

Gratitude and Forgiveness

By Liv Carle, Jamie Lee, Sean Liu, Anthony Londrigo, Jordon Manworren, Cam McAdam, Sadie Mueller, and Eliana Tandy

If We Are So Rich, Why Aren't We Happy? (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

- What causes happiness?
 - Materialist extreme: happiness is dependent on material possessions
 - Spiritual/Psychological extreme: happiness results from mental states and attitudes
 - **Flow states:** happiness stems from activities which demand the individual's full involvement and attention
- What is Happiness? Historical Perspectives
 - Enlightenment: pursuit of happiness involves individual motivation & social well-being
 - John Locke: Good is anything that increases pleasures or diminishes pain
 - Utilitarians: Good society = greatest happiness for the greatest number of people
 - Aristotle: happiness is the only intrinsic goal that people seek for its own sake
 - Epicurus: prudence & delayed gratification are necessary for happiness
 - ***Happiness has always been a notable pursuit***

The Ambiguous Relationship Between Material & Subjective Well-Being

- Are materialistic gains alone enough to produce happiness? **No!**
 - U.S. social pathology statistics show that Americans today are not happier than our ancestors, despite widespread material and monetary gains.
 - Wealthiest individuals in U.S. show only marginal increases in happiness compared to those with average incomes
 - U.S. Adolescents: inverse relationship between material and subjective well-being.
 - Children in lowest SES group report highest happiness.
 - Cross-national comparisons show reasonable correlations between a country's GNP and self-reported happiness... but there are many exceptions. Inconsistent overall.

Why Aren't Material Rewards Enough?

- **Escalation of expectations**

- Once individuals reach a goal, they become habituated, and then strive for the next tier
- Psychological cause

- **Relative Deprivation**

- Individuals compare their position to those who have the most
- Sociocultural cause

- **Need a variety in sources of happiness**

- Need more than just money and fame
- Sociocultural cause

- **Time Scarcity**

- As time becomes more valuable, less of it is spent on non-business pursuits of happiness
- Psychological cause

What does result in happiness?

- Psychological perspective: “Happiness is not something that happens to people, but something that they make happen”
- Religiosity and happiness show slight correlations
- **Flow** or autotelic experience can contribute to happiness
 - Experiences that are worth doing for their own sake
 - Happiness depends on the ability to derive flow from anything you do
 - Requires skill, concentration, and perseverance
- How do you create flow?
 - Create conditions that allow for full engagement in activities
 - Seek out flow in places that demand physical, mental, or emotional energy
- Flow limits: flow alone is not sufficient
 - Flow can be found in maladaptive activities
 - Flow can limit the enjoyable activities one can experience

In Conclusion...

- Find pleasure and flow in the activities that bring extended happiness and are productive to your own development
- Do not mistake imaginary happiness, which is largely based on external determinants, for real happiness.

Is Happiness Relative? (Brickman et al., 1978)

- Idea that happiness is relative is not a new one!
 - Individuals tend to enhance the relative value of their own outcome with someone else's less fortunate outcome.
- This study hypothesizes that if happiness was completely relative, the difference in general happiness between a group of lottery winners and a group of paraplegics would not be as different as we think.

So, how do we conceptualize our emotions in response to certain situations?

Affective Forecasting

- Referred to by the article when they state the results that although lottery winners rated winning the lottery as highly positive and paraplegics rated their incident as highly negative, “neither outcome was rated as extremely as might have been expected” (Brickman et al., 1978)
- What is **affective forecasting**? (Wilson and Gilbert, 2005)
 - Predicting how you may feel about a certain situation in the future
 - **Impact bias**: overestimating the intensity and duration of emotional experiences in response to certain events

People often fail to understand that the human mind is designed to return our emotional state to one of homeostasis and balance, and therefore, we recover from impactful events much more quickly than we actually think we do!

Hedonic Treadmill

- What is the **hedonic treadmill**?
 - Psychological theory that posits that humans have a tendency to return to a relatively stable level of happiness or subjective well-being despite changes in their circumstances or external conditions
 - We talk a lot about this in Dr. Butler's social psychology class!

This is just another way to say that humans tend to overestimate the strength and duration of an emotion they will experience in response to an impactful or emotional event.

