

## Relationship between Realistic Optimism and Gratitude among Indian University Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between gratitude and realistic optimism in the Indian context. The researcher conducted a survey of 206 students (107 males and 99 females) aged 18–22 years from two universities in West Bengal, India, using the Realistic Optimism Scale and the Gratitude Questionnaire-6. Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis was performed to analyze the data. The analysis revealed that gratitude has a significant positive correlation with realistic optimism ( $r = .26$ ), future orientation ( $r = .25$ ), flexibility ( $r = .15$ ), and will/courage ( $r = .15$ ). The findings suggest that individuals with high levels of realistic optimism have a high level of gratitude.

**Keywords:** *Gratitude, Optimism, Future Orientation, Flexibility, Will/Courage, University Students, India*

Gratitude has long been mentioned in philosophy. The origins of this word can be found in Latin, derived from the word *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness. However, it was not adequately researched until the advent of positive psychology. This was because past psychological research on emotions has generally focused on those that are negative, such as fear and anger; few studies have explored positive emotions, such as gratitude. With positive psychology gradually becoming mainstream, the interest in positive emotions has also increased. Naturally, researchers have attempted to define gratitude, and therefore, related studies on this topic have been increasing. Gratitude has been studied in various other fields of positive psychology, such as subjective well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), self-esteem (Kong, Ding, & Zhao, 2015), and life satisfaction (Yildirim & Alanazi, 2018).

Realistic optimism, which is related to gratitude, is an important field in positive psychology. However, few studies have investigated the relationship between these two fields. In the Indian context, such research is almost nonexistent. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relationship between realistic optimism and gratitude among Indian university students.

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Received: August 17, 2022; Revision Received: October 18, 2022; Accepted: November 05, 2022

### Gratitude

Studies define gratitude as a positive emotional reaction to receiving a gift or any other benefit from someone (Roberts, 2004). There are two types of gratitude: state and dispositional or trait gratitude. State gratitude is the degree of an individual's subjective gratitude in a given situation. Trait gratitude is defined as the tendency of an individual to experience feelings of appreciation and thankfulness toward others, for the benefits given by them (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude consists of two aspects that include the perception: 1) of receiving a positive result, and 2) that the positive result is due to the deliberate actions of another person (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Studies conducted in European, American, and Asian countries have demonstrated the importance of gratitude and its effects on improving individuals' mental health and well-being, changing resilience levels positively, increasing optimism, protecting against stress and depression, and strengthening self-esteem (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Fredrickson, 2004; Lin, 2015; Lyubomirsky, 2008). Empirical studies show that gratitude is linked to positive emotions, such as happiness, hope (Overwalle, Mervielde, & De Schuyter, 1995), and contentment (Walker & Pitts, 1998).

Depending on the context, gratitude can be interpreted in several ways, such as an attitude, emotion, habit, a person's characteristic, moral virtue, coping mechanism, and way of life (Emmons, 2009; Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Many understand gratitude as a subjectively pleasurable emotional response to a valued benefit intentionally and benignly bestowed by a benefactor (Emmons, 2009; Roberts, 2004). Gratitude has also been conceptualized as a human strength that can make life more fulfilling and productive (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Shelton (2000) describes gratitude as a key component of moral inventory that can help individuals nurture their moral growth. Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) instructed 80 participants to write a letter of thanks and give it directly to a person to whom they had never expressed gratitude despite them being very helpful. The participants then met that person and read the letter to them. This group of participants (gratitude visit group) reported higher happiness and lower depression for as long as a month following the gratitude visit.

Regarding its relation to optimism, confirmatory factor analyses reveal that gratitude is related to optimism and other positive emotions (McCullough et al., 2002). A study by Froh, Yurkewicz, and Kashdan (2009) showed that in young adolescents (11–13-years old), gratitude is related to more optimism, as well as social and emotional support from peers and family.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

A total of 206 students (107 males and 99 females) from two universities in West Bengal, India, participated in this study. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old. The researcher collected the data in February 2020.

