaningful amidst a context

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, alpha coefficients and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gratitude	30.77	6.53	–	–	–	–	–
2. FS	43.42	7.82	0.41**	–	–	–	–
3. QEWB	56.85	8.82	0.44**	0.41**	–	–	–
4. OHQ	4.47	0.70	0.54**	0.55**	0.56**	–	–
5. SDHS	4.20	1.91	−0.38**	−0.30**	−0.32**	−0.57**	–
6. SPANE Negative emotions	15.80	4.88	−0.37**	−0.43**	−0.49**	−0.59**	−0.65**

Note. PGIS = Personal Growth Initiative Scale; SHS = Satisfaction with Happiness Scale; QEWB = Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being; OHQ = Oxford Happiness Questionnaire; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; SPANE = Scale of Positive and Negative Emotions; **$p < 0.01$

where stress is omnipresent. Thus, it would appear that gratitude could predict well-being and serve as a buffer against negative outcomes.

In summary, gratitude was inversely related to the SDHS and SPANE. Students in the highest cohort of gratitude statuses also reported significantly higher levels on the well-being measures and lower scores on the SDHS and SPANE. These findings support previous studies that reported gratitude to be strongly predictive of well-being (Emmons & Stern, 2013; Guse et al., 2019).

Predicting flourishing, well-being and psychological distress from gratitude

Table 2 presents the results for EWB and HWB the GQ-6.

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict flourishing, EWB, and SWB based on gratitude. A significant regression equation was observed between the measures of GQ-6 and the FS, with F(1,196) = 40.15, $p < 0.01$; R^2 of 0.58. Thus, the GQ-6 explained 17% ($R^2 =$ 0.17) of the variance in FS. Noteworthy regression equations were also observed in predicting eudaimonic well-being (QEWB), with F(1,196) = 40.11, $p < 0.01$; and SWB (OHQ), with F(1,196) = 78.69, $p < 0.01$ from the GQ-6. Specifically, GQ-6 explained 17% ($R^2 = 0.17$) of the variance in the QEWB, and 29% ($R^2 = 0.29$) of the variance in OHQ.

The study found that 14% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.14$, $F(1,196) = 31.10$, $p < 0.01$) in participants' SDHS scores were explained by GQ-6. Negative affect, as assessed using the SPANE, was found to be significantly explained by gratitude, with $R^2 = 0.13$, F(1,196) = 84.28, $p < 0.01$)

Whereas female participants reported higher levels of gratitude (mean = 31.44, SD = 6.42) compared to males (mean = 30.44, SD = 4.58) the difference was not significant (see Table 3). This finding is in contrast to earlier research that indicated female participants tend to report higher levels of gratitude (Kashdan et al., 2009). However, other studies have also reported higher scores on gratitude among male participants (Khan & Singh, 2013). The difference between male and female scores on the SDHS (t-value = 11.09, $p < 0.01$) and SPANE (t-value = 2.00, $p < 0.05$) were significant, with female participants reporting higher levels of psychological distress. This result is consistent with previous research (Addis, 2008).

Table 4 represents the variance in well-being scores and indicators of psychological distress between the subsections of the sample that reported high gratitude and low gratitude scores.

The difference between the two groups' reported gratitude scores ($t_{(19)} = 16.72$, $p < 0.01$) scores was statistically significant. Participants in the highest cohort of reported gratitude scores also reported meaningfully higher scores on the FS ($t_{(19)} = 8.89$, $p < 0.01$), OHQ ($t_{(19)} = 10.59$, $p < 0.01$), and QEWB ($t_{(19)} = 6.04$, $p < 0.01$). Correspondingly, participants who reported higher

Table 2. Regression analyses between scales

Model 1. DV: FS IV: GQ-6	Sum of squares	df	Mean	*F* square	*p*
Regression	1 522.59	1	1 522.59	40.15	0.00**
Residual	5 090.04	196	37.92		
Total	8 955.86	197			
$R^2 = 0.17$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.17$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$					
Model 2. DV: QEWB IV: GQ-6	Sum of squares	df	Mean	*F* square	*p*
Regression	1 521.46	1	1521.46	40.11	0.00**
Residual	7 434.41	196	37.93		
Total	8 955.86	197			
$R^2 = 0.17$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.16$; Significant at $p < 0.01$					
Model 1. DV: OHQ IV: GQ-6	Sum of squares	df	Mean	*F* square	*p*
Regression	2 565.64	1	2565.64	78.69	0.00**
Residual	6 390.22	196	32.60		
Total	8 955.86	197			
$R^2 = 0.29$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.28$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$					
Model 2. DV: SDHS IV: GQ-6	Sum of squares	df	Mean	*F* square	*p*
Regression	1 297.38	1	1297.38	33.20	0.00**
Residual	7 658.48 196	39.07			
Total	2 151.39	197			
$R^2 = 0.14$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.14$; Significant at $p < 0.01$					
Model 1. DV: SPANE IV: GQ-6	Sum of squares	df	Mean	*F* square	*p*
Regression	1 223.55	1	1233.55	31.01	0.00**
Residual	7 732.32	196	39.45		
Total	8 599.86	197			
$R^2 = 0.13$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.13$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$					