What are some of the ways in which we employ emotional regulation in to help our minds return to an emotional state of homeostasis after a very impactful or emotional event?

Adaptation level theory!

Adaptation Level Theory (Brickman & Campbell, 1971)

States that people's judgements of their present level of stimulation will depend on their past experiences.

Contrast

Extreme experiences can make other experiences less enjoyable due to contrast.

Habituation

We grow habituated to our experiences and extreme experiences (on both ends of the spectrum) contribute to our baseline assessment of general happiness.

Do studies support this theory?

Studies

Study 1

Interviewed groups of paraplegic/quadriplegics, lottery winners, and a control group. Each group was asked various questions regarding their life (specific to each group) and also questions regarding their general happiness.

Examples of questions asked:

"Has your lifestyle changed in any way since you've won? How?"

or

"Do you feel you in any way deserved what happened?"

Findings and Discussion

Lottery winners took less pleasure than controls in a variety of ordinary events and *WERE NOT* in general happier than the controls.

Why?

How can this be justified with adaptation level theory?

Interesting caveat with accident victims: Accident victims did not tend to take more pleasure in ordinary events and rated themselves significantly less happy in general than controls. BUT, they did demonstrate adaptation level theory to some extent, in that they rated PAST ordinary events as more positive as opposed to present ordinary events. This is called the **nostalgia effect**.

So why is there a difference in happiness levels between the lottery winners and the control group?

2 major explanations:

1. Baseline satisfaction with life.
2. The study (study 1) shifted the focus of what happiness means.

There is a difference between reported levels of happiness in their past and their future, which can be explained by adaptation level theory!

Again, an exception for accident victims...

Possible Explanations

Good luck in a lottery can be more painful and stress-inducing than pleasurable (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Rahe, 1972; Vinokur & Selzer, 1975).

Lottery winners reported less pleasure in everyday events in order to appear modest and minimize importance of their success. ← not valid.

Winning the lottery changed the **perspective** people have on everyday events without changing the actual pleasure they received from these events.

Perspective Theory

Did not appear to be the case in this study as most victims didn't rate paralysis as the worst thing that could've possibly happened to them and lottery winners didn't rate winning the lottery as the best thing that could've possibly happened to them

Implications

Happiness is relative!

We, as observers, tend to overestimate the happiness (and despair) of others.

“Though overlooking compensatory contrast effects, we overestimate the overall magnitude and generality of the positive or negative feeling generated by an event. Through overlooking habituation effects, we overestimate the general duration of feeling generated by an event” (Brickman et al., 1978, p. 926).

Counting Blessings Vs Burdens (Emmons & McCullough 2003)

- The construct of gratitude is an area of great interest for almost all religions and scientists, but literature remains speculative and lacks scientific evidence
- Emmons & McCullough (2003) aim to examine the influence of grateful thinking on psychological and physical well-being in daily life and thereby putting popular and classical assumptions concerning the benefits of gratitude to the test

Gratitude, Happiness and Well-Being: Mechanisms of Association

- Gratitude is a complex emotion that has been linked to an array of positive or activating emotions (happiness, pride, hope, comfort, etc.)
- While gratitude is associated with many positive emotions and some negative, it is simultaneously distinct from them due to the unique way that individuals approach appraisals of gratitude (Weiner, 1985)
- Gratitude has numerous definitions that are all connected through the theme of recognition and appreciation of an altruistic gift
- Gratitude is also known as a state involving a combination of affect and cognition as predominant components (Clore, Ortony, & Foss, 1987)

Gratitude and Well-Being

- Savoring the positive circumstances of life has been noted as a potential adaptive psychological strategy to maintain a high level of well-being
 - Being grateful for what you have and not adapting to satisfaction
 - Grateful thinking may lead to enhanced psychological and social functioning
- Whether the association of gratitude and well-being is one of correlation or causation requires a study or studies that manipulate gratitude and measure well-being

