

Gratitude, Emotional Regulation And Happiness In College Students

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Abstract:

College-going students are in a very important transition phase of their lives. Moving to college, choosing a career, chasing deadlines & grades, and making new friends, all can be overwhelming to take in at once. The present study examined gender differences in the levels of gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness among college-going students. The study also sought to determine whether there is any correlation between the levels of gratitude, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression) and happiness in college-going students. The sample consisted of 78 students in the age group of 18-21 years from various urban cities in India. Online forms of the gratitude questionnaire-six item form, the emotion regulation questionnaire and subjective happiness scale were used to collect data. Results indicated no gender differences in the levels of gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness among college students. While no correlation was observed between happiness and gratitude or emotional regulation, however a positive correlation was found between gratitude and emotional regulation (viz. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression). These findings can guide the development of gratitude practices to promote emotional regulation among college students for them to have a better overall college experience.

Keywords - college students, gratitude, emotional regulation, happiness

Date of Submission: 15-02-2024

Date of Acceptance: 25-02-2024

I. Introduction

College-going students are in a very important transition phase of their lives. Moving to college, choosing a career, chasing deadlines & grades, and making new friends, all can be overwhelming to take in at once. It can be an emotional rollercoaster to encounter so many changes all at once. Hence, college students may find it difficult to regulate their emotions and find moderate levels of happiness. Therefore, the current study was envisioned to determine if gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness have any gender variations and if the variables - gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness are correlated. This could provide the knowledge base that leads to interventions based on practising gratitude that leads to better happiness and emotional regulation among college students.

Gratitude

We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts.
~ dietrich bonhoeffer

Gratitude is a result of acknowledgement that a positive happened to you along with an assessment that an individual or an impersonal source is responsible for it (cunha et al., 2019). With gratitude, people recognize the positive things around them and during the process, they realise that the source of positivity lies in part, if not entirely outside them (jayakumar & gupta, 2021).

Mccullough et al. (2001) suggest that gratitude has three moral purposes in an individual's social life. These functions are that of a moral barometer, a moral reinforcer, and a moral motive. As a moral barometer, it highlights changes in social relationships; as a reinforcer, an act of gratitude encourages the giver to act kindly again in the future, whereas an act of ingratitude demoralizes the giver to behave kindly again in future; lastly, as a moral motive, it prompts the receiver to behave altruistically or catastrophically towards a giver or others.

Magno and orillosa (2012) concluded from their research that when students are grateful for the academic help received, they will experience positive emotions, Whereas when students are ungrateful, they are more likely to experience negative emotions.

Past research establishes that there is a close correlation between gratitude and subjective well-being as the former positively increases the latter (ramzan, 2022). A very recent study (jayakumar & gupta, 2021) also supports this Claim as it states that grateful people generally have a high level of self-acceptance, such

individuals tend to have a high degree of learned optimism, and consequently, they see obstacles positively.

Emotional regulation

Emotional regulation refers to attempts to control one's emotions in ways which will increase the chance for them to be prosocial rather than destructive (gross, 2015). There are different strategies adopted by individuals for regulating their emotions including focusing on one's breathing, going for a run, punching a pillow, having a drink, taking a nap, texting a friend, reading a book, biting one's lip, quitting a job or considering a situation differently (gross, 2015). In the area of emotional regulation research, central focus has been on organising different strategies that people employ to manage their emotions and assess whether different strategies have different outcomes (gross,2015).

According to thompson (1994) emotional regulation comprises many extrinsic and intrinsic processes, which monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions, especially their acute and temporal features, to achieve one's objectives.

Sheppes and gross (as cited in johns, inzlicht, & schmader, 2008) conclude that cognitive reappraisal (i.e. Interpreting an emotional circumstance in a non-emotional manner) is relatively quite effective than emotional suppression (i.e. Inhibiting emotion-expressive behaviour) as a method of emotional regulation strategy. While, emotional suppression worsens the cognitive deficits which lead to decreased academic performance related to stereotypical threat i.e. The experience of uneasiness in a circumstance where an individual has to confirm a negative stereotype about one's social group (steele & aronson, 1995); cognitive reappraisal has the potential to reduce such negative consequences.

Happiness

It is a complex task to define happiness due to its subjective nature. Lyubomirsky (2007) describes happiness as an experience of contentment, joy, or positive well- being, accompanied with an acknowledgement that one is living a good, meaningful, and worthwhile life. Myers and diener (1995) define happiness as a series of frequent positive effects and less negative effects and a sense of overall satisfaction with life.

Apart from various psychological takes on this concept, there are several philosophical approaches as well. For instance, the western perspective approaches happiness in two very different ways, namely hedonic (focused on minimising pain and discomfort, while maximising comfort and pleasure) and eudaimonic (pursuing happiness from doing morally correct things instead of behaving immorally). The indian concept of happiness in scriptures and ancient texts like the vedas, the upanishads, the bhagavad gita etc. Place emphasis on the idea that a deeper connection needs to be established with one's inner self to be happy (marathe, 2021).

