

Level of Happiness and Gratitude: A Theoretical Review of Their Conceptual Relationship

Dr. Nasreen Taj¹, Dr. Vani R, Ballal²

^{1,2} Associate Professor, Department of Psychology Maharani's Arts College for Women, Mysore

Abstract—Happiness and gratitude are two important constructs within positive psychology and have received considerable attention in psychological, social, and behavioural research. Happiness generally refers to an individual's subjective experience of positive emotions, life satisfaction, and overall psychological well-being, whereas gratitude involves recognizing and appreciating positive experiences, benefits, or contributions received from others, circumstances, or life itself. Although conceptually distinct, the two constructs appear to be closely associated. This theoretical review examines the relationship between levels of happiness and gratitude by considering major conceptual perspectives and findings from empirical research. The review discusses the nature of happiness and gratitude, theoretical explanations for their relationship, possible psychological and social mechanisms, and evidence concerning gratitude-based practices. Existing research suggests that individuals with greater dispositional gratitude tend to report higher subjective well-being and life satisfaction. Experimental and meta-analytic evidence also indicates that gratitude interventions can produce small improvements in well-being, although the magnitude and consistency of these effects vary according to intervention design, outcome measures, and cultural context. The review concludes that gratitude may contribute to happiness by directing attention toward positive experiences, strengthening social relationships, and encouraging adaptive interpretations of life circumstances. However, gratitude should not be viewed as a universal or sufficient explanation for happiness, as happiness is influenced by multiple psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors.

Index Terms—happiness, gratitude, subjective well-being, positive psychology, life satisfaction, positive emotions

I. INTRODUCTION

Happiness is one of the most widely valued aspects of human life. Across cultures and societies, individuals

generally seek conditions that allow them to experience satisfaction, positive emotions, meaningful relationships, and a sense of well-being. In psychological research, happiness is commonly examined through the broader concept of subjective well-being, which includes positive affect, relatively low levels of negative affect, and satisfaction with life. Thus, happiness is not simply a temporary pleasurable emotion; it can also represent an individual's overall evaluation of the quality and meaningfulness of life. The scientific study of happiness expanded considerably with the development of positive psychology. Rather than focusing exclusively on psychological disorders and dysfunction, positive psychology examines strengths, positive emotions, relationships, meaning, and conditions that enable individuals and communities to flourish. Within this framework, gratitude has emerged as an important psychological construct.

Gratitude can be understood as an emotional response to recognizing and appreciating a benefit received. It may involve appreciation for another person's kindness, recognition of favourable circumstances, appreciation of nature, or a broader sense of thankfulness for life. Gratitude can occur as a temporary emotional state, but it can also represent a relatively stable disposition. Research on the "grateful disposition" has linked gratitude with several indicators of psychological well-being, including optimism, life satisfaction, hope, and positive emotions.

The relationship between gratitude and happiness is therefore an important area of study. If gratitude encourages individuals to notice and appreciate positive aspects of their lives, it may contribute to greater happiness. At the same time, happier individuals may be more likely to recognize positive experiences and express gratitude. Consequently, the

relationship may be reciprocal rather than strictly causal.

This paper provides a theoretical review of the concepts of happiness and gratitude and examines the mechanisms through which they may be associated.

II. CONCEPT OF HAPPINESS

Happiness is a multidimensional psychological construct. In everyday language, it is often understood as feeling good or experiencing pleasure. Psychological research, however, treats happiness more broadly.

One important perspective defines happiness through subjective well-being (SWB). Subjective well-being involves how individuals evaluate and experience their lives. It includes cognitive evaluations such as life satisfaction and affective experiences such as positive and negative emotions.

From a hedonic perspective, happiness is associated with pleasure, positive emotions, and the absence or reduction of unpleasant emotional experiences. From a broader eudemonic perspective, well-being also involves meaning, personal growth, purpose, and psychological functioning. These perspectives suggest that happiness cannot be reduced to momentary pleasure.

An individual's level of happiness may be influenced by personality, relationships, socioeconomic circumstances, health, social environment, goals, expectations, and interpretations of life events. Consequently, happiness should be regarded as a complex outcome rather than the result of one psychological characteristic.

III. CONCEPT OF GRATITUDE

Gratitude is generally described as the recognition and appreciation of positive outcomes or benefits. It commonly occurs when an individual recognizes that something valuable has been received, particularly when another person is perceived to have intentionally contributed to that benefit.

Gratitude can be conceptualized at two levels:

1. State gratitude – a temporary feeling of thankfulness arising in response to a particular event.

2. Trait or dispositional gratitude – a relatively stable tendency to notice and appreciate positive aspects of life.

This distinction is important because a person may occasionally experience gratitude without generally possessing a highly grateful disposition.