Studies

- Study 1 – College Students
 - Students were asked to complete 10 weekly reports asking them to rate their well-being and list gratitude-inducing experiences, hassles, and events or circumstances that affected them in the week
- Study 2 – College Students
 - Students were provided 16 daily experience rating forms with the first 2 acting as practice days. The report itself mirrored that of the first study with the main difference being an additional section pertaining to participants health behaviors
- Study 3 – Adults with congenital and adult-onset neuromuscular diseases
 - Participants were provided 26 daily experience rating forms that were similar to those of study 2
- The hypothesis is that those in the gratitude focused group would show enhanced psychosocial functioning relative to persons in the hassles and life events groups (Study 1), hassles and downward social comparison groups (Study 2), and to a true control group (Study 3)

Results

- Study 1

- The participants in the gratitude group rated their life more favorably on these two items than did participants in the hassles group or events group and additionally experienced fewer symptoms of physical illness. No correlation was found between gratitude and global positive or negative affect.

- Study 2

- This study aimed to more intensively cultivate gratitude. Unlike study 1, participants in the gratitude group showed higher levels of positive affect but did not demonstrate somatic benefits. Prosocial motivation was also increased with participants in the gratitude group becoming more likely to report that they had offered emotional support or had helped someone with an emotional problem.

- Study 3

- As study 1 found, participants in the gratitude group rated their life more favorably. As study 2 found, global positive affect was higher but negative affect was also found to be lower. One of the goals of this study was to find consistency on the somatic benefits of gratitude but, consistent with study 2, no effects were found on physical health or health behaviors.

- The studies together show that daily evaluation is more effective at facilitating gratitude than weekly and that gratitude has positive implications in life satisfaction, prosocial motivation, sleep quality, global affect, and potentially physical health

Gratitude as a Motivator of Self Improvement (Armenta et al 2017)

How is **Gratitude** defined?

- Recognized two ways:
 - Affective
 - Frequent positive emotions, Infrequent negative emotions
 - Cognitive
 - Global sense of life satisfaction
- State that requires one to endorse two facts:
 - (a) that one has achieved a positive outcome,
 - (b) that this positive outcome came from an external source
- Two types:
 - **benefit-triggered gratitude**: felt in response to a specific action by another person (*used in the study*)
 - general gratitude: broader appreciation or thankfulness for what is important and meaningful in one's life

How do positive emotions motivate positive behaviours?

Broaden and Build Theory

- All positive emotions share a common evolutionary function:
 - Expand individual's cognitive scope in order to cultivate personal resources
 - Lead to **positive/upward spirals**
- Negative emotions narrow cognitive focus to survival oriented behaviors

Do distinct positive emotions function in unique ways?

- At least 12 representative positive emotions
 - joy, love, gratitude, admiration, elevation, awe, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, and inspiration
- Each of these emotions is theorized to facilitate the growth of specific personal resource

How Does Gratitude Facilitate Self Improvement?

Gratitude compels people towards prosocial or reciprocal action

- compels individuals to perform future kind acts not only towards their benefactors, but also towards people uninvolved in the initial interaction

Motivating and energizing, motivates positive behaviors

- Academic performance, progress towards goals, coping with challenge, social involvement, exercise and other self improvement behaviors

Four paths:

- Connectedness, elevation, humility, specific negative states

Connectedness

- Increases in **connectedness** →
 - Increases one's commitment to prove oneself worthy of the relationship with one's benefactor
 - strengthens the desire to stay healthy and active
 - feeling encouraged and inspired by a role model
- **Find-remind-and-bind theory**
 - Gratitude makes people recognize and acknowledge relationships with others and engage in behaviors to manage interpersonal conflict and bring them closer together
- Social support
 - Gives people a safe and stable foundation so they can better commit to self improvement

Elevation

Elevation:

- associated with a warm feeling in the chest, a desire to help others and be a better person, and feeling moved, uplifted, and inspired to emulate the good deeds of others
- Gratitude makes people more aware of moral (for the good of others) acts around them
 - Increased feelings of elevation
 - engage in more prosocial behavior

Humility

Humility:

- ability to accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses, increased openness to critical feedback, and acknowledgement of the need for self-improvement
- Gratitude involves acknowledging that one received a positive outcome they didn't necessarily earn
 - May be humbling and motivate people to prove they are deserving/worthy of those benefits
 - Increases openness to self improvement

Specific Negative States

More recent research has revealed that some negative emotions can motivate self improvement

- **Indebtedness**
 - Often feel gratitude in a subordinate position
 - Your success is not entirely your doing, you have to repay people who helped you in some way
 - May be part of the link between gratitude and self improvement motivation
- **Guilt**
 - Negative reinforcement - want to reduce feelings of guilt so more motivated to repay your benefactor
- **Other negative emotions also elicited**
 - Layous 2016 study found that people who had to write gratitude letters to someone who helped them reported more discomfort and embarrassment than a control group

These negative emotions can bolster individuals' motivation to improve themselves, thus leading to self-improvement

However...