### *Instruments*

Two scales were used in this study

- **The Realistic Optimism Scale:** The Realistic Optimism Scale (Nishaat, 2018) used in this survey consists of 12 items across three factors (future orientation, flexibility, and will/courage). The scale developer defines orientation as “the ability to step

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forward with a bright outlook for the future even when encountering difficulties” and flexibility as “the ability to change one’s mind flexibly from various perspectives, even when encountering difficulties” (Nishaat, 2021, p. 54). Furthermore, she defines will/courage as “the ability to face difficulties head-on” (Nishaat, 2021, p. 54). The first two factors—future orientation ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and flexibility ( $\alpha = .86$ )—showed high internal consistency. The third factor—will/courage—also showed a moderate level of internal consistency ( $\alpha = .60$ ). A five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (“Quite applicable”) to 1 (“Not applicable”) was used to rate each item.

- **The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6):** McCullough et al. (2002) developed the one-factor, six-item GQ-6 to measure gratitude and assess its relationship with various characteristics. Participants indicate their level of agreement with the given items on a scale from 1 (“Strongly disagree”) to 7 (“Strongly agree”). Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .82, suggesting good internal consistency. The results of the convergent validity tests showed that gratitude correlated positively with life satisfaction ( $r = .53$ ), happiness ( $r = .50$ ), vitality ( $r = .46$ ), hope ( $r = .67$ ), and optimism ( $r = .51$ ) and negatively with anxiety ( $r = -.20$ ) and depression ( $r = -.30$ ).

### Data Analysis

For data analysis, the researcher performed a correlation coefficient analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0.

### Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Soka University, Tokyo, to conduct the survey. The survey was conducted in person, and the questionnaire was distributed to the participants after obtaining their informed consent.

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of all participants. The participants’ mean gratitude score (standard deviation [SD]) was 3.65 (.55), indicating above-average levels of gratitude. The mean score (SD) of realistic optimism total was 3.68 (.50), indicating above-average levels of realistic optimism. The mean scores (SDs) for future orientation and flexibility were 4.34 (.55) and 3.89 (.74), respectively, indicating above-average levels of future orientation and flexibility. Meanwhile, the mean score (SD) for will/courage was 2.81 (1.04), indicating an average level of will/courage.

*Table No. 1 Descriptive statistics of the participants*

	Mean			Standard Deviation		
	total	male	female	total	male	female
Future orientation	4.34	4.24	4.45	.55	.62	.44
Flexibility	3.89	4.06	3.70	.74	.61	.82
Will/courage	2.81	2.90	2.71	1.04	1.03	1.06
Realistic Optimism (total)	3.68	3.73	3.62	.50	.45	.55
Gratitude	3.65	3.61	3.69	.55	.53	.57

In addition, table 1 shows the mean scores and SDs of male and female participants. For male participants, the mean gratitude score (SD) was 3.61 (.53). The mean score (SD) of realistic optimism total was 3.73 (.45), indicating an above-average level of realistic optimism. Further, male participants’ mean scores (SDs) for future orientation and flexibility

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were 4.24 (.62) and 4.06 (.61), respectively, suggesting above-average levels of future orientation and flexibility. Meanwhile, the mean score (SD) for will/courage was 2.90 (1.03), indicating that male participants had an average level of will/courage.

Female students' mean gratitude score (SD) was 3.69 (.57), and their mean score (SD) of realistic optimism total was 3.62 (.55), indicating above-average levels of both optimism and gratitude. The mean scores (SDs) for future orientation and flexibility were 4.45 (.44) and 3.70 (.82), respectively, suggesting above-average levels of future orientation and flexibility. The mean score (SD) for will/courage was 2.71 (1.06), indicating an average level of will/courage.

Table 2 shows the relationship between gratitude and realistic optimism and its factors. The analysis revealed that gratitude had a significant positive correlation with realistic optimism ( $r = .26$ ). The correlation was significant at the .01 level, and therefore, the strength of the correlation between the variables was moderate. Furthermore, gratitude had a significant positive correlation with future orientation ( $r = .25$ ), and the correlation was significant at the .01 level. This suggests that the strength of the correlation between the variables was moderate. In addition, there was a positive correlation between gratitude and flexibility ( $r = .15$ ) and between gratitude and will/courage ( $r = .15$ ). The correlation was significant at the .05 level, and the strength of correlation among variables was low.

