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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FORGIVENESS, GRATITUDE, DISTRESS, AND WELL-BEING: An integrative review of the literature*

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More miracles occur from forgiveness and gratitude than anything else.

Well-Being flourishes where there is forgiveness, gratitude and appreciation.

ABSTRACT

Research findings point consistently to the conclusion that forgiveness is positively associated with well-being, quality of life, life satisfaction, gratitude, optimism, hope, trust, self-worth and positive beliefs. Forgiveness also affects and is negatively associated with emotional distress and negative affective states such as depression, anger, vengeance, anxiety, somatic symptoms, guilt and vulnerability. Gratitude, like forgiveness, has been shown to have positive associations with well-being, positive affect and emotions, happiness, trust, altruism, life satisfaction, forgiveness, vitality, spirituality, optimism and positive beliefs. Gratitude also has negative associations with emotional distress and negative affective states such as hostility, anger, aggression, depression, anxiety, stress and vulnerability.

This integrative review of the literature also points out that forgiveness and (to a somewhat lesser extent) gratitude, are multidimensional constructs. The research to date has, however, implied an underlying duality in the constructs of forgiveness and gratitude and has usually been conducted from a non-spiritual focus. Moreover, the research is largely focused on correlations, leaving the direction of causality somewhat unclear. This paper reviews the relevant literature and discusses how a non-dualistic, spirituality oriented theory and research guided by that theory would potentially contribute a great deal to the field.

Introduction

In the last 10-15 years research has developed, grown and greatly expanded in the areas of forgiveness, gratitude, distress and well-being. (Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Worthington, 2005). The purpose of this article is to summarize this recent work and map conceptual connections between these constructs with a particular focus on the potential of forgiveness and gratitude to contribute to well-being outcomes and reduce emotional distress. We take the view that forgiveness and gratitude are significant factors that contribute to well-being and our review is structured as such.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a multidimensional construct (including dimensions of self, others, circumstances) that shows negative associations with negative affective states and positive associations with positive affective states and well-being. However, to-date, forgiveness research is based on a set of assumptions that assume an underlying duality amongst the constructs. Forgiveness can be seen from a dualistic or non-dualistic perspective. A dualistic perspective assumes a basic underlying separateness between people and often assumes one person is better or of higher status or value in some way than another. A non-dualistic perspective assumes an underlying unity and equality amongst people and is therefore more likely to connect with spirituality and divinity than a dualistic perspective. Almost all research on forgiveness to date assumes a dualistic perspective. A comprehensive forgiveness theory is needed that clarifies the relationships between these different constructs. A non-dualistic approach to forgiveness theory has been proposed by Jampolsky (1999) and by the Foundation for Inner Peace (1975). A non-dualistic approach is more likely to connect with spirituality/divinity than the dualistic perspective of research to date.

Much of the research to date has focused on associations between forgiveness and negative affect (e.g., depression, anxiety, anger) and well-being, quality of life, and life satisfaction. (See Figure 1). Examples of empirical studies supporting these connections are reviewed below. This review is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to provide a summary of new and innovative work focusing on these constructs.

