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Gratitude, Forgiveness and Humility as Predictors of Subjective Well-being among University Students*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between gratitude, forgiveness, humility and happiness and to determine the prediction levels of gratitude, forgiveness and humility on happiness. 443 university students (321 female, 110 male), studying at Sakarya University - Faculty of Education, participated in the study. 12 of the students did not give information about their gender. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale, The Gratitude Questionnaire, The Humility Scale and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire - Short Form were used as measures. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Hierarchical Regression Analysis were conducted. Considering the relationships between predictor variables (gratitude, forgiveness and humility) and happiness, gratitude and happiness were found to positively correlate. Sub dimensions of forgiveness: forgiveness of self and forgiveness of situation were similarly found positively related with happiness, whereas no significant relationship was found between forgiveness of others and happiness. Finally, there was a positive correlation between openness and focusing on others, which are sub dimensions of humility and happiness, and a negative correlation between humility towards self and happiness. The relationship between modest self-assessment and happiness was not significant. According to the results of the hierarchical regression analysis conducted to determine the predictive value of sub dimensions of gratitude, humility and forgiveness on happiness, entering the model in the first level, gratitude was the predictor that mostly accounted for happiness. Sub dimensions of forgiveness: forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others did not significantly predict happiness, however forgiveness of situation significantly predicted happiness. Both openness and modest self-assessment as sub dimensions of humility significantly accounted for happiness. The findings are discussed in the light of the related literature.

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Keywords:
gratitude, forgiveness, humility, subjective well-being, happiness

Introduction

There has been an increasing focus on positive psychology in recent years. Happiness is one of the basic concepts of positive psychology. This is perhaps related to the pursuit of happiness by human beings. Conceptualization of happiness in public language and subjective well-being in the literature, how it could be measured, whether it is gained or not, what contributed to it, what predictors it has, are the questions to which positive psychology is seeking answers (Doğan, Sapmaz & Akıncı Çötok, 2013).

Happiness or subjective well-being is a construct formed by frequently positive feelings such as excitement, joy, hope, interest, trust, love, and rarely by negative feelings such as sadness, guilt, hate, and anger, as well as satisfaction from working life, educational life, and personal life (Myers & Deiner, 1995; Diener, 2000). Seligman (1998), the founder of positive psychology, suggested that psychology should focus on subjective well-being and strengths.

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As a result of studies accelerated by Seligman, subjective well-being was found to have various predictors. Some of those are strengths of personality or merits (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Datu, 2013). In this context, gratitude, forgiveness and humility are the primary concepts which are regarded as merits or personality characteristics.

Although gratitude has been the primary topic of different disciplines like religion, sociology and economics for centuries, it has been the focus of positive psychology literature recently. Since gratitude is a research topic of several disciplines besides positive psychology, its conceptualization is various in these disciplines. For instance, gratitude is conceptualized as "feeling grateful for a good or kind behaviour from anyone" in a traditional description (Froh, Miller & Snyder, 2007). Furthermore, researchers asserting that there are some inadequacies in this description (Homan, Sedlak & Boyd, 2014; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010) discuss gratitude as a feeling and suggest that providing benefit for other people is not the only motivation underlying this feeling (Homan et al., 2014). For instance, Wood et al. (2010) reported that several natural and supernatural factors affect the feelings of gratitude. In this regard, one could be grateful to God and nature only for what one has. This may be the sign that people who tend to be grateful behave appreciatively about what they have because of their awareness of positive events that they have encountered in life (Emmons, McCullough & Tsang, 2007; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002). Consequently, gratitude brings together other positive feelings such as optimism and hope, therefore this is perhaps why gratitude takes place in most research investigating subjective well-being (McCullough et al., 2002). Nevertheless, Geraghty, Wood and Hyland (2010), approaching gratitude as a personality characteristic, described gratitude as the core of positive psychology, and focused on the fact that almost no personality characteristic is related to life satisfaction and mental health. There are much research in the literature supporting this statement (Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch & Carlisle, 2014; Chan, 2013; Froh, Yurkewicz & Kashdan, 2009). This has been the topic of little research in Turkey, although it receives considerable attention in international literature (Oğuz Duran & Tan, 2013; Yüksel, & Oğuz Duran, 2012). Therefore, it is important that determining the place of the concept of gratitude in Turkish culture and determining the relationship with subjective well-being.

