

Original Papers

Polish Psychological Bulletin
2011, vol. 42(1), 20-23
DOI - 10.2478/v10059-011-0004-z

Małgorzata Szcześniak*
Esmeralda Soares

Are proneness to forgive, optimism and gratitude associated with life satisfaction?

The main aim of the current study was to examine whether and how life satisfaction is related to propensity to forgive one's transgressor. Additionally, it also explored the relationship between life satisfaction and other chosen psychological variables, such as optimism and gratitude. The study involved 338 persons between 16 and 83 years of age. For the measurement of psychological variables the following research tools were used: Satisfaction With Life Scale, Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory, Gratitude Questionnaire, and Learned Optimism Test. Among the study participants satisfaction with life was positively correlated with the conviction about a permanent and ubiquitous nature of positive events, optimism and gratitude. The study also observed a negative correlation between satisfaction with life, the motivation for revenge and avoidance motivation, and the perception of a permanent and ubiquitous nature of adverse events.

Keywords: *Forgiveness, Life Satisfaction, Gratitude, Optimism, Hope*

Introduction

Although the question title appears to be rhetorical and it seems that we already know the answer, the up-to-date research does not provide us with obvious responses that could strengthen our common sense of knowledge. In fact, whereas the scientific literature abounds with theoretical and empirical studies on religiousness, spirituality, hope, gratitude and other positive emotions as predictors of well-being, relatively little research has been conducted on the mutual relationship between forgiveness and subjective life satisfaction (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). Moreover, the few studies that exist on this topic show somewhat weak connections between forgiveness and life satisfaction and thus challenge the popular and widespread intuitions which let us believe that happy people, at the same time, are more forgiving.

For example, McCullough et al. (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick & Johnson, 2001), in one of the first studies dedicated to this subject, observed a lack of relations between forgiveness and life satisfaction, calling into question the importance of forgiving one's offenders for promoting health or restoring subjective well-being. Such

results certainly do not exclude the possibility of reciprocal connection but rather imply that this relationship may be more complex and hard to identify than it is usually presumed.

In another study, Muñoz Sastre et al. (Muñoz Sastre, Vinsonneau, Girard & Mullet, 2004) who examined forgiveness and well-being in adolescents from France and Portugal, assessed a fragile correlation between both variables, explaining that satisfaction understood as a self-referential trait is not related to disposition toward forgiveness and suggesting the small number of participants in the sample. Similar results obtained Maltby et al. (Maltby, Day & Barber, 2005) who studied forgiveness, hedonic (short-term) and eudaimonic (long-term) happiness. Outcomes of this research illustrate a moderate association between forgiveness and both types of happiness. While negative forgiving conditions were uniquely associated with hedonic happiness, positive forgiving was linked to eudaimonic happiness. Also in a recent survey by Wnuk et al. (Wnuk, Marcinkowski & Kalisz, 2010) consistent with the results gained in the previous research studies, did not confirm any significant relationship between motivation for revenge, and motivation for avoiding the wrongdoer

* Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences, Institute of Psychology, via Cremolino 141, 00166 Rome, Italy, E-mail: mm_szczeniak@wp.pl

with life satisfaction, casting doubts on the hypothesis that forgiving one's transgressors has a positive effect on subjective well-being.

Unlike in the above mentioned reports, Karremans et al. (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk & Kluwer, 2003) noticed that forgiving was associated with psychological well-being when commitment between two parties involved in a relationship was strong. In fact, participants in forgiving condition exhibited greater life satisfaction than did respondents in the no-forgiving situation, proving that there really might be some kind of positive link between forgiveness and satisfaction with life. Also Bono et al. (Bono, McCullough & Root, 2008), using cross-sectional and prospective multilevel analyses, demonstrated that enhancement in forgiveness, measured as fluctuations in individuals' avoidance and revenge toward their transgressors, was related to within-persons increases in psychological well-being, considered as more satisfaction with life.

The main aim of the study was to verify the extent to which people that are happy and satisfied with their lives are disposed to forgive. In light of Karremans' and Bono's results we assumed that persons low in forgiving and high in avoiding the offender or motivated to seek revenge would be less likely to report their satisfactory subjective well-being. Simultaneously we hypothesized that happy people, who evaluate favourably the overall quality of their life, would be also more optimistic and grateful.

Methods

Participants and measures

The study was carried out among Italian citizens, inhabitants of Lazio (a region of west central Italy), Sardinia (an island in the Mediterranean Sea), and Calabria (a region in southern Italy). It involved 338 persons between 16 and 83 years of age ($M=32.11$; $DS=14.53$). The sample included 228 women (67,5%) and 109 men (32,2%). One person did not answer the question about gender. Other socio-demographic variables revealed that 2% of respondents had basic education, 68% finished secondary school and 30% had higher education. Almost 55% of participants declared themselves as working persons and 44% were not working at all. The remaining respondents did not provide the response about their working experience.

