

GRATITUDE AND LIFE SATISFACTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to investigate trait gratitude and life satisfaction of university students. This study was conducted with the specific objectives: investigating trait gratitude and life satisfaction of the students, comparing gender, grade and university differences in gratitude and life satisfaction of students; exploring the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction and exploring the effect of gratitude on life satisfaction of the students. A total of 840 university students (Male=420, Female=420) from three selected Universities in Sagaing Township participated in this study. Descriptive research design and survey method were used. To examine trait gratitude of students, Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT short form, Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts, 2003) was used and Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) developed by Huebner (2001) for life satisfaction of students was used in this study. According to the descriptive statistics, the results showed that the students' trait gratitude and life satisfaction were satisfactory. Then, independent sample *t* test showed that trait gratitude and life satisfaction of students were significantly different by gender. Females were higher in trait gratitude and life satisfaction than males. However, no significant difference was found in trait gratitude but there was significant difference in life satisfaction of students by grade. Again, the results of ANOVA and Turkey HSD showed that there was significant difference in the students' life satisfaction by University. Moreover, there was a significant positive relationship between trait gratitude and life satisfaction ($r=.489$). With the result of linear regression analysis, 24% of the variance in life satisfaction can be predicted from trait gratitude of students. Therefore, the results of this study revealed that trait gratitude of students can influence students' life satisfaction.

Keywords: Gratitude, Trait Gratitude, Life Satisfaction

Introduction

Gratitude may have arisen as an evolutionary adaptation from research on primates (Bonnie & de Waal, 2004). Gratitude increases people's trust in others but only toward people they don't know well already (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). Moreover, gratitude may have played an important role in human social evolution and may explain why feelings and expressions of gratitude are spread across different cultures and societies (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson, 2001).

Gratitude could be considered as an adaptive psychological strategy by which human beings interpret their everyday experiences and at the same time receive its benefits (Salavada-Ferrer, 2017). As a positive experience, gratitude could change the negative effects of other occurrences in people's existence, leading to higher life satisfaction (Diener, 1984).

Expressing gratitude to people who have been kind to us validates their efforts and reinforces such behavior in the future. Then gratitude motivates us to extend kindness in response to those who have been kind to us but to others as well. Therefore, people who experience and express gratitude more tend to strengthen their existing relationships and form new supportive relationships (Bono & Emmons, 2012).

As such, gratitude is a positive characteristic that could be improved in schools (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkin, 2009) by the collaborative work of teachers, school counselors, administrators, and other school staff, and as a part of the school culture. The beneficial effects of gratitude on a number of well-being outcomes such as high life satisfaction,

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positive affect, and physical health, and low depression have been reported in various studies (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Gratitude can be regarded as a personality trait in a form of moral emotion as trait gratitude as well as emotion for a beneficiary experience as state gratitude. Trait gratitude is “a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains” (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002).

Wood, Froh and Geraghty (2010) developed the schematic theory to explain trait gratitude. First, they argued that grateful people have a cognitive lens that determines how they perceive the world. This lens might make them likely to perceive help as more costly, valuable, and altruistic than less grateful people and thus they place greater value on the helpful action of the helper.

Thomas and Watkins (2003) described three characteristic habits of individuals with a grateful trait. They suggested that grateful individuals tend to (i) experience a feeling of sufficiency, (ii) have an eye for the little things in life, and (iii) consciously appreciate other people in their lives. Overall, trait gratitude is viewed as a general tendency to recognize small to large benefits, to experience sufficiency, and to acknowledge anything in the world, both human and nonhuman, with grateful emotion and expression of this emotion which promotes personal well-being and the well-being of others.

Additionally, a number of authors have espoused a theoretical relationship between gratitude and well-being. In a very pragmatic way, this association seems logical. Experiencing gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation tends to foster positive feelings, which in turn, contribute to ones’ overall sense of well-being including life satisfaction (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Puente-Diaz and Meixueiro (2016) found that gratitude positively predicted life satisfaction in the study of high school students.

Again, life satisfaction is the cognitive component of a larger construct, subjective well-being, and has been defined as a cognitive judgmental process and appraisal of one’s quality of life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). It is one of three major indicators of well-being: life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect (Diener, 1984). As society is seen to be the provider or the environment for well-being, individuals generally judge whether they are happy in that environment. In essence, life satisfaction is a subjective assessment of the quality of one’s life (Diener, 1994). It is also considered to be an evaluation of one’s daily experiences because everyday problems and stressors contribute to how an individual rates his or her satisfaction with life (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002).