Another concept which is thought to be related to subjective well-being and also gratitude is forgiveness. Literature suggests that forgiveness is the first value which is effective for the maximum decrease of negative effects, such as offence or resentment in communications with others, as required by being human (Berry & Worthington, 2001). In related literature, forgiveness not only contributes to decrement of negative feelings, but also to frequency of positive feelings (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Therefore, McCullough, Pargament and Thoresen (2000), indicated that forgiveness has a correction effect on interpersonal relationships. Forgiveness in psychology literature started to be discussed with the positive psychology movement, gained speed in the 1980s and continues until today. In this regard, the question arises: what is the place of forgiveness in positive psychology research? The answer, indeed, is in the definitions of forgiveness. According to Reed and Enright (2006), forgiveness is displacement of negative attitudes, such as anger and revenge towards damaging situations or people, with positive attitudes such as compassion and tolerance. As this definition suggested, forgiveness has a function that transforms negative feelings into positive feelings. In another definition by Maltby, Macaskil and Day (2001), forgiveness is a healthy attempt to cope with negative outcomes which are caused by maltreatment by others or wrong behaviours by oneself. This attempt is, at the same time, regarded as a sign of overcoming the feelings and thoughts that intervene with the well-being or happiness of a person (Maltby et al., 2001). In the studies about forgiveness in the positive psychology field, forgiveness was found to be related to life satisfaction which is the sub dimension of subjective well-being (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Asmussen & Billings, 2005). Factors related to the subjective well-being of an individual such as enthusiasm, high energy and cheer decrease with the negative feelings such as anger, revenge and blame, which were experienced as a result of problems in interpersonal relationships. In this situation, subjective well-being is expected to be affected negatively. Negatively affected subjective well-being may lead to psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. If an individual gives up negative feelings such as anger, irritation, revenge, and blame caused by any reason, and turns negative feelings into positive feelings and attempts to forgive the person, this positively contributes to the subjective well-being of the individual. Thus, individuals can take precautions against psychological disorders that could occur for this reason.

Humility is one of the positive characteristics that could affect the subjective well-being of an individual (Elliot, 2010). According to Emmons (1999), humility reflects restraint and realism when evaluating the successes and skills of oneself. Tangney (2000) also defines that humility is being open-minded to new and different ideas whilst being aware of one's own mistakes and limitations, realistically evaluating success and skills, and seeing oneself as a small part of the universe with comparatively low self-absorption instead of a grandiose attitude. In this context, individuals with high humility levels present the opportunities they have and their personality characteristics while evaluating their successes and skills. At the same time, they could be said not to behave in an exaggerated manner, to see themsleves as a part of the world, not to show grandiose attitudes, and to be compatible in social relationships. Humility positively reflects their lifestyles with this aspect. The main point highlighted in the definition is to behave realistically while evaluating their own characteristics. Peters, Rowat and Johnson (2011), reported that social relationships of individuals who evaluate themselves with humility in their social environments are more qualitative.

In the literature, a relationship was found between the concepts of gratitude (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008; Wood, Froh & Geraght, 2010), forgiveness (Bugay & Demir, 2011; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick & Johnson, 2001), humility (Murray, 2009) and subjective well-being. Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore that subjective well-being is affected by cultural differences (Oğuz Duran & Tan, 2013). Therefore, Kağıtçıbaşı (2000) reported that it is important to present the underlying dynamics over behaviours and the meanings attributed to observed behaviours by society while directly observing behaviours. The aim of this study is to determine the relationship of gratitude, forgiveness and humility with subjective well-being and which of these predictor variables most contributes to subjective well-being.

Method

This study was conducted with a descriptive relational screening model to determine what level of gratitude, forgiveness and humility variables predict the subjective well-being of university students.

Research group. 443 university students, consisting of 321 females (72.5 %) and 110 males (24.8%), studying at different departments of Sakarya University Faculty of Education in the 2013-2014 academic year participated in the study. 12 students (2.7%) did not give information about their gender.

Measures. In accordance with the aim of the study, the "Heartland Forgiveness Scale" was used to determine the forgiveness levels of students and "The Gratitude Questionnaire" was used to detect their gratitude levels. The "Humility Scale" was used to detect their humility levels and "The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire" was used to measure their happiness levels.