The two important components of happiness are well-being (overall good mental health and satisfactory performance in social, academic, physical, and psychological areas) and quality of life (mirasu, 2003 as cited in yadav et al., 2023).

According to gruber (2011), it is possible to have too much happiness, to experience happiness at the wrong time, to pursue happiness in the wrong ways, and to experience the wrong types of happiness. In such cases, happiness may not be adaptive and might even lead to harmful consequences.

II. Method

Research design: the study is a quantitative study which uses a between-groups design to study the gender differences in the level of gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness in college-going students in terms of levels of gratitude. The study also adopts a correlational design to determine whether there is any correlation between the level of gratitude, emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression) and happiness in college-going students.

Sample: non-probability purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 78 (41 girls and 37 boys) adults aged 18 to 21 years attending college in various urban cities of india. Of the 78 responses, 65.8% were 18 years old, 21.5% were 19 years old, 8.9% were 20 years old and the rest 3.8% were 21 years old. Out of all the responses, 52.6% were commerce students, 26.9% were science students and the rest (20.5%) were humanities students.

Instruments: three questionnaires were used in the present study, namely, the gratitude questionnaire-six item form (gq-6), emotional regulation questionnaire (erq) and subjective happiness scale (also known as general happiness scale).

Gratitude scale

The gratitude questionnaire-six item form (gq-6) was compiled by mccullough et al. (2002). The grateful disposition: a conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 82, 112-127. It has a seven scale scoring; the higher the score, the greater the tendency to be grateful. The gq-6 has good internal reliability, with alphas between .82 and .87.

Emotional regulation strategy scale

The emotion regulation questionnaire (erq) was compiled by gross & john(2003), and revised by wang et al. For use with a chinese sample (wang et al., 2017). It has 10 items divided into 2 dimensions: cognitive reappraisal and expression suppression. Each dimension includes the regulation of positive emotions and negative emotions. The items are rated on a seven-point likert scale, ranging from 1 “completely disagree” to 7 “completely agree”.

Happiness measure

Subjective happiness scale (also known as general happiness scale) is a 4 itemscale compiled by lyubomirsky & lepper (1999). The items are scored on a 7 point scale. The options are different for each of the four questions.

Procedure: a survey was emailed to college students in urban cities of india, using an online platform, google forms. The survey was given out only to thestudents currently attending college and in the age range of 18 to 21 years. All students who participated were informed about the purpose and the objective of the study and were promised confidentiality through anonymity but used to conduct further research. The survey consisted of demographic questions enquiring about participants’ age, gender, current city of residence, course of study and current year of study. The section on personal details was followed by a gratitude scale

(gq-6), an emotional regulation strategy scale (erq) and a happiness measure (general happiness scale). There was no fixed time limit for any of the questionnaires. It took approximately 10 minutes for each participant to fill out theform carefully. The data collected was over a period of fifteen days during the second half of september 2023.

Objectives:

1. To determine gender differences in gratitude, emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression, and happiness among college students.
2. To determine the relationship between gratitude, emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal, emotional suppression, and happiness among college students.

Hypotheses:

1. There will be a gender difference in gratitude among college students.
2. There will be a gender difference in emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression among college students.
3. There will be a gender difference in happiness among college students.
4. There will be a relationship between gratitude and emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal, and emotional suppression among college students.
5. There will be a relationship between gratitude and happiness among college students.
6. There will be a relationship between emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal, emotional suppression and happiness among college students.

III. Result

The findings in table 1 indicated no gender difference in levels of gratitude among college students ($t = 0.176$, $p = 0.577$). It is evident from the mean scores, males ($m = 32.30$) were the same as females on their levels of gratitude ($m = 32.05$). Thus, hypothesis 1 has been rejected.

The results in table 1 also indicated no gender difference in levels of emotional regulation with respect to cognitive reappraisal among college students ($t = 0.586$, $p = 0.142$) with the mean scores revealing that the males ($m = 28.54$) scored almost the same as the females ($m = 27.68$). Similarly, a negligible gender difference in levels of emotional regulation with respect to emotional suppression among college students ($t = 0.377$, $p = 0.682$) was seen. It is evident from the mean scores, males ($m = 18.05$) had almost the same scores as females ($m = 17.59$). Thus, hypothesis 2 has been rejected.

Lastly, no gender difference was observed in the levels of happiness among college students ($t = 0.810$, $p = 0.306$). The mean scores report that males ($m = 18.95$) were as happy as females ($m = 18.07$). Thus, hypothesis 3 has been rejected.

