

Gratitude and Happiness among Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

Research on the concept of Happiness has attracted considerable attention in recent years focusing on how to increase and sustain the levels of happiness amongst people. Researchers have found a relation between experiencing and expressing gratitude and happiness. There is a paucity of research based upon elderly that are often neglected even with the vast population of older adults in India. Older people, due to age related risk factors that include lowered health, poverty, lack of social support and stressful events like loss of partner and peers, are more prone to low mood and lowered well-being. Thus, this requires a lot of attention morally and even professionally and finding ways that can lead to increase in happiness among them. The objective of the present research was to study the effect of gratitude on happiness among older adults and to assess the gender differences among them. This Pre-Post experimental research examined the effect of two-week gratitude intervention upon happiness amongst the participants. The sample consisted of 40 older adults (20 Males and 20 Females) living in Lucknow, India. The Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) (McCullough & Emmons, 2002) and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Argyle & Hills, 1989) were used for obtaining data. The results showed that gratitude affects happiness among elderly people although the gratitude intervention did not lead to an increase in their happiness. There were no significant differences found in happiness and gratitude among both males and females. Thus, specific measures must be taken to improve the levels of these factors among elderly people as these are vital for the betterment of elderly people in all human societies.

Keywords: *Happiness, Gratitude, Older adults, Well being*

According to **Cicero (106–43 BC)**, gratitude is considered as “the greatest virtue,” and “the mother of all other remaining virtues”. Research on gratitude has backed up this statement very well. Gratitude encourages us to appreciate what is good in our lives and drives us to pass that goodness on to others. People with more grateful dispositions have reported being happier and much content with their lives (**Gallup, 1998**). Gratitude is reported to be the most beneficial character strength, and is constantly and robustly associated with well-being and life satisfaction (**Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004**). Research shows that there is a relationship between gratitude and happiness, both in

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terms of experiencing it and expressing it (**Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Gersema, M., 2007; Witvliet et. al, 2018**)

Gratitude is a construct, which has inspired interest in most researchers because it has been considered as an important factor of human personality and social life (**Emmons & McCullough, 2003**). There is no single definitive definition of gratitude. It has been defined in different ways by different researchers. Simply expressed Gratitude is, “An acknowledgement that we have received something of value from others” (**Emmons & Mishra, 2011**). Gratitude has also been viewed as “A moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait and a coping response” (**McCullough, Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, 2002**).

Gratitude has been considered as a moral emotion and is strongly associated with positive affect (**Watkins, et. al., 2004**). According to **Frederickson (2004)**, gratitude functions like other positive motions, broadening the repertoire of thought-action possibilities and building enduring personal resources. Therefore, it is possible that cultivating gratitude may boost happiness among people.

Happiness according to **Kesebir and Diener (2008)** is about more than simply the experience of a positive mood. In order to describe happiness, psychologists commonly refer to Subjective Well Being (SWB) which has been defined as “a person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life” (**Diener, Lucas & Oshi, 2002**). In other words, happiness is “people’s evaluations of their lives and encompasses both cognitive judgments of satisfaction and affective appraisals of moods and emotions” (**Kesebir and Diener, 2008**). Happiness is an important aspect in the construct of subjective well-being; sometimes happiness becomes synonymous with subjective well-being (SWB), which involves various ways of assessing an experienced person in his life. It encompasses more than positive feelings. Positive emotions consist of happiness and life satisfaction (**Seligman, 2011**), and therefore happiness continues to play a part in positive psychology and optimal health and functioning.

Literature review reveals that there has been constant overlap between happiness, wellbeing, subjective well-being, psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction (**Diener, 1984**). Gratitude development in adults yields positive effects. In adults, gratitude is related to positive emotions and wellbeing, including the emotion of happiness (**McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002**).

Researchers **Emmons and McCullough (2003)** assessed the effect of having a grateful outlook on a person’s psychological and physical wellbeing. Three studies were conducted in which people were asked to write down journals and were randomized in given categories: 1. Hassles, 2. Gratitude listing, 3. Either neutral life events or social comparison. It was found out that people who were in the gratitude condition felt much happier, they were more optimistic about their future, they felt better about their lives and they even did more exercise a week than those in hassles or events’ condition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researches till date have focused well enough on gratitude intervention to increase happiness among varying age groups but there is very little research based upon elderly that are often neglected even with the vast population of older adults in India. The elderly population (60+) jumped 35.5% - from 76 million in 2001 to 103 million in 2011 in India,

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while India's overall population grew by 17.7%. Older people comprise approx. 9% of total Indian population and it is projected to reach over 20% by 2050 (**Report of Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Govt. of India, 2016**). Older people due to age related risk factors that include lowered health, poverty, lack of social support and stressful events like loss of partner and peers are more prone to low mood and lowered well-being (**Fiske, Wetherell, & Gatz, 2009**). As a result, a significant amount of moral and even professional attention, as well as the identification of ways that can lead to an increase in happiness among them, is essential.