The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire-Short Form (OHQ-SF)

The questionnaire developed by Hills and Argyle (2002) consists of 8 items and was found to be correlated with a 29-item original form at .93 level ($p<.001$). Callaway (2009) explored the reliability of OHQ-SF among 201 university students and the internal consistency coefficient was .76. Doğan ve Çötok (2011) adapted the scale into Turkish. According to exploratory factor analysis results, an eigenvalue of 2.782 was found and the single factor structure shared 39.74% of variance. The single factor structure of OHQ-SF was examined by confirmatory factor analysis and the goodness of fit indexes were reported ($\chi 2/df=2.77$, AGFI=.93, GFI=.97, CFI=.95, NFI=.92, IFI=.95, RMSEA=.074). The internal consistency coefficient of OHQ-SF was .74 and test re-test reliability coefficient was .85.

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ)

McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002) developed the scale which was designed to measure the gratitude of individuals by four dimensions as severity, frequency, period and intensity, and it has 6 items. Each item was rated between 1 (absolutely disagree) and 7 (absolutely agree) in a 7-point Likert type scale. The Cronbach alpha coefficients for 6 items of the Gratitude Questionnaire were between .76 and .84 (Yüksel & Oğuz-Duran, 2012).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the adapted Gratitude Questionnaire scale into Turkish by Yüksel and Oğuz-Duran (2012). According to Confirmatory Factor Analysis results, factor loadings were between .32 and .89. Findings showed that the research model confirmed

the single factor structure with standard goodness of fit index values. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was found to be .67 (Yüksel & Oğuz-Duran, 2012).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale

A 7-point Likert type scale and an 18-item scale were developed by Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen and Billings (2005) to measure the forgiveness levels of students. It consists of three sub dimensions which are forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situation. The test re-test coefficient was calculated to be .83 for forgiveness of self, .72 for forgiveness of others, .73 for forgiveness of situation and .77 for the total score. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients were: for the forgiveness of self subscale α=.75, for the forgiveness of others subscale α=.78, and for the forgiveness of situation subscale α=.79, the total score was α=.86 (Thompson et al., 2005). Turkish adaptation of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale was done by Bugay (2010). Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients of the Turkish form were α=.64 for the forgiveness of self subscale, α=.79 for the forgiveness of others subscale, α=.76 for the forgiveness of situation subscale, and α=.81 for the total score. Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted to test the original 3 factor structure for the Turkish sample and goodness of fit values indicated that the model was well-fit (Bugay & Demir, 2012).

Humility Scale

The Humility scale was developed by Elliot (2010) to measure humility levels of individuals. Turkish adaptation of this scale was conducted by Sarıçam, Akın, Gediksiz and Akın (2012). It consists of 13 items with four subscales as openness, self-forgetfulness, modest self-assessment, and focus on others dimensions. The psychometric properties of the scale was examined by test re-test, internal consistency, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and criterion related reliability methods. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients were calculated as α=.63 for the openness subscale, α=.67 for the self-forgetfulness subscale, α=.72 for the modest self-assessment subscale, and α=.79 for the focus on others subscale. The scale was given to 71 students 21 days Dec and the correlation coefficient for test re-test reliability was found to be r=.94 for openness, r=.88 for self-forgetfulness, r=.34 for modest self-assessment, r=.33 for focus on others and r=.63 for the total scale (Sarıçam et al., 2012).

Procedure

Permission was obtained from related departments for the participation of the students and the students voluntarily participated in the study. Then, researchers with different instructors from different departments participated in the students' classes and informed them about the purposes and content of the study.

Data analysis

Data from questionnaires were analysed in SPSS version 22.0. Before the analysis, data were checked for missing values and normal distribution of data were assured. Despite that the maximum distance of Cook value must be smaller than 1 and Leverage value must be over .05, it was calculated to be .031 and .056, respectively. Moreover, box diagram, scatterplot, histogram and normal distribution curve were examined, 78 data (521-78=443) were thereafter excluded from the analyses and the remaining 443 data were analysed.

Firstly, Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to determine the associations between variables. Then, hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to find to what extent the independent variables (predictor) gratitude, forgiveness and humility predict the dependent variable (criterion) subjective well-being, the unique effect of predictor variables on the criterion variable, and the effects of all predictors on the predicted variable together.

Findings

In this section, the statistical analysis and findings of data collected by The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, the Heartland Forgiveness Scale, The Gratitude Questionnaire and the Humility Scale, and the interpretations have been shared on tables.

Correlations between variables were given in Table 1 and the findings about the predictive level of independent variables on dependent variables were given in Table 2.