Table 1 shows that no gender differences were found in levels of gratitude, emotional regulation (with respect to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression) and happiness among college students. Hence, hypotheses 1,2 and 3 are rejected.

The findings in table 2 indicate there is a positive relationship between gratitude and cognitive reappraisal among college students ($r=.37$, $p <.01$). Similarly, the table also indicates a negative correlation between gratitude and emotional suppression among college students as ($r=-.33$, $p <.01$). Thus, hypothesis 4 has been accepted.

The results in table 2 reveal that there is no relationship between gratitude and happiness among college students ($r=.20, p >.01$). Thus, hypothesis 5 has been rejected.

No relationship in terms of correlation between happiness and emotional regulation with respect to cognitive reappraisal ($r=.18, p >.01$) and emotional suppression ($r=-.14, p >.01$) was observed among college students. Thus, hypothesis 6 has been rejected.

Table 2 shows that there is a correlation between gratitude and emotional regulation with respect to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression among college students. Whereas, no relationship between gratitude and happiness, and happiness and emotional regulation with respect to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression among college students was found. Hence, hypothesis 4 is accepted and hypotheses 5 and 6 are rejected.

IV. Discussion

This study sought to determine any gender differences in levels of gratitude, emotional regulation (viz. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression), and happiness among college students across the urban cities of India. The study also looked into the relationship between gratitude, emotional regulation viz. Cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression and happiness among the same sample.

Past researchers with similar sample demographics as the present study have found greater differences in the levels of gratitude among young adults or college students. Further, Sran (2023) found that females were more likely to express gratitude than males.

There have been mixed findings when it comes to gender differences in emotional regulation. A study by Delhom, Melendez and Satorres (2021) which comprised 851 participants (299 men and 554 women) from older age groups showed gender differences indicating higher levels of emotional regulation in women. A research conducted by Haga, Kraft and Corby (2009) measured the gender differences in the levels of emotional regulation and contradicted the previous study by stating that men scored better than women on the suppression scale and that no gender differences for the reappraisal scale were observed. Overall men showed better levels of emotional regulation. It must be noted that this also used a vast sample in comparison to the present study. Abdel-hadi, Ellala and Kaba (2023) studied 321 faculty members and indicated gender differences in emotional regulation strategies. The results showed substantial differences for those who lacked emotional awareness, struggled to manage their impulses, and did not accept their emotions. The results also showed that females used less emotion regulation strategies in comparison to male members.

A study by Meisenberg and Woodley (2015), a highly extensive study in comparison to the present study, shows that among 95 countries, happiness was greater for women in 50 countries and life satisfaction was higher for women in 49 countries. This depicts that there is a global pattern of gender differences in happiness and life satisfaction. Another study conducted by Rathore and Chhajer (2021) concluded that there are relevant gender-related differences in subjective well-being, a state of being healthy and happy. The study stated that females have better well-being as they are more satisfied and health conscious.

The present study shows that there are no significant gender differences in the levels of gratitude, emotional regulation (with respect to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression), and happiness. A smaller sample size and different demographics could have led to these contradictory results. The young adults in the present study are all from urban cities in India with similar cultural upbringing, education and access to financial resources which could have contributed to the lack of gender differences. Hence, a possible reason for decreasing gender inequalities in the present study in comparison to previous ones can be this.

Boggio, et al. (2019) conducted a study which confirms that there is a positive relationship between emotional reappraisal and writing about experienced gratitude. Wolf (2023) found that gratitude impacts one's emotional health and quality of life, further motivating people to live a life of happiness. He adds that coping strategies (like making a gratitude list, enjoying simple pleasures of life etc.) may help one combat negative emotional symptoms that could be playing a role in the relationship between gratitude and happiness. Triantoro (2014) in his study on gratitude and happiness among a sample of 81 college students found that gratitude has a role in happiness among college students. In the present study the relationship between gratitude and happiness is in the expected direction but may not have been statistically significant due to the small sample size.

The results show no correlation between happiness and emotion regulation with respect to cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression. However, previous findings suggest that cognitive reappraisal is positively related to well-being and life satisfaction (Haga et al., 2007).

Limitations

It is undeniable that the present study suffered from various limitations. Due to time and resource constraints, the sample size was not big enough to be representative of the pan India population. In addition to this, all three tools employed self-report measures, which have a high chance of being biased because of various reasons such as fear of being judged, vague self awareness, or to have more socially acceptable answers, and are

more prone to errors due to wrong interpretation of questions.

V. Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the study provides an insight into gratitude, emotional regulation and happiness among the current set of college students in india. The study highlights that there is a positive correlation between gratitude and emotional regulation (with respect to cognitive reappraisal, keeping this important finding in mind this study can be further used to develop and improve gratitude practices to improve the overall academic experience for students, for instance incorporating gratitude related groups as well as individual activities. For further studies in this area, it is recommended that researchers expand their sample in terms of number and cities.

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