

## Gratitude, Hope and Humour: Their role in Happiness of Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Every individual desires to be happy in life. Besides external situations the inner strengths of a person are found to play a key role in making life constantly happy and fulfilling. In the present study the strengths of gratitude, hope and humour have been studied to find out their role in happiness amongst college students of age group 18-24 years. These strengths have been measured by the Value in Action Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The three happiness orientations i.e., meaning, pleasure and engagement have been measured with the help of Orientation to Happiness Scale (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005). The data have been analysed by correlation and multiple regression analysis. All the three strengths were found to have significant positive correlation (ranging from 0.22 to 0.45) with each of the happiness orientations. The regression model indicated that gratitude, hope and humour significantly predicted each of the three happiness orientations. Individually, gratitude predicted pleasure and engagement, hope predicted meaning and engagement and humor predicted only pleasure orientation.

**Keywords:** Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Meaning, Pleasure, Engagement

**H**appy individuals are the most productive assets for the society. The present study has been conducted on the college students who can be designated as young adults. Young adults are those who have achieved sexual maturity but whose personality is still developing as they gain further experience. Till the end of adolescence, the child has learned the basic skills which are necessary for playing the future role of a responsible adult. Psychologically, this period is marked by taking responsibility for oneself and making independent decisions. In this period, the students have a predetermined vision and direction to move forward. Happiness is more crucial to this stage as the happy adults have been found to be more physically active, have higher self-esteem, better in interpersonal relationships, perform better in academic achievement and work life. Happy youth are also found to be less prone to counter-productive behaviour such as alcoholism, substance abuse and criminal acts. Keeping in mind all these things, the policy makers are found to be very keen to know the things that are crucial for the happiness of youth.

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Happiness is not only dependent on external situations as different people may interpret same situation differently. Having some traits enables a person to create happiness in neutral or challenging life situations. Positive psychology focuses on the inner strengths of a person to increase well-being and happiness in life, keeping aside the negative aspects of life. Gratitude, humour and hope are some of these strengths that may play vital role to increase happiness levels in people's life.

Gratitude, hope and humour cover all the three aspects of life i.e., past, present and future. Gratitude is the generalised tendency of a person to perceive the good and be grateful for what has happened in the past or already exist in life. Humour enables a person to interact in playful manner in the present and makes it pleasurable. Hope makes a person expecting and desiring positive outcome in the future. An individual's tendency to be grateful for the things received in the past (gratitude); interacting in a playful manner in the present (humour) and to expect positive for the future (hope) increases the happiness in his/her life.

In the midst of multiple challenges related to the academic, work or personal life the role of strengths such as gratitude, humour and hope become more crucial. The present study is aimed at finding out how these strengths contribute to the way one feels happy.

In this study these variables have been studied as the character strengths. The Value in Action (VIA) classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) identifies six virtues i.e., wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence and under these there are twenty-four-character strengths, which are the 'psychological components' making up these virtues. Virtues are the core valued characteristics or "qualities desired of people due to intrinsic worth". Different virtues are made up of different number of character strengths. Hope, humour and gratitude are related to the virtue of transcendence. Therefore, conceptually, they share similar function of connecting one with the larger universe (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Various findings indicate that having these strengths changes the way one perceives the circumstances, events or actions and increase the happiness in different ways.

Happiness is "the extent to which people think and feel that their lives are going well" (Lucas & Diener, 2008). The hedonic views define happiness as pleasant feelings whereas, eudemonic views believe that it involves doing what is virtuous, morally right, meaningful and growth producing. There are three orientations to happiness i.e. meaning, pleasure and engagement based on strategies that individuals use to promote well-being (Peterson et al., 2005). Pleasure-oriented people focus on positive emotions and pleasure to increase their happiness. Happiness is not limited to pleasurable feeling. Sometimes a neutral sort of experience can bring a deep sense of satisfaction. Meaning oriented people find more happiness by doing acts in service of the common good. People who are engagement orientated seek happiness by experiencing flow which is experienced when they are completely absorbed in something, and lose the sense of time, surroundings and bodily sensations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### ***Gratitude***