**Table No. 2** *The relationship between gratitude and the three dimensions of the Realistic Optimism Scale*

Dimensions of the Realistic Optimism Scale	Gratitude
Future orientation	.25**
Flexibility	.15*
Will/Courage	.14*
Realistic Optimism (total)	.26**

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Table 3 shows the relationship between gratitude and realistic optimism and its factors for male and female students. For female students, gratitude had a significant positive correlation with realistic optimism ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ ); the correlation was significant at the .01 level, with the strength of the correlation being moderate. Meanwhile, for male students, there was no correlation between gratitude and realistic optimism. Furthermore, gratitude had a significant positive correlation with future orientation in female students ( $r = .26$ ); the correlation was significant at the .01 level, with the strength of the correlation being moderate. For male students, there was a significant positive correlation between gratitude and future orientation ( $r = .23$ ). The correlation was significant at the .05 level, and the strength of the correlation was moderate. For female students, there was a significant positive correlation between gratitude and flexibility ( $r = .27$ ). The correlation was significant at the .01 level, and the strength of the correlation was moderate. Furthermore, there was a significant positive correlation between gratitude and will/courage in female students ( $r = .22$ ). The correlation was significant at the .05 level, and the strength of the correlation was moderate. Meanwhile, for male students, there were no significant differences between gratitude and flexibility as well as gratitude and will/courage.

**Table No. 3** *The relationship between gratitude and the three dimensions of the Realistic Optimism Scale based on gender*

Dimensions of the Realistic Optimism Scale	Gratitude	
	Male	Female
Future orientation	.23*	.26**
Flexibility	.18	.27**
Will/Courage	.09	.22*
Realistic Optimism (total)	.18	.35**

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that people with a high realistic optimistic orientation have a high level of gratitude. It can be said that if one expresses gratitude toward others, they will feel more optimistic about their future. However, it can also be said that optimistic people express more gratitude than pessimistic people.

Sansone and Sansone (2010) reported that optimism and gratitude are related. Further, Kardas, Cam, and Eskisu (2019) conducted a study on 510 students in Turkey regarding various variables (gratitude, hope, life satisfaction, and optimism) affecting well-being and found a significant positive relationship between gratitude and optimism.

This study found that optimism and gratitude are moderately correlated. In the original GQ-6, there was a significant correlation between gratitude and optimism ( $r = .51$ ) (McCullough et al., 2002). A study of 1405 adolescents aged 10–19 years also found positive associations between gratitude and optimism, as well as other variables (Froh et al., 2009). This shows that these two concepts are correlated, but various factors, such as cultural background, may affect the degree of correlation between them.

The results of the current study also show that gratitude is positively correlated with other factors of realistic optimism. In particular, there was a significant positive correlation between gratitude and future orientation, which is defined as having hope for the future. This indicates that people who have hope for the future tend to be more grateful to others. Other studies have found similar results for these two variables. Kardas et al. (2019) found that gratitude and hope are positively correlated. Furthermore, according to McCullough et al. (2002), gratitude is significantly correlated with hope but is different from it. In addition, Witvliet, Richie, Luna, and Van Tongeren (2018) also reported a relationship between gratitude and hope.

Next, regarding the correlation between gratitude and flexibility, the results of this study are consistent with those of prior studies. Fredrickson (2004), who developed the broaden-and-build theory, states that an increase in psychological flexibility is related to a grateful life orientation. In addition, Hill (2011) states that gratitude is a skill that increases psychological flexibility and that it is a flexible strategy that helps people focus on the positive attributes of events or circumstances.

Regarding the relationship between gratitude and optimism based on gender, this study found a significant positive correlation for female students. However, for male students, only gratitude and future orientation were significantly correlated. This may be because women generally feel more grateful than men, as suggested in a previous study on gratitude

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levels in males and females (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). It can be said that as women are more likely to experience and express gratitude, a significant positive relationship is found between gratitude and variables of optimism in the present study. Further, men's general preference for concealing emotions might be a reason for the lower expression of gratitude compared to women (Kashdan et al., 2009). In the current study, gratitude was not significantly related to optimism in general, as well as to two of its variables (flexibility and will/courage). This is consistent with the results of a previous study, which reported that men prefer to avoid feelings of gratitude toward others (Kashdan et al., 2009).

### **Future Research**

This study focused on finding the relationship between optimism and gratitude alone. In the future, it will be interesting to see how interventions to increase a sense of gratitude affect people's level of optimism. Moreover, future studies can also explore how optimism helps to increase feelings of gratitude and, in turn, well-being.

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### **Acknowledgement**

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interests.

**How to cite this article:** Aneesah, N. (2022). Relationship between Realistic Optimism and Gratitude among Indian University Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(4), 034-040. DIP:18.01.004.20221004, DOI:10.25215/1004.004