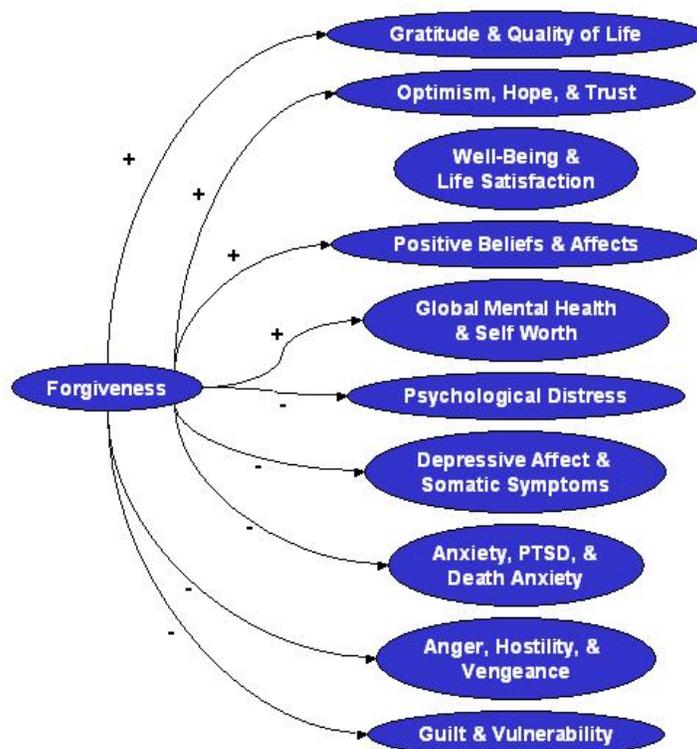
Studies have examined associations between forgiveness and negative affective states, as well as positive outcomes such as life satisfaction, quality of life and well-being. For instance, Toussaint et al. (2001) found, in a national probability sample of 1,423 US adults, that forgiving oneself and others was negatively related to psychological distress and positively related to life satisfaction. Similarly, Krause and Ellison (2003) found that forgiving others was negatively related to depressive affect, depressive somatic symptoms, and death anxiety and positively related to life satisfaction in older adults. Friedman (2004, 2005) and Toussaint and Friedman (2006) in a clinical, adult population found that forgiveness was positively related to well-being, quality of life, life satisfaction, gratitude, positive beliefs, positive affect and emotions, optimism, self-worth, trust, hope, meaning, warmth, friendliness, altruism, joy, peace and love. Friedman (2004, 2005) also found that forgiveness was negatively related to many negative affects and beliefs (total stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, anger, hostility, irritability, aggressive attitudes, guilt, vulnerability), neuroticism, paranoia, emotional instability, negative relationships and identity, traumatic stress, thought confusion and social withdrawal. Finally, Berry and Worthington (2001) found that forgiveness in undergraduates related moderately to a measure of global mental health. Generally, in adult, college, and clinical populations

forgiveness appears to be negatively associated with negative affective states and positively associated with life satisfaction, quality of life and well-being.

A number of studies have shown inverse associations between forgiveness and negative affective states such as, depression, anxiety, anger or vengefulness (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Friedman (2004; 2005); Kendler, et. al. 2003; Rippentrop & Altmaier, 2005). Other investigations have shown a positive association between measures of unforgiveness and depression, anxiety, anger, negative affects and beliefs and even PTSD (Friedman, 2004; 2005; Mauger et al., 1992; Seybold et al., 2001; Subkoviak et al., 1995; Witvliet et al., 2004). Many of these studies are reviewed in the recent Handbook of Forgiveness edited by Everett Worthington (2005) and particularly the chapter by Toussaint & Webb (2005).

Key work in this area suggests that dispositional forgiveness (a personality trait that involves being consistently forgiving across multiple situations, people, and offenses) is related to negative affect and well-being outcomes. In a series of recent studies using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005), high dispositional forgiveness was shown to be predictive of low depression, anger and anxiety and high satisfaction with life. However, with regard to depression, anxiety and satisfaction with life it appeared that forgiveness of oneself and circumstances were most strongly correlated. With regard to anger, forgiveness of others was most strongly correlated. This set of studies suggests that the strength of the association between forgiveness and negative affect and well-being outcomes may vary depending on the type of forgiveness (i.e., self, others, circumstances) being considered.

Figure 1. Conceptual summary of relationships (+/-) between forgiveness and negative affective states and well-being



Friedman (2004, 2005), in an unpublished study with psychotherapy clients, has provided evidence that mostly supports the findings of Thompson et al. (2005). Forgiveness of self correlated highest in a negative direction with depression (-.61 across 3 different assessments) and forgiveness of situations (circumstances) correlated highest in a negative direction with anger (-.58 across 4 different assessments), using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale. Forgiveness of situations, though, also had fairly high negative correlations with depression (-.57 across 3 measures). The negative correlation of the forgiveness of others scale with depression and anger, though significant, was substantially less than the negative correlation with forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situations (circumstances). While the magnitude of the associations varies somewhat, Friedman's (2004, 2005) findings largely support those of Thompson et al.'s and point again to the conclusion that forgiveness is associated with much less negative affect and greatly improved well-being.