Gratitude is the quality of being thankful and appreciate. It includes feeling grateful towards people for something good done by them as well as a generalised feeling of thankfulness towards every little thing or situation of life. We often take for granted many good things in our life. Gratitude is about noticing and appreciating them. It is one of the many positive emotions. The feelings of gratitude can be described in a number of words. We might say we feel thankful, lucky, fortunate or blessed. Gratitude can be studied at trait and state level

(Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2003). At the state level it is conceptualised as an emotion or affective response. Bono and McCullough (2006) defined it as “a positive psychological reaction towards an interpersonal benefit received”. In other words, it is benefit-triggered gratitude. At the trait level, it is generalised gratitude and predisposes a person to experience gratitude for all little or big gifts in life. The strength of gratitude in the VIA classification is dispositional in nature (Chan, 2010). Feeling grateful on a regular basis can have a big effect on our lives. In a study, college students were asked to keep a record of their blessings on daily or weekly basis by keeping a gratitude journal. The participants who were maintaining gratitude record reported higher levels of positive states (Galati, Manzano & Sotgiu, 2006). In another study on Chinese school teachers gratitude of teachers was found positively correlated with meaning orientation to happiness. The more grateful teachers seek more meaning oriented happiness than less grateful teachers. The study suggested that grateful people focus more on meaning orientation to happiness as compared to pleasure (Chan, 2010).

### **Hope**

Hope is “a feeling of expectation along with a desire for a certain thing to happen”. As a positive psychological construct, it was developed by Snyder in 1989. Hope is the state of a person that promotes the desire of positive outcomes in different circumstances. Dufault and Martocchio (1985) consider it as “a dynamic life force which involves a certain expectation of achieving something good which is realistic and has personal significance for a person”. Hope is strongest when it entails valued goals. Fredrickson (2009) defines hope as a positive emotional experience. In the VIA classification it has been taken as a character strength related to transcendence virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Accordingly, it is an enduring trait of a person to expect positive outcome in future. Several studies have ascertained that the people who are hopeful tend to be happier than others. The students high in hope experience more happiness than others. In a study conducted on young adults the relationship of happiness to character strengths was studied in different samples. Gratitude and hope were among those strengths that showed greater associations with happiness (Shimai, Otake, Park et al., 2006).

### **Humour**

Humour is a universal phenomenon that can be seen in people of all places and ages. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), it involves creating troubles or contradictions which doesn't produce anger or terror but are pleasurable. Martin (2007) defines humour as “a way for people to interact in playful manner”. Humour has been considered as one of the most controversial strengths (Edwards, 2013). It has been studied as a virtue as well as a vice. The humour in the VIA-inventory has been taken as a strength that adds to the transcendence virtue and accordingly, it is a positive trait expressed in thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It improves the social relationship among people and makes them feel more connected. In this context, an individual with the trait of humour is explained as “one who is skilled at laughing and gentle teasing, at bringing smiles to the faces of others, at seeing the lighter side, and at making (not necessarily telling) jokes” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

However, other approaches such as humour style questionnaire (HSQ) define humour as a virtue as well as a vice (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003). The positive uses of humour and relative absence of negative uses can be taken as strength according to the HSQ approach (Edwards, 2013). The VIA inventory measures only virtuous humour. It has also been supported by some studies (for e.g., Beermann and Ruch, 2009). Humour is a character strength that is found to be most strongly related to the pleasure-orientation to

happiness (Peterson et al., 2007). According to Edwards (2013), humour has a more positive relationship with the pleasure orientation because of its playful nature and it is less related to engagement orientation because it distracts from something serious.

Past researches have shown that different strengths relate to different happiness orientations. Apter (1991) explained telic and paratelic states of mind. The paratelic state is a playful state of mind which is present oriented whereas telic state is goal-directed state involving more seriousness. He further explained that gratitude relates to the telic state and humour relates to the paratelic state which makes gratitude more closely related to meaning orientation and humour to pleasure orientation. Lee, Foo, Adams, Morgan and Frewen (2015) investigated different hypotheses to investigate the relationships among strengths of character, happiness orientations, life satisfaction and purpose for adults. Along with some other strengths, they found gratitude to be significantly associated with meaning and humour associated most with pleasure.