Research on gratitude and happiness shows great potential to understand and promote the concept in this field of positive psychology. Research by **Emmons and McCullough (2003)** in their gratitude intervention studies showed that gratitude is associated with positive emotions including happiness, contentment, pride and hope. **Hill's (2015)** study on the relationship between self-esteem, subjective happiness, and overall life satisfaction among the elderly appears to be an important contribution to this area of positive psychology. This study is designed to examine the effect of gratitude upon happiness in older adults.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

1. To study the effect of gratitude on happiness among older adults (60-85 years old)
2. To assess the gender difference in happiness and gratitude among older adults.

Hypothesis

- H1. Increase in gratitude among older adults through gratitude intervention will lead to an increase in their happiness.
- H2. There will be a significant difference between gratitude of male and female older adults.
- H3. There will be a significant difference between happiness of male and female older adults.

Participants and Procedure

The present pre and post experimental research was conducted on a sample of 40 older adults (20 males and 20 females) of Lucknow, UP, India. Their age range varied from 60-85 years of age. Convenience sampling method was used to select the participants into two groups i.e., intervention and control groups each having 20 participants (10 Males and 10 Females). The informed consent of all participants (consent forms) was obtained beforehand and pretest scores were obtained using Gratitude Questionnaire-6 and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. Then, the participants in the intervention group were instructed to perform self-guided gratitude exercises for 15 days through online sessions, according to those recommended by **Emmons (2003)**. After the end of the sessions and performing the practices, the questionnaires were handed to the participants of intervention and control groups simultaneously and post test scores were obtained.

Measures:

1. **Gratitude Questionnaire-6-Six Item Form (GQ-6)**- by McCullough, M.E. Emmons (2002) The Gratitude Questionnaire-Six-Item Form (GQ-6) is a six-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individual differences in the propensity to experience gratitude in daily life. Respondents endorse each item on a 7-point Likert type scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). The GQ-6 was found to have high reliability and validity, suggesting sound psychometric

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properties. The scale has acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha .82), good convergent reliability with wellbeing and peer ratings and high test, retest reliability, and discriminant validity from related traits. (McCullough et al., 2002). The Cronbach's alpha was .87 in this study.

- 2. Oxford Happiness Questionnaire-** An improved instrument, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), has been derived from the Oxford Happiness Inventory, developed by psychologists Michael Argyle and Peter Hills (1989) at Oxford University. The OHI comprises 29 items, each involving the selection of one of four options that are different for each item. The OHQ Items are presented as a single statement which can be endorsed on a uniform six-point Likert scale where 1= Strongly Disagree and 6= Strongly Agree. The scale was found to be psychometrically sound with high scale reliability ($\alpha=0.91$) and demonstrate construct validity by correlation with measures of self-esteem, life regard index and depression-happiness scale (.81, .77, .90).

Statistical Analysis

The data analysis methods used were descriptive and inferential statistics for analysis of three variables i.e., gratitude, happiness and gender. The inferential statistics used in the study were paired sample t- test and independent sample t- test.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of the study was to study the relationship between gratitude and happiness among older adults and assess the gender difference. The sample included 40 participants (20 males and 20 females) who were divided into control and intervention groups upon which pre and post tests were administered. The statistics used descriptive and inferential statistics for analysis of three variables i.e., gratitude, happiness and gender. The inferential statistics used in the study were paired sample t- test and independent sample t- test.

The main objective was to study the effect of gratitude on happiness among older adults (60-85 years old). The effectiveness of intervention was analysed by paired sample t- test on intervention and control group for assessing difference in gratitude and happiness before and after the intervention. Pretest scores of both the groups were compared with post test scores on Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and Gratitude Questionnaire-6 for analysing the happiness and gratitude scores respectively. The t test show that there is a significant difference between pre test and post test gratitude scores of intervention group participants obtained on Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6) with a t- test score of 3.98 that is significant at 0.05 confidence level. Whereas, the control group t test score was found to be insignificant (Table 1).

The t test of happiness scores obtained on Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) between the pretest and post test conditions show that the difference in happiness among intervention group participants is not statistically significant on 0.05 confidence level with a t- score of 1.72 which does not lie in the critical value region. Also, the control group did not report a significant difference in happiness between the pre and post test conditions (Table 1). This indicated that the intervention increased the gratitude level among participants but the happiness level was not much affected by the increase.

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Table 1- Showing the Mean, S.D. and t test score of Pre test and Post test scores obtained for happiness and gratitude.