Gratitude also has an interpersonal dimension. Saying "thank you," helping others, acknowledging another person's contribution, or expressing appreciation can strengthen social connections. Thus, gratitude is not only an internal emotional experience but can also function as a social behaviour.

Research has found associations between gratitude and positive psychological characteristics such as optimism, hope, life satisfaction, empathy, forgiveness, and prosocial behaviour. Gratitude has also been associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, materialism, and envy in correlational research.

IV. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND GRATITUDE

The theoretical relationship between happiness and gratitude can be understood in several ways.

Gratitude as a source of positive emotion: Gratitude may increase happiness by directing attention toward positive experiences. Individuals who regularly recognize things for which they are grateful may become more aware of positive aspects of their daily lives.

For example, an individual who consciously appreciates supportive relationships, opportunities, achievements, or ordinary positive experiences may experience more frequent positive emotions. Repeated attention to such experiences could contribute to a more favourable evaluation of life.

Thus, gratitude may function as a psychological process through which positive experiences become more salient.

Gratitude and life satisfaction: Life satisfaction represents a cognitive evaluation of one's life as a whole. Gratitude may influence life satisfaction by encouraging individuals to evaluate what they possess rather than focusing exclusively on what they lack.

A person who recognizes existing resources, relationships, achievements, and opportunities may develop a more positive assessment of life. This does not necessarily mean ignoring difficulties. Rather,

gratitude may provide a broader perspective in which positive and negative experiences are considered together.

The association between gratitude and life satisfaction has been repeatedly observed in psychological research, supporting the idea that gratitude is relevant to subjective well-being.

Gratitude and social relationships: Social relationships are a major component of happiness. Gratitude can strengthen relationships because expressing appreciation communicates recognition and value.

When individuals feel appreciated, they may be more willing to maintain supportive interactions. Similarly, people who regularly recognize the contributions of others may develop stronger interpersonal bonds.

Consequently, gratitude may influence happiness indirectly through social relationships. The process can be conceptualized as:

Gratitude and positive cognitive processes: Gratitude may also influence the way individuals interpret life experiences. People naturally differ in the aspects of an experience to which they pay attention. A grateful orientation may increase attention to benefits, support, opportunities, and positive outcomes.

This does not imply that grateful people never experience sadness, stress, or disappointment. Instead, gratitude may provide an additional perspective that helps individuals recognize positive elements even during challenging circumstances.

V. THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

Several psychological perspectives can help explain the relationship between gratitude and happiness.

Positive psychology perspective

Positive psychology views gratitude as a psychological strength that can contribute to positive functioning. Rather than simply reducing negative states, gratitude may help cultivate positive emotions, relationships, and psychological resources.

From this perspective, happiness is supported not only by removing problems but also by developing positive psychological capacities.

Broaden-and-build perspective

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions proposes that positive emotional experiences can broaden an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire and contribute to the development of enduring psychological and social resources.

Gratitude may generate positive emotions that encourage individuals to engage with others, reflect on positive experiences, and develop social resources. Over time, these resources may contribute to greater psychological well-being.

Social perspective

Gratitude has a strong interpersonal component. Expressions of appreciation can communicate recognition and strengthen social bonds. Supportive relationships, in turn, are closely associated with happiness.

Therefore, part of the relationship between gratitude and happiness may operate through interpersonal processes rather than through individual emotion alone.

VI. EVIDENCE FROM GRATITUDE INTERVENTIONS

The relationship between gratitude and happiness has been investigated not only through correlational research but also through intervention studies.

Gratitude interventions commonly include activities such as maintaining a gratitude journal, writing gratitude lists, reflecting on positive experiences, or writing a gratitude letter. These activities are designed to intentionally increase attention to and appreciation of positive experiences.

A randomized clinical trial examining a 14-day daily gratitude-list intervention reported increases in positive affect, subjective happiness, and life satisfaction, alongside reductions in negative affect and depressive symptoms. However, the results also indicated that some outcomes changed similarly in another active intervention condition, suggesting that the benefits of gratitude should not automatically be interpreted as uniquely attributable to gratitude itself.

A systematic review and meta-analysis of 64 randomized clinical trials found that gratitude interventions were associated with greater feelings of gratitude, better mental health, fewer anxiety and depression symptoms, and more positive mood and emotions.

These findings suggest that gratitude interventions can be beneficial, but their effects should be understood as generally modest rather than as a guaranteed or dramatic increase in happiness.

VII. GRATITUDE, HAPPINESS, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

An important issue in understanding gratitude and happiness is culture. Happiness is not conceptualized identically across societies. Some cultures emphasize individual achievement and personal satisfaction, while others place greater emphasis on social harmony, family relationships, duty, and collective well-being.