### ***Objective***

The objective of the present study is to find out how the strengths of gratitude, hope and humour relate and contribute to different happiness orientations (i.e., meaning, pleasure and engagement) in college students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research participants***

The participants of this study are the college students of age group 18-24 years. The sample size is N=120 (60 male and 60 female). The sample has been drawn from the colleges in urban areas only.

### ***Measures***

**i) Value in Action Inventory of Strengths** (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is a 120 items self-report inventory that measures character strengths of adults of age 18 and above. It uses 5-point likert-scale to measure the degree to which respondents endorse strength-relevant statements about themselves (1 = very much unlike me through 5 = very much like me). This assessment was derived by Dr Robert McGrath from the original VIA-240 (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) by taking the 5 items for each scale with the highest corrected item-total correlations. Average internal consistency reliability is .79. The internal consistency reliability for gratitude, hope and humour is .87, .79 and .75 respectively. Initial validity coefficients are between .39 and .50 and are slightly lower than for the VIA-IS.

**ii) Orientations to Happiness scale** (Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005). It is an 18-item measure used to know the use of three approaches to happiness: meaning, pleasure and engagement. There are six items for each subscale. Participants respond using a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = ‘very much unlike me’ to 5 = ‘very much like me’). Scores can be obtained for all the three orientations. The reliabilities of each subscale have been found  $\alpha=0.84$  for meaning,  $\alpha=0.81$  for pleasure and  $\alpha=0.74$  for engagement. Items for this measure were contributed by independent experts showing its face validity and high correlations with other measures of meaning, pleasure and engagement have been found (Peterson et al., 2005).

### ***Procedure***

The sample was selected using random sampling. The data was collected as per the convenience of the participants. After taking informed consent, the tests were administered individually as well as in groups. The data was analysed with the help of correlation and

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simultaneous multiple regression to study the three strengths as predictor of the happiness orientations.

### RESULTS

The results have been shown in table 1, 2 and 3. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics. The correlation coefficients between each of the studied strength and each happiness orientation were calculated for the sample. Table 2 shows that all the three strengths had a significant positive correlation with each of the happiness orientation i.e., meaning, pleasure and engagement, with the correlation coefficients ranging from 0.22-0.45.

**Table 1. Descriptive (N=120)**

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean (SD)
Gratitude	11	25	19.11 (2.930)
Hope	10	25	20.03 (3.054)
Humor	11	25	19.44 (3.116)
Meaning	14	29	22.39 (3.237)
Pleasure	14	30	24.52 (3.021)
Engagement	13	29	22.78 (2.926)

**Table 2. Correlations (N=120)**

	Gratitude	Hope	Humor	Meaning	Pleasure	Engagement
Gratitude	—					
Hope	.452**	—				
Humor	.334**	.266**	—			
Meaning	.310**	.395**	.264**	—		
Pleasure	.444**	.371**	.449**	.360**	—	
Engagement	.331**	.337**	.219*	.413**	.415**	—

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Simultaneous multiple regression analysis was then performed to analyse the overall model as predictor of different happiness orientations. It was also examined which of these strengths are the best predictors of a particular happiness orientation. Table 3 shows the regression coefficients.

**Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis with Meaning, Pleasure and Engagement as Dependent Variables (N=120)**

	Meaning				Pleasure				Engagement			
	B	$\beta$	t	p	B	$\beta$	t	p	B	$\beta$	t	p
Constant	10.48	-	4.51	<.001	10.06	-	5.05	<.001	12.99	-	6.06	<.001
Gratitude	.14	.13	1.32	.190	.27	.26**	2.95	.004	.199	.199*	2.03	.045
Hope	.32	.30**	3.18	.002	.17	.17	1.94	.055	.21	.22*	2.31	.023
Humour	.15	.14	1.59	.114	.31	.32**	3.86	<.001	.09	.09	1.03	.307
F	9.382**			<.001	18.232**			<.001	7.453**			<.001
R <sup>2</sup>	.195				.32				.162			

Note. B=Unstandardized regression coefficient,  $\beta$ =Standardised regression coefficient \*\* $p<0.01$ , \* $p<0.05$

The regression model studied gratitude, hope and humor as predictors of the three orientations to happiness. Table 3 shows the unstandardized regression coefficient (B), standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ ), t-value and significance level (p) for each of the three happiness orientations.