Summarizing the research on Forgiveness: These research findings point consistently to the conclusion that forgiveness is positively associated with well-being quality of life, life satisfaction, gratitude, optimism, hope, trust, self-worth and positive beliefs and affects; and negatively associated with emotional distress and negative affective states such as depression, anger, vengeance, anxiety, somatic symptoms, guilt and vulnerability. Studies conducted by Thompson et al. (2005) and Friedman (2004, 2005) revealed that associations may depend somewhat on the type of forgiveness being considered (oneself, others, circumstances), but generally a consistent thread of such correlations is found across the research literature. A limitation of these studies is that they are mostly correlational in nature and additional, experimental work would be useful for clarifying causal directionality of effects.

Gratitude

Gratitude, like forgiveness, has been studied extensively in recent years. Like forgiveness, gratitude can be considered both an inner experience and an attitude. In recent research Emmons (2005) and Emmons and McCullough (2003; 2004), using the 6-item Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ6), which assesses both an inner experience and attitude, showed that grateful people report higher levels of positive emotions, life satisfaction, vitality, and optimism and lower levels of depression and stress. Watkins et al. (2003) and Watkins (2004), using the Gratitude Scale (GRAT), reported similar findings that showed that gratitude correlated in the positive direction with life satisfaction, happiness and measures of positive affectivity and negatively with some measures of negative affectivity such as depression and hostility and physical aggression. Some other measures of negative affect such as anxiety and irritability did not correlate with the GRAT, however. In general, the correlations using the GRAT were stronger with the positive affect measures than negative affect measures.

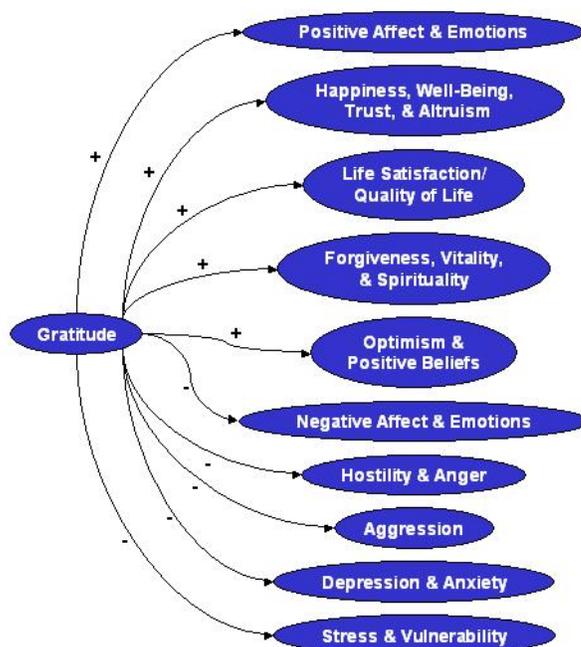
Adler and Fagley (2005) have also shown that their newly developed appreciation questionnaire (conceptually similar to gratitude) correlates in the positive direction with measures of life satisfaction, optimism, spirituality, emotional self awareness, and positive affect and in the negative direction with negative affect. Friedman (2004, 2005) also found in his population of psychotherapy clients that there were statistically significant, large correlations between gratitude and measures of well-being, quality of life, life satisfaction, positive affect, positive beliefs, cognitive balance, affective balance, optimism, self-worth, forgiveness, trust, altruism, hope, and happiness (most correlations ranged from .51 to .69 with only a few in the .31 to .50 range). Friedman also found very strong negative correlations (mostly within the .4 to .7 range) between gratitude and various measures of negative affect (especially total stress symptoms, depression, anger, anxiety and vulnerability). Emmons and

McCullough (2003; 2004) and Watkins (2004) suggest that the disposition toward gratitude appears to increase pleasant feelings more than it diminishes unpleasant emotions. However, Friedman's (2004, 2005) data call into question these assertions and suggest that perhaps gratitude has an equally important effect on positive *and* negative affective states. See Figure 2 for a conceptual summary of the connections between gratitude and well-being outcomes.

Summarizing the research on Gratitude: Gratitude, like forgiveness, has been shown to have positive associations with well-being, positive affect and emotions, happiness, trust, altruism, life satisfaction, forgiveness, vitality, spirituality, optimism and positive beliefs and negative associations with emotional distress and negative affective states such as hostility, anger, aggression, depression, anxiety, stress and vulnerability. These associations appear rather robust and unaffected by differing approaches or types of measurements. Although the associations provide a consistent pattern, the question remains open as to whether gratitude has strong connections to both positive well-being outcomes and distress/negative affective states. In other words, it remains unclear whether gratitude has more of an impact in enhancing positive experiences in life or minimizing the negative experiences or both. The research on gratitude shares the same limitations that are present in the research on forgiveness. Hence, experimental work would be very useful in clarifying the causal connections between gratitude and other constructs.