Table 1. Correlations between variables

Variables	Happiness
1.Gratitude	.431**
2.Forgiveness of self	. 151**
3.Forgiveness of others	.029
4.Forgiveness of situation	.228**
5.Openness	.053*
6.Self-forgetfulness	.057
7.Modest self-assessment	-.185**
8.Focus on others	.186**

*$p< .05$ **$p< .01$

According to the correlation table, the gratitude, forgiveness of situation, forgiveness of self, and focus on others, openness variables were found to significantly correlate with subjective well-being in a positive way. On the other hand, while the relationship between forgiveness of others, self-forgetfulness and subjective well-being is not significant, there is a significant relationship between modest self-assessment and subjective well-being in a negative way.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis table.

Independent Variables	R^2	ΔR^2	R^2 change	B	Beta	t
MODEL 1	,186	,184	,186			22,164
1. Gratitude				,307	,431	10,043***
MODEL2	,211	,204	,025			9,249
2. Forgiveness of self				,059	,068	1,516
3. Forgiveness of others				-,065	-,086	-1,867
4. Forgiveness of situation				,134	,144	3,047*
MODEL 3	,241	,227	,029			5,905
5. Openness				,229	,109	2,425*
6. Self-forgetfulness				-,113	-,065	-1,403
7. Focus on others				-,188	-,121	-2,598*
8. Modest self-assessment				,150	,079	1,766

*$p< .05$ **$p< .01$ *** $p<.001$

Table 2 shows the hierarchical regression analysis results. Analyses were done at three levels. In the first model, gratitude had a significant contribution and accounted for the 18.4% of total variance (R^2 =.186, ΔR^2 = .184, R^2 change =.186, F change (1,441) =100.885, p< .001). In the second model, forgiveness sub dimensions (forgiveness of situation, forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others) contributed to the model. While sub dimensions of forgiveness and gratitude together at 20.4% contributed to the model, forgiveness significantly contributed 2.5% in the condition that gratitude was controlled. However, forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others did not predict subjective well-being (R^2=.211, ΔR^2 = .204, R^2_{change}=.025, F_{change} (3,438) =4,678, p<.01). Humility (openness, self-forgetfulness, focus on others, modest self-assessment) shared 2.9% of total variance when gratitude and forgiveness were controlled. On the other hand, humility with contribution of gratitude and forgiveness at 22.7% predicted subjective well-being (R^2=.241, ΔR^2 = .227, R^2_{change}=.029, F_{change} (4,434) =4.182, p< 0.01). Despite openness and modest self-assessment being the predictors of subjective well-being, self-forgetfulness and focus on others did not predict subjective well-being.

Discussion

In this study, the predictive role of gratitude, forgiveness and humility variables on subjective well-being was examined. The findings will be adressed at three levels. Firstly, the findings indicated that gratitude positively predicted subjective well-being. Related literature shows several research studies support this result. Froh et al. (2008) investigated the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being in an

adolescent sample. Gratitude was found to predict subjective well-being as in this study. Chan (2013) showed that gratitude accounts for subjective well-being in the study examining the relationship between gratitude, forgiveness and subjective well-being.

Several research studies (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008; Wood, Froh & Geraght, 2010) indicated that gratitude predicts subjective well-being. This may be explained by the formation of the gratitude concept. The gratitude concept includes acknowledgement of positive situtions in life, development of positive responses towards those positive situations and feeling grateful by its nature. From this point of view, there is a strong circle between gratitude and the positive emotional component of subjective well-being and these two concepts continually influence each other. McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson (2001) found that gratitude affects subjective well-being, considering gratitude as a moral emotion such as empathy and guilt.

The forgiveness concept, as the second variable of the study, was examined via three different dimensions (forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of situation). According to the correlation and regression analysis results, forgiveness of situation predicted happiness, while forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others did not predict a dependent variable despite the relation to happiness. This kind of research is limited, however some research has focused on similar findings. Emmons et al. (2007) suggest a temporary forgiveness concept. According to the concept, the forgiveness levels of individuals change day by day via the daily incidents and needs of individuals. Hence, Baumeister et al. (1998) investigated the interpersonal and inner dimensions of forgiveness by different combinations. One of these combinations is the pseudo forgiveness concept. They explained that individuals do not internalize forgiveness, however they show it as a behaviour in interpersonal relationships for this kind of forgiveness. Therefore, temporary forgiveness and forgiving behaviour differentiate. Sometimes, individuals may not forgive the same behaviour at another time, this may change every day and forgiveness is not stable. Individuals have difficulty in internalizing forgiveness in pseudo forgiveness. When the individual cannot sufficiently internalize forgiveness, this situation does not contribute to the subjective well-being of the individual. For this reason, it may not be true to suggest a constant idea that forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others predict subjective well-being.

