

Gratitude as a predictor of Depressive Attributions

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ABSTRACT: The present study was conducted to determine whether gratitude can work as a protective factor against depressive (pessimistic) attributions that people make about their lives. The study had two hypotheses; one expecting a negative correlation between the two variables and second expecting gratitude to predict lesser depressive attributions. For this purpose a sample of 328 participants (161 men and 167 women), with ages ranging from 17 – 40 years (\bar{x} =22.88, SD =4.244) was taken from various universities of Karachi city. Depressive Attributions Questionnaire (DAQ) and Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) along with a demographic information questionnaire were administered. Findings, using IBM SPSS 21, showed that the two variables have significant moderate negative relationship ($r(328) = -.293, p < .001$) and Gratitude was found to be a significant predictor of reduced Depressive attributions ($\beta = -.45, t = -5.533, p < .001$). Gratitude also explained a significant proportion of variance in depressive attribution scores ($R^2 = .086, F(1, 326) = 30.614, p < .001$). It is therefore concluded that the attitude of gratitude or thankfulness does reduce the pessimistic view people develop about their lives.

KEYWORDS: gratitude, pessimistic attribution style, pessimism, thankfulness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, psychological research has witnessed a surge in research into positive psychology. Instead of focusing just on pathology from a clinical perspective, researches surrounding positive traits and characteristics with a focus on human strength have emerged. The movement of Positive Psychology under Martin Seligman back in 1998 opened the doors to scientific study of normal human functioning. Previously, the entirety of focus of behavioral scientists was on mental illnesses. This could be why the late 90's had seventeen times more negative studies as oppose to positive ones (Achor, 2010).

One such aspect of positive functioning is gratitude. It is a universal concept as can be observed by its presence in various religious and cultural traditions that emphasize the importance of showing gratefulness to their supernatural or other benefactors (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Philosophers and scholars have long debated the benefits and dangers of gratitude (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002). However, it is only recently that the trait has come under empirical spotlight. There are opposing views regarding the nature of the construct. At first gratitude was viewed as a positive emotion experienced by a person in response to being provided costly, valuable or altruistic aid from other people (McCullough et al., 2001). This view was questioned when participants in Emmons and McCullough's (2003) research included events like 'waking up in the morning' in their daily gratitude diary, implying that a grateful response was not limited to provision of aid from other people. In a more inclusive explanation, Emmons (2004) described gratitude as "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty" (p. 554). However most recently Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010) have provided a 'life orientation' conception of dispositional gratitude. According to this gratitude is viewed as a "life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world" (p. 2). This includes gratitude arising from help from other people as well as a general habit of appreciating the positive features of life.

Researchers have found various benefits of having a grateful outlook of life. In one of the first researches into gratitude and mental health, Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that people who maintained a daily diary to list down the things they are grateful for showed improvements in their mood, coping behaviors and physical health as compared to those who wrote about neutral topics or daily problems. In a similar study, teenagers maintaining a gratitude diary reported more gratitude, increased life satisfaction, optimism and a decrease in negative affect as oppose to those writing about neutral topics or daily problems (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010) reviewed twelve studies that give support to the relationship between the constructs of gratitude and subjective wellbeing. People who are grateful also tend to evaluate themselves positively (Toussaint and Friedman, 2009) and report greater happiness (Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Research into gratitude and psychopathology supports an inverse relation of gratitude with depressive symptoms (Wood et al., 2008; Seligman, Steen, Park & Peterson, 2005), suicide ideation (Kleiman, Adams, Kashdan, Riskind, 2013), post-traumatic stress disorder (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006) and anxiety (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002).

Attribution refers to the causal inferences that people make to understand why things happen (Heider, 1958). People make attributions to predict and explain the behaviors of self and others. According to Weiner (1979) people make attributions along three causal dimensions namely locus, stability and controllability. Locus involves the individual's perception of the location of the cause i.e. internal or external. Stability refers to the cause being perceived as either permanent or changeable. Controllability is related to the extent to which the cause is perceived to be under one's control. Abramson et al. (1978) added globality as another causal dimension that is the extent to which an event is perceived to happen consistently across many situations as oppose to specific situations. When an individual consistently uses a particular combination of these four aspects to make causal inferences they tend to develop a corresponding attribution style (Metalsky & Abramson, 1981). One of these is a pessimistic attribution style which is the tendency to associate uncontrollable negative events to internal, global and stable causes (Abramson et al., 1989). This pessimistic attribution style is associated with a generalized sense of hopelessness which puts people at risk of developing symptoms of depression (Alloy et al. 2006).