Table 3 shows that the overall regression model predicting the meaning was found significant  $F(3,116) = 9.382, p < .001, R^2 = .19$ . The significant positive correlations were also found between gratitude and meaning  $r(118) = .31, p < .01$ ; hope and meaning  $r(118) = .39, p < .01$ ; humor and meaning  $r(118) = .26, p < .01$  (see Table 2). The effect size for meaning i.e.,  $R^2 = .195$  indicated that overall, 19.5 per cent variance in meaning was caused by these three predictors. Individually, only hope was found significant predictor of meaning ( $p < .01$ ). In case of pleasure also the overall regression model was found significant  $F(3,116) = 18.232, p < .001, R^2 = .32$ . Correlations were significantly positive between gratitude and pleasure  $r(118) = .44, p < .01$ ; hope and pleasure  $r(118) = .37, p < .01$ ; and humor and pleasure  $r(118) = .45, p < .01$  (see Table 2). Individually only gratitude and humor were significant predictors of pleasure ( $p < .01$ ) whereas hope didn't significantly predict pleasure orientation. Overall, 32 per cent variance in pleasure was caused by these predictors.

The regression model predicting the engagement orientation to happiness was also found significant  $F(3,116) = 7.453, p < .001, R^2 = .162$ . Positive correlations were also found between gratitude and engagement  $r(118) = .33, p < .01$ ; hope and engagement  $r(118) = .34, p < .01$ ; and humor and engagement  $r(118) = .22, p < .05$  (see Table 2). The overall variance in engagement caused by these three predictors was 16.2 per cent. Individually, only gratitude and hope were found significant predictors of engagement ( $p < .05$ ) and humor alone was not significant predictor of engagement orientation.

## **DISCUSSION**

The largest amount of variance caused by the predictor strengths was in the pleasure orientation to happiness followed by meaning and engagement. Individually, gratitude predicted pleasure and engagement, hope predicted meaning and engagement and humor predicted only pleasure orientation. It shows that gratitude contributes to the pleasure and engagement orientation in students. Hope contributes most in the meaning orientation followed by engagement. Humor contributes to the pleasure orientation. The previous researches have shown gratitude, hope and humor as positive predictors of overall happiness and well-being (Maiolini & Kuipera, 2014; Meherunissa, 2016). The results of the present study show that the strength of gratitude enables students to have more pleasurable experiences and also to experience flow in whatever they do. Gratitude feeling adds positivity to their experiences and brings trust and companionship among them. Those who are more hopeful have more of meaning and engagement orientation to happiness that enhances goal directed behavior. This may be because of 'I can do this' approach which makes them put more effort in achieving their goals. It brings inner strength and self-confidence. Humour as strength enhances the relationship by making one feel more connected with others. They have more playful interactions with others. It leads to pleasure-oriented happiness. This is also in line with the previous researches (Peterson et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2015 etc.).

### ***Limitations of the present study***

There are some limitations of the present study such as small sample, age wise and area wise generalizability concern etc. Also, there may be gender differences with respect to the relative importance of a particular strength for male or female. Gender differences may be included in future studies. Further, a broad range of strengths that relate to the happiness of a person such as courage, persistence, kindness, forgiveness etc. can be included in future studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

In short, the study revealed that hope, humour and gratitude contribute to increase the happiness in different ways. The results of the current study are significant in several ways. Most importantly, it contributes to the limited literature in finding the role of strengths in happiness of students. Most of the previous researches have focused on finding out the factors that are causing a threat to their well-being. The results of the present study are significantly useful for education sector in making the learners happier. The interventions to enhance these strengths in the students can be developed and incorporated in educational settings. Training programmes for this purpose can be designed.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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