For the measurement of psychological variables the following research tools were used: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-12), Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), and Learned Optimism Test (LOT).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), originally developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) is intended as a brief assessment of an individual's

general sense of satisfaction with her or his life as a whole. Although the SWLS includes only five statements, it has demonstrated good psychometric characteristics. In fact, in the present study the value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.84, suggesting that the scale has high internal consistency. Moreover, its one-factor character has been confirmed and extracted factor explained 63% of the total variance. Five items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-12) is a brief self-report instrument designed to measure the nature of interpersonal forgiving. The first subscale, called 'avoidance', contains seven statements and shows the motivation to keep away from the offender. The second subscale, called 'revenge', includes five statements and illustrates the motivation to seek vengeance. Forgiveness takes place when people are no longer motivated to seek vengeance or avoid the wrongdoer (McCullough, Hoyt & Rachal, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Both subscales in this study have high internal consistency (avoidance $\alpha=0.88$ and revenge $\alpha=0.86$) and confirm one-factor character for each of them. The avoidance factor explains 58% of the total variance and revenge factor explains 64% of the total variance. Responses to 12 items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) is a six-item self-report questionnaire by McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002), that investigates the extent to which people experience gratitude in their daily life. In the presented research, the GQ-6 has alpha value $\alpha=0.67$. Respondents endorsed each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

The Learned Optimism Test (LOT) is a scale developed by Martin Seligman (1991). It consists of 32 situations to which respondents indicate how they would most likely respond. The test is based on the idea that people have different explanatory styles: 1) pervasiveness: global or specific (events have a widespread or specific effect); 2) permanence: unstable or stable (events have a temporary or long-lasting cause); 3) personalisation: external or internal (whether a person or some external agents are the cause of the event). The responses are combined to create general hope score. The scale is designed to measure dispositional optimism.

Results

All the data were analyzed using the SPSS Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Version 18.0 IT). In order to measure the degree of linear relationship between the variables taken into consideration, Pearson correlation formula was used.

Table 1
Value of correlation coefficients between the selected variables (n=304)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Satisfaction with life (1)									
Motivation for avoiding the wrongdoer (2)	-.19**								
Motivation for revenge (3)	-.15*	.43**							
Gratitude (4)	.49**	-.21**	-.35**						
Permanent good events (5)	.19**	-.02	-.08	.07					
Permanent bad events (6)	-.14*	.01	.10*	-.11*	-.12*				
Pervasive good events (7)	.18**	-.01	.00	.06	.29**	.02			
Pervasive bad events (8)	-.09	.02	.14*	-.08	-.22**	.15**	-.16**		
Hope (9)	.25**	-.02	-.12*	.12*	.65**	-.50**	.63**	-.62**	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

The results illustrate that, contrary to the previous studies which did not prove relation between well-being and forgiveness or provided evidence that such a relationship was very weak, we noticed a robust negative connection between satisfaction with life and two central components of forgiveness: motivation for avoiding the wrongdoer and motivation for revenge (Table 1). Those participants who scored high on the avoidance subscale e revenge subscale, expressed lower life satisfaction.

Additionally, we identified that the perception of a permanent and ubiquitous nature of adverse events, characterizing rather pessimistic narrative styles, was negatively correlated with life satisfaction, and the perception of permanent causes of good events, which distinguishes optimistic explanatory style, was positively correlated with life satisfaction. Life satisfaction had also a negative connection with perception of pervasiveness of bad events and a positive connection with perception of pervasiveness of good events.

These results found their confirmation in the correlational outcome obtained between life satisfaction and the overall score of hope. Hopeful participants expressed higher satisfaction with life in comparison to hopeless respondents who felt lower satisfaction with life.

Among the study participants satisfaction with life was also strongly and positively correlated with dispositional gratitude. It seems that individuals who reported high subjective well-being are more inclined to experience and communicate their gratitude as well.

Discussion

The hypothesis stating that one's life satisfaction and capacity of forgiveness are correlated was solidly confirmed in the current study. The negative connection between life satisfaction and both motivation to avoid the transgressor and motivation to seek revenge (in such form they both mean a lack of forgiveness) seems to prove that the more

people evade or retaliate against the wrongdoer, the less they feel well about their lives. As Ashford and LeCroy (2010) observe, carrying around a desire for retribution or a need to avoid someone who behaved incorrectly towards us, is not beneficial because hostility and aggression are linked to a variety of health problems. Moreover, this inverse relationship between unforgiveness and life satisfaction may be explained through the experience of grudge. According to Seligman (2003), those who hold on to rancour and grudges, conserve bitter memories and do not forgive their perpetrators, are more subjected to health risks, especially in cardiovascular terms.