Witvliet (2001), emphasized that social support is one of the important factors of forgiveness. When the social support resources are high in number, an individual will not feel guilty as a result of positive suggestions and will decide that there is not something to forgive. However, this does not always mean that the individual has inner peace. An individual may use it as a coping strategy to escape from the momentary stress. Therefore, it could be said not to affect subjective well-being (Sastre, Vinsonneau, Neto, Girar & Mullet, 2003).

According to correlation and regression analysis, it was found that there is a positively significant relationship between the forgiveness of situation sub dimension and subjective well-being, and that forgiveness of situation predicts subjective well-being. Forgiveness of situation is defined as the translation of negative thoughts about bad events into positive ones, when things have become bad for uncontrollable reasons and being empathetic towards the bad events in life. Bugay and Demir (2011), in their research, stated that rumination is a mediator in the relationship between forgiveness of self and others and life satisfaction, as a cognitive sub dimension of subjective well-being. Individuals remember their mistakes by remembering the past and have a tendency to self-accusation and regret. They then may feel anger by repetitively thinking of past events. This negatively affects subjective well-being. If an individual forgives the past events or situation, the subjective well-being of the individual increases. It may be interpreted that forgiveness of situation is positively related to subjective well-being.

Another concept related to subjective well-being was humility. Humility was examined with the openness, self-forgetfulness, focus on others, and modest self-assessment sub dimensions. Humility is a frequent topic in the literature, however there is little research about its relationship with subjective well-being. This research also investigated humility without considering sub dimensions (Alpay, 2009; Sarıçam et al., 2012).

There is a significant relationship between openness and subjective well-being. Between openness and subjective well-being the relationship may be easily understood when openness is defined as openness to other ideas, information and accepting one's own mistakes. Exline and Geyer (2004) indicated that with humility people do not have acknowledgement needs and do not need a defence against criticism. Therefore, they do not suffer harm from interpersonal relationships and do not feel inner disturbance because they do not perceive the criticism as a threat to their own personality. Their subjective well-being does not decrease, on the contrary, it increases because they can explain themselves better. This explains the relationship between openness and subjective well-being.

Another sub dimension is self-forgetfulness. Self-forgetfulness can be explained as thinking of oneself less than other people. There was no significant relationship between self-forgetfulness and subjective well-being. This may be explained by the fact that humility is not valuable in every culture (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Hareli & Weiner, 2000; Landrum, 2011). Self-forgetfulness as a sub dimension of humility, which is not valuable for all cultures, may not always be considered to be important in interpersonal relationships. Unappreciated individuals do not feel inner peace about their behaviours. Therefore, the subjective well-being of these individuals may not be affected positively or negatively. The other sub-dimensions of humility is named focusing on others, also don't predict subjective well-being. Focus on others is defined as the appreciation of the goodness of everyone by humble individuals. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) suggested that humility is shaped by feelings of inner value rather than external factors such as confirmation and success. In this situation, people focus on the emerging feelings more than the external responses.

Appreciation of others provides an inner satisfaction for the appreciated side while the appreciating side does not need a confirmation. Appreciating others may have a significant relationship with subjective well-being and this is also parallel with the data obtained. Hökelekli (2007) suggested that humility is not underestimating oneself, even if it is, this underestimation is far from illusory. It means to accept oneself knowing everything, and emphasises that there is no pride or arrogance in this concept. In the context of humility, it can be said that individuals with high humility levels evaluate their opportunities, personalities, abilities and successes as they are, and do not behave in an exaggerated way, whilst at the same time, they accept themselves as a part of the world and are easygoing in social relationships (Peters, Rowat & Johnson, 2011). This explains the relationship between modest self-assessment and subjective well-being.

It is inevitable that cultural differences are detected in the gratitude, forgiveness and humility concepts as in most psychological concepts. Research about these concepts is frequently observed in foreign countries with respect to Turkey. Therefore, there is a growing need to research the associations between the sub dimensions of these concepts and positive concepts. Besides, similar studies in different cities, regions and cultures may be recommended to be done with different age groups. By this way generalizability of the findings obtained in this study can be improved. Finally, the experimental utility of the findings, especially in the education and psychological guidance area, is important for both the subjective well-being of individuals and the experimental testing of the findings.

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