Gratitude does not always motivate positive outcomes

- Depressed individuals
 - Negative states induced may have stronger effect and actually be more disheartening
 - Overwhelming feelings of guilt or discomfort
 - Unforeseen negative impacts
 - Watkins 2014 study: individuals not being able to recall an instance where someone helped them and in turn feeling more socially isolated and upset
- Different cultures
 - Collectivist cultures where helping other people is expected and expressing gratitude could be seen as out of character or offensive

Insecure Gratitude

If gratitude expressed is not genuine, it can backfire!

- People often express gratitude for extrinsic reasons
 - Social pressure, obligation, appear more likable, gain more favors, make themselves feel better about accepting kindness

Benefits on motivation for self improvement only happen when gratitude is genuine and gratitude expressed is sincere

What is Forgiveness? (McCullough et al 2011)

Distinct from:

- Pardon
 - More related to legality
- Condonation
 - Implies justifying the transgression
 - Also more legal
- Excusing
 - Implies recognizing that the transgressor had a good reason for committing the transgression
- Reconciliation
 - Implies restoration of a relationship
 - Not always the case!

What is Forgiveness? (McCullough et al 2011)

Webster's Dictionary (1983) – forgiveness is “to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; to stop being angry with; to pardon”

→ mentions pardon, but that's okay because it has the essence of forgiveness: prosocial motivational change on the victim's part!

Assumes that most people are (initially) motivated to respond to transgressions with other negative behavior

→ particularly to **avoid contact** with the transgressor + to **seek revenge**

What happens when we forgive?

- Counteract/modulate motivations to avoid the transgressor/seek revenge
 - so that the probability of restoring positive relations with their transgressor is increased
 - at least that's what we assume!
- Reduced *potential* for avoidance/revenge!

The Forgiving Personality

Three traits:

1. Agreeableness
2. Emotional stability
3. Religiousness/spirituality

We will go in depth into all of these!

Agreeableness

Characterized by altruism, empathy, care + generosity

People who are high in agreeableness tend to thrive in interpersonal situations + have less conflict in relationships

Also would typically be rated high on traits like ‘forgiving’ but low on traits like ‘vengeful’

Tend to be *less* exploitative of + *more* empathetic toward others

Reported higher levels of moral responsibility + demonstrated a greater tendency to share resources with people who have been rude + inconsiderate to them!

Emotional Stability

a.k.a. lower neuroticism

Lower vulnerability to experiences of negative emotion

Tend to not be overly moody or sensitive

People who are more emotionally stable score higher on measures of the disposition to forgive than others

Religiousness + Spirituality

People who consider themselves highly religious/spiritual tend to value forgiveness more highly

Also see themselves as more forgiving than those who are not religious/spiritual

Future research - specific transgressors?

Consider themselves more forgiving doesn't necessarily mean actually more forgiving...

What do people do when they forgive?

They do three things!

1. Empathize with the transgressor
2. Make generous attributions + appraisals
3. Ruminate about the transgression

More on these!

Empathy for the Transgressor

The vicarious experience of the transgressor's state

Correlated with the extent to which a victim forgives their transgressor

(also characterized by compassion, tenderness + sympathy)

More likely to pick up on vulnerability

Empathy fosters forgiveness!

Generous Attributions + Appraisals

Perceive transgressor as more likable and attribute less responsibility to them for negative behavior

Also perceive their explanations for the transgression as more adequate + honest

Forgiveness is correlated with the victim's appraisal of the severity of the transgression

Inclined to give the benefit of the doubt

Important to remember: every situation is different!