Note. PGIS = Personal Growth Initiative Scale; SHS = Satisfaction with Happiness Scale; QEWB = Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being; OHQ = Oxford Happiness Questionnaire; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; SPANE = Scale

Table 3. Independent samples t-test

Variables	*N*	Mean	SD	*t*-value
Male	*60*			
GQ-6	60	30.44	4.58	
FS	60	43.17	6.92	
OHQ	60	4.51	0.60	
QEWB	60	56.29	8.22	
SDHS	60	2.61	1.92	
SPANE	60	14.77	4.20	
Female	*138*			
GQ-6	138	31.44	6.42	1.03
FS	138	43.53	7.98	0.30
OHQ	138	4.43	0.81	0.72
QEWB	138	57.23	8.69	0.70
SDHS	138	10.82	1.93	11.09**
SPANE	138	16.27	5.29	2.00*

Note. PGIS = Personal Growth Initiative Scale; SHS = Satisfaction with Happiness Scale; QEWB = Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being; OHQ = Oxford Happiness Questionnaire; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; SPANE = Scale of Positive and Negative Emotions; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

Table 4. Independent samples *t*-test

Variables	*N*	Mean	SD	*t*-value
Low gratitude group	*20*			
GQ-6	20	20.45	4.70	
FS	20	31.10	6.38	
OHQ	20	3.23	0.62	
QEWB	20	43.80	17.38	
SDHS	20	5.65	3.03	
SPANE	20	21.70		
High gratitude group	*20*			
GQ-6	20	40.90	1.02	16.72**
FS	20	51.35	3.96	8.89**
OHQ	20	5.05	0.34	10.59**
QEWB	20	69.00	7.39	6.04**
SDHS	20	−2.85	2.12	9.58**
SPANE	20	12.75	12.52	4.51**

Note. PGIS = Personal Growth Initiative Scale; SHS = Satisfaction with Happiness Scale; QEWB = Questionnaire for Eudaimonic Well-being; OHQ = Oxford Happiness Questionnaire; SDHS = Short Depression Happiness Scale; SPANE = Scale of Positive and Negative Emotions; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

gratitude scores indicated lower scores on the SDHS ($t_{(19)} = 9.58$, $p < 0.01$) and SPANE ($t_{(19)} = 4.51$, $p < 0.01$). These findings indicate that students in the higher cohort of gratitude statuses are more likely to experience heightened levels of well-being and may be less prone to the negative sequelae associated with depression and negative emotions. This finding can be interpreted through Fredrickson's broaden and build theory, which stipulates that positivity, such as a grateful mindset, enables people to broaden and build resources that enhance well-being and serves as a protective factor against unwellness (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Hence, gratitude could serve as a protective factor against psychological distress and potentially enhance holistic student success.

Implications for student counselling and development

The findings have implications for student counselling. First, it can be hypothesised that gratitude could serve as a buffer for students against the stressors that they experience in higher education. Second, efforts aimed at enhancing a sense of gratitude among students could positively affect levels of well-being, which may strengthen holistic student success. Consequently, the cultivation of gratitude among university students could prove beneficial in efforts aimed at supporting university students. Student counsellors should take note of the findings and take purposeful steps towards cultivating gratitude among university students. Amongst other things, the results could serve as a springboard for the development of student support programmes aimed at nurturing gratitude as an avenue to enhanced well-being among student populations.

Limitations of the study and further research

The findings of this study should be viewed against a backdrop of certain limitations. Firstly, a cross-sectional design was adopted. Hence, the dynamic and changing nature of gratitude and the dependent variables were not considered. Furthermore, since the self-report data were collected shortly after students were enrolled for university studies, participants' levels of motivation could have

skewed the results in a positive direction. Additionally, the use of self-report data on the independent and dependent variables could further have elicited potential response bias distortion on each of the measures, and the associations between the variables.

To address these limitations, future research could use longitudinal designs to assess changes in participants' reported data over time. Measures to control for social desirability could also be incorporated to control for response bias.

Conclusion

This study found students who self-reported with higher levels of gratitude to also self-perceive with higher well-being. Male and female students self-reported with similar levels of gratitude and well-being. Incorporating gratitude as a variable in the development of student support programmes may be of incremental benefit to promoting holistic student success.

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