Other work on gratitude, while not examining the direct link to well-being, has shown connections to other positive and pro-social constructs that are likely to enhance one's overall well-being and life satisfaction. Emmons and McCullough (2003; 2004) showed that people with a strong disposition toward gratitude have the capacity to be empathetic and to take the perspectives of others. Grateful people are also considered to be more generous and helpful by people in their social networks. (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). In addition, McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang's research indicated that those who regularly engage in religious activities such as prayer and reading religious materials are more likely to be grateful and more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of life and a commitment to and responsibility to others. Watkins et al. (2003) indicated that there is a positive correlation between gratitude and internal locus of control, divine control, and intrinsic religious orientation, and a negative correlation with extrinsic religious orientation—the tendency to engage in religious behavior for social or extrinsic (as opposed to intrinsic) motivations. They suggest that grateful people are more likely to feel in control of their destiny through the actions of a divine entity who is interested in their well-being. In sum, gratitude is associated with a number of positive relationships and spirituality-enhancing qualities that may ultimately increase a person's sense of well-being.

Figure 2. Conceptual summary of relationships (+/-) between gratitude and negative affective states and well-being



Unpublished research (Friedman, 2005) with psychotherapy clients supports the findings reported above. Both the GQ6, GRAT-R (revised) and GRATS-Short form correlated with two measures of spiritual transcendence and a measure of multidimensional prayer (correlations ranged from .20 to .44). More grateful clients were rated as more altruistic by spouses or significant others living with them. Moreover, spiritual transcendence and multidimensional prayer correlated with the three measures of gratitude (correlations were even higher than with forgiveness measures). It appears that gratitude is an important expression of religious/spiritual factors that may enhance well-being and life-satisfaction. In fact, based on the correlational data, it might be that, at least in some cases, gratitude is even more of a primary contributor to well-being and life satisfaction than forgiveness. Friedman's (2005) findings will need to be replicated to bear this issue out. However, these findings do raise an interesting issue, in that, forgiveness and gratitude may be reciprocally influencing one another and yet contributing unique, but perhaps, non-overlapping variance to well-being and life satisfaction. That is, while one might need to feel grateful to offer forgiveness and vice versa, the net effects of each factor on well-being may well be independent and of differing magnitude. *In summary*, gratitude is connected to positive and pro-social constructs that are, in and of themselves, likely to enhance well-being. As such, there are potentially a number of indirect mechanisms through which gratitude may influence well-being, as discussed next.

Measures of Forgiveness and Gratitude

The research on forgiveness and gratitude and their connections to negative affective states and well-being will continue to grow and contribute to scientific and therapeutic understanding, but only if adequate measures are available and their use is well understood. There have been, to date, a wide variety of measures of forgiveness and unforgiveness (see Mullet, Neto, and Rivière, 2005; Thompson et al., 2005; Worthington, 2005). These measures do not always correlate highly with each other, as some are dispositional, multidimensional, forgiveness measures (e.g., Heartland Forgiveness Scale) and some are relationship specific,

unforgiveness measures (e.g., Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory). Moreover, most of these measures of forgiveness might be called secular measures. Only the religious forgiveness subscale, which is part of the Religious Coping inventory (Pargament, 2000) measuring religious coping, explicitly appeals to either God or spiritual helpers to help people forgive or release resentments. The amount of research on this subscale is small to date compared with other measures of forgiveness. Further research needs to be done comparing the role of spiritual/religious measures of forgiveness with secular measures on different populations to see their relative contributions to well-being, quality of life and life satisfaction.

There are fewer gratitude scales in general use (mainly the GQ6 and the GRATS scales). Although other measures such as the Appreciation Inventory measure conceptually similar constructs and have been recently developed and shown to possess good psychometric characteristics (Adler & Fagley, 2005). The GQ6 and the GRATS consistently correlate highly with each other in such diverse populations as college students and psychotherapy clients (.75 to .87 range). These gratitude scales also are devoid of spiritual content and appeals to God, a higher power or spiritual helpers.