Rumination about the Transgression

The more the victim ruminates about the transgression, the higher their levels of avoidance + revenge are

Rumination is directly correlated with **avoidance + revenge** → negative behavior
(which is exactly what we assume forgivers are *not* motivated by!)

Considerably less progress in forgiveness in 8 weeks

Research + Theory So Far

People who are more likely to forgive are:

- more agreeable
- more emotionally stable
- more religious/spiritual

When people forgive, they are more likely to:

- empathize with the transgressor
- make generous appraisals/attributions about the transgressor/transgression
- *not* ruminate about the transgression

Future Research

Explore the cognitive + emotional habits of people who are predisposed to forgiveness!

- ex: agreeableness reflects a tendency toward kindness + prosociality → more empathetic toward transgressors
- ex: emotionally stable people might find forgiveness easier because of perceptual processes
 - perceive many environmental factors (eg: physical pain, negative life events) less negatively than more neurotic people
 - also ruminate less!
 - less avoidance + seeking revenge

Future Research

Could also benefit from theoretical refinements

Modern trait theory → basic traits are “channelized” into characteristic adaptations

“one’s approaches to negotiating life within their own cultural and environmental context”

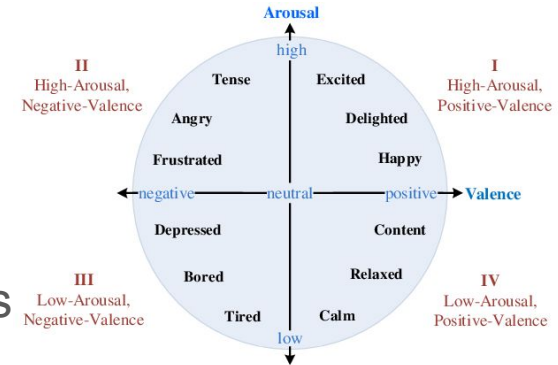
Why are more agreeable + emotionally stable people more predisposed to forgiveness? (characteristic or goal?)

Grudges and Forgiveness(Witvliet et al. 2001)

- Interpersonal offences often hurt or change relationships
- The methods in which we respond to these offenses can have potentially drastic effects on health
 - Unforgiving responses often associated with increased chances for **coronary heart disease and premature death**
 - Forgiving responses associated with **reduced risk** for coronary heart disease
- Other approaches focus on allostasis and allostatic load
 - **Allostasis** involves the changes in physiological symptoms in the presence of internal and external stressors
 - Allostasis is **required for survival**, but over **long periods** of time allosteric load builds up and leads to physiological breakdown.

The Theoretical Framework(Witvliet et al. 2001)

- Dimensional approach to emotion
- Valence(positive-negative) is important for the **facial expression**
- Arousal(high-low) is important for the other **physiological symptoms** such as increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Interpersonal transgressions **stimulate negative and arousing memories** which act as a negative emotion(a grudge)
 - Cause physiological symptoms as negative emotion would
- Forgiveness creates more **pleasant imagery** and acts as a positive emotion



Two approaches to forgiveness and grudges(Witvliet et al. 2001)

- Unforgiving responses keep the negative emotion going and hence increase the adverse physiological reactions
 - **Rehearsing the hurt** refers to repeating the memories of a painful experience, often unconsciously
 - **Harboring a grudge** refers to keeping yourself as the victim and constantly reiterating the negative emotion
- Forgiving responses focus on letting go of negative emotions and reducing adverse physiological repercussions
 - **Developing feels of empathy** involves looking at the perpetrator and understanding the situation that caused the transgression; humanizing.
 - **Forgiveness** involves building a positive reaction towards the perpetrator by letting go of the negative emotions associated with them

Implications (Witvliet et al. 2001)

- In Witvliet study the outcomes in response to unforgiving and forgiving conditions were as expected.
 - Unforgiving caused negative emotions and physiological reactions and forgiving reduced both
- The nature of the short term experiences in the study are not likely to causes long term negative consequences
- It is hypothesized that in real life situations people tend to **intensify hurtful memories and vengeful thoughts** and display this imagery through **behaviors(i.e. Slamming doors)**
 - This in turn boosts the adverse physiological effects in both intensity and duration
- Developing methods for thinking about offenders in forgiving ways may allow to **change emotional responses and behaviors and improve overall health**