The second hypothesis about life satisfaction and optimism about the future was also found in its suggestive evidence in the present study. We noticed that the perception of a permanent and pervasive nature of adverse events, characterizing rather pessimistic narrative styles, was negatively correlated with life satisfaction, and the perception of a permanent and pervasive causes of good events, which distinguishes optimistic explanatory style, was positively correlated with life satisfaction. These outcomes found its confirmation in the correlational effects obtained between life satisfaction and the overall score of hope. This result may signify that happy people are more likely to express optimism about the future, because as Taylor and Brown (1999) observe, they typically have high self-esteem, positive conception of themselves and constructive vision of life's circumstances. Conversely, unhappy, discontent and dissatisfied people habitually have a pessimistic approach to life, experience negative emotions and perceive unfavourable aspects of reality. Also Liberman et al. (2009) demonstrated that participants, who showed a greater tendency to endow positive events, reported greater satisfaction with their lives and displayed more optimism about the future as well. On the contrary, respondents who showed a greater tendency to dwell on adverse events expressed lower satisfaction with their lives and displayed less optimism about the future.

Also, the hypothesis about positive relationship between life satisfaction and gratitude was validated, as significant and intense positive correlation was found between these two psychological dimensions. Recent empirical evidence does indeed suggest that the trait of gratitude is associated with life satisfaction. Park and collaborators (2004), for example, identified consistent and robust correlation between well-being and different character strengths, among them gratitude. From a theoretical point of view this connection seems to be valid and comprehensible because if we think that dispositional gratitude consists in being thankful for the kindness of others and good things that happen or happened, therefore this characteristic indicates one's positive perception of life and satisfaction with it. Wood and associates (2008), in their recent survey, confirmed that gratitude as a trait appears to correlate most strongly with the facets that correspond to well-being and social functioning, thus replicating their earlier findings and suggesting that the degree of the relationship between both variables was remarkable. As Wnuk and other collaborators (2010) noticed, both gratitude and hope, belonging to the same virtue which Seligman and Peterson call "transcendence", involve a positive attitude toward oneself, life in general and other people.

As we can observe, the present study evidently confirmed the common sense intuition and few research surveys on the topic that people who are happy and satisfied with their lives are also less resentful toward others, more forgiving, grateful and hopeful.

Concluding, our findings showed that the individuals who distinguish themselves by low motivation to avoid the transgressor and to seek revenge (forgiveness), are more satisfied with their lives. We also noticed that among Italian participants, optimism about the future, hope and gratitude are strongly and positively related to life satisfaction.

References

Ashford, J. B., & LeCroy, C. W. (2010). *Human behavior in the social environment: A multidimensional perspective*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, CENGAGE Learning.

Bono, G., McCullough, M. E., & Root, L. M. (2008). Forgiveness, feeling connected to others, and well-being: Two longitudinal studies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 182-195.

Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction With Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 41, 71-75.

Karremans, J. C., Van Lange, P. A. M., Ouwerkerk, J. W., & Kluwer, E. S. (2003). When forgiving enhances psychological well-being: The role of interpersonal commitment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 1011-1026.

Lieberman, V., Boehm, J. K., Lyubomirsky, S., & Ross, L. D. (2009). Happiness and memory: Affective significance of endowment and contrast. *Emotion*, 9, 666-680.

Maltby, J., Day, L., & Barber, L. (2005). Forgiveness and happiness: The differing contexts of forgiveness using the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 1-13.

McCullough, M. E., Bellah, C. G., Kilpatrick, S. D., & Johnson, J. L. (2001). Vengefulness: Relationships with forgiveness, rumination, well-being, and the Big Five. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 601-610.

McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., & Tsang, J. A. (2002). The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 112-127.

McCullough, M. E., Hoyt, W. T., & Rachal, K. C. (2000). What we know (and need to know) about assessing forgiveness constructs. In M. E. McCullough, K. I. Pargament, & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.). *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 65-88). New York: Guilford Press.

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23, 603-619.

Muñoz Sastre, M. T., Vinsonneau, G., Girard, M., & Mullet, E. (2003). Forgiveness and satisfaction with life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 4, 323-335.

Seligman, M. E. P. (1991). *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York: Knopf.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. New York: Free Press.

Taylor, S. T., & Brown, J. D. (1999). Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.). *The self in social psychology* (pp. 43-66). Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

Toussaint, L., & Friedman, P. (2009). Forgiveness, gratitude, and well-being: The mediating role of affect and beliefs. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10, 635-654.

Wnuk, M., Marcinkowski, J. T., & Kalisz, Z. (2010). Relationships between the strengths of character: forgiveness, gratitude, and hope and satisfaction with life among public health and physiotherapy students. *Zdrowie Publiczne*, 120, 158-162.

Wood, A. M., Joseph, S., & Maltby, J. (2008). Gratitude uniquely predicts satisfaction with life: Incremental validity above the domains and facets of the five factor model. *Personality of Individual Differences*, 45, 49-54.