A large portion of our communication today is based on complaining about the wrongs happening in the world. It is not uncommon to come across social media posts, newspaper articles or even real-time conversations that are heavily influenced by the negativity surrounding us. Technology has allowed us to broadcast even the smallest of things that bother us to other people, promoting a culture of 'micro-complaints' (Wayne, 2015). The influx of information is making worldwide events more accessible to us. It has become increasingly important to protect oneself from a pessimistic attribution style in order to maintain hope. The question is whether an ignored virtue like gratitude which research has shown to have positive implications can protect us from negative thought patterns or not. The purpose of the current study is to determine whether a grateful attitude can serve as a protector against pessimistic attributions that people generally make about situations. The study has two hypotheses:

H1: There will be a negative correlation between dispositional gratitude and depressive attributions.

H2: Gratitude will predict lower levels of depressive attributions

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 SAMPLE

A sample of 328 participants (161 men and 167 women) was taken for the present study. The ages of the participants ranged between 17 – 40 years (\bar{x} =22.88, SD =4.244). The sample included graduate and post graduate level students conveniently approached at various universities of Karachi city.

2.2 MEASURES

Demographic Information Tool: It contained questions about the age, gender and other socio-demographic characters of participants.

Depressive Attributions Questionnaire (DAQ) (Kleim, Gonzalo & Ehlers, 2011): The DAQ is a measure of depressogenic attributions. It is a self report scale comprising of sixteen items. Responses range from 'not at all' (0) to 'very strongly' (4). The scale has an internal reliability of $\alpha = .94$. It is also reported to have high test-retest reliability.

Gratitude Questionnaire-Six Item Form (GQ-6) (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002): The GQ-6 is designed to measure dispositional gratitude in the adult population. It is a self report scale comprising of six items. Responses make use of a 7 point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The scale has a Cronbach's alpha estimate ranging from .76 to .84. It also shows substantial correlation with other scales that measure gratitude experienced in daily life.

2.3 PROCEDURE

The participants were approached individually. After taking verbal consent, the two questionnaires along with the demographic information tool was given to them. The researcher was available throughout to make sure all the queries of participants were handled appropriately. The participants were thanked for their participation after completion of the questionnaires.

3 RESULTS

Table 1. Correlation coefficient of Gratitude with Depressive Attributions and Age (N=328)

Variables	Gratitude	Age
Depressive Attributions	-.293** (.000)	-.122* (.027)
Gratitude	--	.151* (.006)

*p<.05 **p<.01

Gratitude is found to be significantly (although moderately) correlated ($r=-.293$, $p<.001$) with Depressive Attributions, indicating people having a grateful attitude make fewer depressive attributions about their life events.

Additional analysis shows that as the age increases, people learn to have more gratitude ($r=.151$, $p=.006$) and lesser depressive attributions ($r=-.122$, $p=.027$)

Table 2. Regression analysis of Gratitude as a Predictor of Depressive Attributions (N=328)

Variable	Depressive Attributions		
	B	SE B	β
Gratitude	-.450	.081	-.293**
R^2			.083
F			30.614**

*p<.05 **p<.01

The results of the regression indicates that Gratitude explains 8.3% of the variance ($R^2=.083$, $F(1,326)=30.614$, $p<.001$). It was found that Gratitude significantly predicted lower levels of Depressive Attributions ($\beta = -.293$, $p<.001$).

4 DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to determine whether gratitude can protect people from developing a pessimistic attribution style towards life in general. As proposed in the first hypothesis the results indicate that people who have a grateful attitude make fewer depressive attributions about their life events. The finding is consistent with previous literature which shows gratitude to be associated with positive attributions (Wood, Maltby, Gillett et al., 2008). As hypothesized, gratitude was also found to be a significant predictor of lower levels of depressive attributions. Results give support to the popular notion that a positive attitude can act as a buffer against negative thinking.