Variables	Group (n=20)		Mean	S.D.	t-test
1.Gratitude	Intervention group	Pre test	28.1	2.27	3.98*
		Post test	30.5		
	Control Group	Pre test	31.45	1.8	
		Post test	32		
2.Happiness	Intervention group	Pre test	3.86	0.14	1.72
		Post test	3.91		
	Control group	Pre test	4.17	0.11	
		Post test	4.10		

df = 19

Value at 0.05 level = 2.093

Value at 0.01 level = 2.861

The secondary aim of this work was to assess the gender difference in happiness and gratitude among older adults. To do this the data obtained through both the measures of gratitude and happiness were compared simultaneously of male and female participants and an independent sample t test was carried out. The hypothesis stating that increasing gratitude among older adults through gratitude intervention will lead to an increase in their happiness was not accepted as the difference in gratitude of male and female older adults in the study was found insignificant at 0.05 confidence level with a t- test score of 1.734 (Table 2).

Table 2- Showing Mean, S.D. and t test score for males and females on gratitude obtained by Gratitude Questionnaire-6(GQ-6)

Gender (n=20)	Mean	S.D.	t-test
Male	30.05	5.30	1.734
Female	32.65	4.11	

d.f = 19

Value at 0.05 level=2.093

Value at 0.01 level= 2.861

Therefore, the hypothesis that there will be a significant difference between gratitude of male and female older adults was not accepted. Thus no gender difference was found on the measures of happiness among elderly people as the difference in male and female happiness was found to be statistically insignificant with a t-test score of 0.46 which did not lie in the critical region at 0.05 confidence level (Table 3).

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Table 3- Showing Mean, S.D. and t test scores for males and females of happiness obtained on Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

Gender (n=20)	Mean	S.D.	t-test
Male	4.06	1.68	0.46
Female	3.976	0.43	

d.f. = 19

Value at 0.05 level=2.093

Value at 0.01 level= 2.861

The above table shows that the difference in male and female happiness was found to be statistically insignificant with a t-test score of 0.46 which did not lie in the critical region at 0.05 confidence level. Therefore, the hypothesis was not accepted i.e., no gender difference was found on the measures of happiness among elderly people.

DISCUSSION

Effect of gratitude on happiness-

The findings of this study show that the gratitude intervention on older adults leads to an increase in their gratitude in the experimental group but not in the control group. The results can be supported by **Ramirez et al. (2014)** who found reductions reported in anxiety and depression after elderly participants wrote letters expressing their gratitude to others. **Horder et al. (2013)** in a qualitative interview study with community-dwelling older people reported that focusing on feeling gratitude for what was positive in their lives rather than worrying about what could be changed was associated with increased feelings of well-being. Whereas, the intervention increased the gratitude level among participants but the happiness level was not much affected by the increase. The result is not supported by the study by **Emmons and McCullough (2003)** which showed that when participants followed the intervention's instructions on a daily basis, the positive effect of the participants did not increase, but when their intervention continued for 21 day, the findings changed significantly.

Gender difference in Gratitude among older adults-

This signifies the gratitude was found to have no difference on gender of the participants in the research study. The probable reasons might be that gender is said to be a trait or a state by different researchers. Thus not only gender can influence gratitude but personality characteristics, life orientation, economic status etc will have an effect on gratitude. Other reasons might be that the small sample of the research study could not possibly assess the gender difference even though the mean of female participants was found to be higher than males; a larger sample could lead to a clear result. The research that supported the study includes research by **Charzyńska (2015)** that indicated that gender difference could not be found in a study of gratitude, forgiveness and spiritual coping during an alcohol addiction treatment program. Whereas, the research that did not support the results includes a series of research by **Kashdan, et. al. (2009)** studied gender differences in gratitude suggesting that women are more likely to benefit from the positive effects that gratitude has on well-being, than men.

Gender difference in Happiness among older adults-

No gender difference was found on the measures of happiness among elderly people. The probable reasons might be that according to psychologists, happiness has been defined to be subjective feeling; therefore, gender alone cannot influence happiness. There are many other factors that might influence happiness such as the economic status, family preferences, personality, health etc. Also, the study was conducted on a small scale so the gender differences might not be noticeable as suggested by some researchers. The research supporting the results include a study by **Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan (1989)** who conducted a meta-analysis based on 96 studies from both US and international samples. They found that women reported higher levels of happiness, but that when examined more broadly, there was not a non-significant gender difference for positive affect overall. Whereas, studies that did not support the results show differences between men and women over the age of 55 in happiness was found to be slightly lower in older women, as compared to older men.

Limitations and Suggestion

The present study was conducted on a small sample of a limited population. The data was collected using limited psychological variables and quantitative methods only. Another limitation was that the participants in this study belonged to a particular socio-economic class and were educated therefore the results could not be generalized to a great extent. Therefore, the sample size could be increased and the data can be collected through mixed methods and more psychological variables like stress and health can be studied in future research. Also, the long-term effect of gratitude upon happiness can be studied with a longitudinal study. Further studies could be planned by eliminating the limitations of the study so that the findings can be generalized on a broader level.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study showed that gratitude affects happiness among elderly people although the gratitude intervention did not lead to an increase in their happiness. There were no significant differences found in happiness and gratitude among both older adult males and females. Thus, specific measures must be taken to improve the levels of these factors among elderly people as these are vital for the betterment of elderly people in all human societies.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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