Gratitude is similarly influenced by cultural norms. What constitutes an appropriate expression of gratitude, toward whom gratitude should be expressed, and how gratitude is experienced may vary across cultural contexts.

The recent cross-cultural meta-analysis of gratitude interventions found significant differences in intervention effects across countries, although the researchers could not identify specific moderators that fully explained these differences. This finding highlights the importance of considering cultural context when studying gratitude and well-being.

Therefore, theories of gratitude and happiness should avoid assuming that psychological processes operate identically in all populations.

Possible Mechanisms Linking Gratitude with Happiness

Based on the theoretical and empirical literature, several mechanisms may explain the association between gratitude and happiness.

Attention to positive experiences

Gratitude may increase awareness of positive events and resources. By repeatedly identifying things that are appreciated, individuals may become more attentive to positive experiences in everyday life.

Positive emotional experiences

Recognizing benefits and expressing appreciation can generate positive emotions. Repeated positive emotional experiences may contribute to higher subjective well-being.

Social connectedness

Gratitude can promote appreciation and prosocial behavior, potentially strengthening interpersonal relationships and increasing perceived social support.

Positive reinterpretation

Gratitude may encourage individuals to interpret life experiences from a broader perspective. Even when circumstances are imperfect, recognizing available

support or positive aspects may contribute to adaptive coping.

Reduction of negative comparison

A grateful orientation may reduce excessive attention to what others possess or what one lacks. This could potentially reduce envy and dissatisfaction and support greater contentment.

These mechanisms should be considered interconnected rather than independent. Gratitude may influence happiness through a combination of emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal pathways.

VIII. LIMITATIONS AND CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although the relationship between gratitude and happiness is supported by a substantial body of research, several limitations should be considered.

First, correlation does not establish causation. People with greater happiness may naturally report greater gratitude. Therefore, an association between the two variables does not necessarily mean that gratitude alone causes happiness.

Second, many studies rely on self-report measures. Participants may report higher gratitude or happiness because of social desirability, expectations, or differences in how they interpret questionnaire items.

Third, gratitude interventions differ substantially. Some involve journaling, some involve gratitude letters, and others use structured reflection or multiple activities. Therefore, the effects of one type of intervention should not automatically be generalized to all forms of gratitude practice.

Fourth, intervention effects may be relatively small. The recent large-scale meta-analysis found a small overall effect on well-being, suggesting that gratitude should be considered one potential contributor to well-being rather than a complete solution to unhappiness.

Finally, cultural differences require greater attention. Psychological constructs developed primarily within particular cultural contexts may not capture the full meaning of gratitude and happiness across different societies.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Future research should investigate the relationship between gratitude and happiness using longitudinal

and experimental designs. Longitudinal studies could help determine whether changes in gratitude predict subsequent changes in happiness over time.

Researchers should also examine possible mediators such as social connectedness, positive affect, resilience, meaning in life, and cognitive appraisal. Such research could clarify how gratitude contributes to well-being rather than simply demonstrating that the two variables are associated.

Cross-cultural research is particularly important. Studies involving diverse populations could examine whether the meaning and psychological function of gratitude differ across cultural environments.

Future studies should also compare gratitude interventions with other positive psychology interventions and psychologically active control conditions. This would help determine whether gratitude has distinctive effects or whether some of its benefits result from broader processes such as self-reflection, attention, behavioural activation, or social engagement.

X. CONCLUSION

Happiness and gratitude are closely related but conceptually distinct dimensions of positive psychological functioning. Happiness reflects an individual's positive emotional experiences and broader evaluation of life, whereas gratitude involves recognizing and appreciating benefits, positive experiences, and contributions from others or circumstances.

Theoretical perspectives suggest several pathways through which gratitude may contribute to happiness. Gratitude can direct attention toward positive experiences, promote positive emotions, strengthen social relationships, encourage adaptive cognitive interpretations, and potentially increase life satisfaction. Empirical evidence generally supports a positive association between gratitude and well-being. Intervention research also suggests that intentionally practicing gratitude can improve aspects of well-being, although the effects are generally modest and vary across contexts.

The strongest conclusion is therefore not that gratitude automatically produces happiness, but that gratitude represents one potentially important psychological resource within a larger system of factors contributing to well-being. Happiness is influenced by

relationships, personality, circumstances, meaning, health, social conditions, and individual interpretations of life. Gratitude may complement these factors by helping individuals recognize and appreciate the positive resources already present in their lives.

Understanding the relationship between happiness and gratitude can contribute to the development of psychologically informed approaches to well-being. At the same time, future research should continue to examine cultural variation, causal mechanisms, intervention effectiveness, and the conditions under which gratitude is most beneficial.

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