An explanation comes from Lambert, Fincham and Stillman (2011) research that found out that gratitude lowers depressive symptoms by means of positive emotion and positive reframing. Since a pessimistic attribution style is associated with symptoms of depression (Alloy et al., 2006), perhaps positive emotion and positive reframing helps lower pessimistic attributions as well. They based their research on the Fredrickson’s broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998). According to this theory negative emotions temporarily restrict a person’s thought-action ability so that they can make quick decisions. On the other hand positive emotions have the capability to temporarily broaden one’s mindset thus allowing access to diverse and creative thoughts and actions. Hence positive emotions help individuals build personal resources overtime by engaging in thoughtful productive actions. Gratitude can also prevent depressive attributions by encouraging people to engage in positive reframing where they turn a negative experience into a positive one for example thinking of a failure as a learning opportunity.

Another possible explanation comes from research associating gratitude with the Big Five personality traits (Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2008, 2009). Grateful people have personality traits that are adaptive, habitually positive and instrumental to development of healthy relationships. They were found to have traits associated with positive emotional functioning, showing less hostility, depression and emotional vulnerability. Moreover, gratitude was also associated with traits indicating positive social functioning such as warmth, altruism and tender-mindedness. Just as research shows grateful people to have certain tendencies, pessimistic people have a particularly important tendency too. A popular notion about pessimists states that they tend to see the glass as half empty instead of half full, implying their tendency to pay attention to only the negative aspects of a situation. Empirical evidence shows this to be true as optimists paid more attention to positive stimuli in an emotional stroop task (Segerstrom, 2001) and less attention to unpleasant images than pessimists in eye tracking studies (Isaacowitz, 2005, 2006). In summary gratitude and pessimism appear to be headed in opposite directions as one is associated with noticing the positives while other is associated with ignoring the positives. It is hard to imagine someone who is habitually grateful to have pessimistic thoughts at the same time.

Further elaborating on gratitude's association with positive social functioning traits, the review by Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010) shows a grateful attitude gives people the necessary tools to develop and maintain healthy and positive relationships. Grateful people have the willingness to forgive (DeShea, 2003), engage in constructive conflict resolution (Baron, 1984) and be helpful to other people (Tsang, 2006). Another evidence for the same comes from McCullough's et al. (2001) conceptualization of gratitude where it was proposed to function as a moral barometer, a moral motivator and a moral reinforcer. They proposed that gratitude allows people to perceive prosocial acts by others, motivates them to reciprocate prosocial behavior with others and maintain prosocial behavior by acting as a pleasant reinforcer. When grateful people acknowledge the help they receive from others they feel loved and cared for (Reynolds, 1983). In a way gratitude promotes healthy and positive interpersonal interactions that help build a strong social support system for grateful people in times of need

The link between gratitude and religiosity could also be a factor that helps in lesser depressive attributions. Religiosity is an integral part of the Pakistani society. Firstly, religious people show more gratitude because they associate positive events in life as intentionally caused by a benevolent higher power. However, non-religious people tend to associate positive events to chance or other factors thus showing comparatively less grateful attitude (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). Secondly a central theme of many religious practices around the world is praising and thanking a higher power (Wainwright, 1980) which maintains and reinforces the concept of gratitude throughout life. Believing in a higher power and showing gratefulness gives people a positive outlook of life and hope which can possibly lower the chances of engaging in depressive attributions.

Another additional finding was that as age increased people showed more gratitude and lesser depressive attributions. This could possibly be because with age comes the experience and knowledge of dealing with life stressors and problems. People realize with time that complaining about problems does far less than working towards solutions. Time also equips people with personal resources and successful coping strategies to help with problems.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Future researches can compare negative attributions in people before and after being trained in developing a grateful attitude. The present study's additional finding regarding age can be further researched upon with a sample of middle and old aged people to see the impact of increasing age on positive thinking. Religiosity and religious belief can also be studied as a correlate of positive thinking.

6 CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to determine whether a grateful disposition can help lower depressive attributions. Overall it can be concluded that the trait of gratitude works as a protective factor against pessimistic thinking. And so its presence predicts lower levels of depressive attributions in people. Additionally, people show more gratitude and lesser depressive attributions as they age.

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