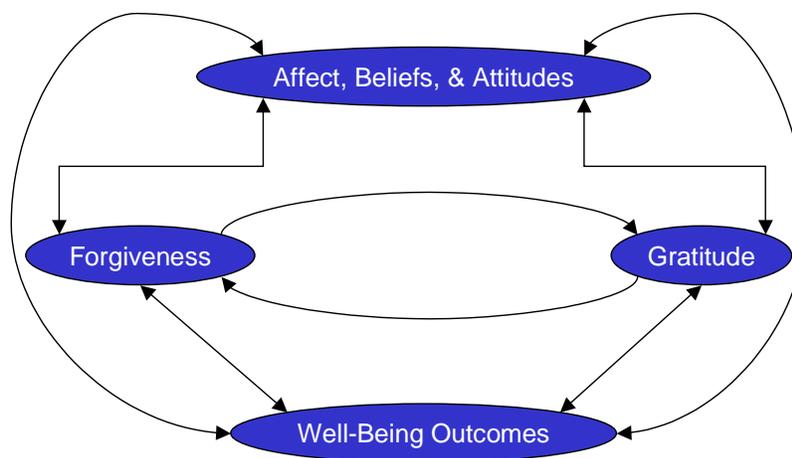
Surprisingly, there has been little research relating gratitude and forgiveness. Friedman (2005) found in his psychotherapy population a substantial correlation (ranging from .53 to .66) between the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) total score and 3 measures of gratitude (GQ6, GRATS-R and GRATS-Sh).

There are a number of factors that may influence the measurement of and associations between forgiveness, gratitude, and negative affect and well-being. These factors include: 1) population being measured, 2) country/culture, 3) age, 4) socioeconomic status, and 5) health/illness status of respondents. Generally though, age and income have shown relatively low correlations with forgiveness and gratitude.

In addition, though forgiveness and gratitude may contribute unique variance to levels of well-being they may also be related to a larger construct related to beliefs/attitudes or affects. For example, Toussaint and Friedman (2006) have analyzed forgiveness data and found that both positive and negative beliefs and affects toward oneself and others account for a substantial amount of the variance in both the forgiveness and gratitude measures. These variables of belief/attitudes and affect (which themselves tend to be highly correlated) may then be higher order constructs that at least partially subsume constructs of forgiveness and gratitude. See Figure 3 for a conceptual model of these relationships.

Another variable that has received some but not extensive attention is the person doing the rating. Most measures of forgiveness and gratitude are self-report measures. As previously mentioned McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) have used some observer ratings of gratitude. Frequent observer ratings by different people (spouses, parents, siblings, friends, employers, employees etc.) would be a significant contribution to the field. In addition behavioral observations of people in situations where they have the opportunity to forgive or be grateful would be very beneficial whenever possible.

Figure 3. Conceptual summary of relationships between affect, beliefs, and attitudes and forgiveness, gratitude and well-being



Summary

This is an exciting time for research on forgiveness and gratitude. Much progress has been made and many measures have been developed to assess these variables. More research needs to be done relating these variables to measures of well-being, quality of life and life satisfaction in different populations and in different settings. Equally important is the need for a comprehensive theory relating these constructs of forgiveness and gratitude, perhaps with a higher order construct (e.g. regarding beliefs and affects), especially from a non-dualistic perspective.

The inner experience of forgiveness and gratitude would appear to be central to any definition of spirituality, although it is certainly possible to experience forgiveness and gratitude without any professed affiliation with a religious or spiritual tradition. In addition, almost all well-known spiritual teachers from many traditions emphasize forgiveness and gratitude as key virtues to be cultivated. (See for example, Rye et al., 2000). More research, though, needs to be done on the relationship of spiritually oriented forgiveness and gratitude, unconditional love and the experience of enlightenment or liberation.

*An earlier version of this article on forgiveness and gratitude was included in a much longer chapter by R. Piedmont, and P. Friedman entitled *Spirituality, Religiosity, and Quality of Life* to be published by Springer Publishers in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life* edited by Kenneth Land. (in press) The authors are grateful to R. Piedmont and K. Land for permission to publish this somewhat modified and enhanced section on forgiveness and gratitude in this journal.

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