According to positive psychology, it goes far beyond the social practice of conveying a positive response to a kind act that led to some sort of a personal gain. It is more like a deeper appreciation for someone or something, which produces more long lasting positivity. The feeling of gratitude can uplift people’s spirits and help them find some positive qualities in life during bad times. It can also improve their well-being (Mini, 2016). Gratitude has long been viewed as fundamental for both functional communities and personal well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Thus, while there are numerous constructs that fit under the positive psychology framework, the current study focused on gratitude, a positive emotion, and life satisfaction, positive experiences.

According to the reasons mentioned above, the researchers studied trait gratitude and life satisfaction of University students from Sagaing Township. They may encounter challenges about their academic, social, emotional and personal problems with their environments. Again, since they are adolescence, it is a period of development for youth during which changes regarding life satisfaction may occur. Besides, they may face and solve the different problems in their respective environments along their lives. Thus they need to adapt with them in their life. To do like that, they need to have gratitude extrinsically and intrinsically along their lives. If they have gratitude, they will be more satisfied with the things they face in daily lives. Therefore, gratitude and life satisfaction are important positive outcomes for them. The greater gratitude they experience, the more satisfaction they get in their lives. If so, they will be satisfied in their lives with their intended goals. So this study will be helpful for them.

Aims of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate gratitude and life satisfaction of students from Universities in Sagaing Township. The specific objectives of the study are;

1. To observe trait gratitude of students by gender, grade and university,
2. To explore life satisfaction of students by gender, grade and university,
3. To find out the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction of students and
4. To explore the effect of gratitude on life satisfaction of students.

Definitions of Key Terms

Gratitude: Gratitude refers to an emotion which occurs after people receive aid which is perceived as costly, valuable, and altruistic (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley & Joseph, 2008).

Trait Gratitude: Trait gratitude refers to a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains (McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002).

Life Satisfaction: Life satisfaction is as an appraisal of the positive things in one's life overall or within specific domains, such as satisfaction with one's family, school, and neighborhood (Diener, 1994).

Materials and Method

Participants

The samples chosen for the present study consisted of 840 students of University from Sagaing Township in 2018-2019 academic year by using simple random sampling method from three Universities in Sagaing Township. Then, the number of participants included in this study was presented in the following table.

Table 1 Number of Students in Three Selected Universities in Sagaing Township

| Universities | First Year | | Second Year | | Total |
|----------------|------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | |
| University (1) | 70 | 70 | 70 | 70 | 280 |
| University (2) | 70 | 70 | 70 | 70 | 280 |
| University (3) | 70 | 70 | 70 | 70 | 280 |
| Total | 210 | 210 | 210 | 210 | 840 |

Method

The quantitative research design and the descriptive survey method were used in the present study. To investigate trait gratitude and life satisfaction of University students, descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used.

Instrumentation

In this study, Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT short form) developed by Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts (2003) was used to measure trait gratitude of students. The GRAT short form comprises of 16 items with three dimensions. These dimensions are Lack of Sense of Deprivation (6 items), Simple Appreciation (6 items) and Appreciation for Others (4 items).

In order to measure satisfaction across five domains of students, the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) developed by Huebner (2001) was used. The MSLSS includes 40 items with five dimensions: Family (7 items), Friends (9 items), School (8 items), Living Environment (9 items) and Self (7 items). Responses to the items was based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree. And then, the scoring was based on 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). But, the reverse items were scored as 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree).

Findings

Trait Gratitude of Students in Each University

First, descriptive statistics was used to find out trait gratitude of first year and second year students. Thus, the results were presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Trait Gratitude of Students in Each University

| Variable | Universities | N | Min | Max | Mean | SD |
|-----------|--------------|-----|-----|-----|-------|-------|
| Gratitude | University 1 | 280 | 38 | 71 | 58.78 | 4.440 |
| | University 2 | 280 | 33 | 74 | 60.64 | 4.800 |
| | University 3 | 280 | 43 | 73 | 59.73 | 4.517 |

In Table 2, the mean scores for trait gratitude of students in all Universities were greater than the theoretical mean score (48). Therefore, it may be concluded that the trait gratitude of students in each University was satisfactory.

Comparison of Trait Gratitude of Students by Gender

In order to examine the differences in trait gratitude of University students significantly by gender, independent sample *t* test was conducted. The result was presented in Table 3.

Table 3 The Result of Independent Sample *t* test for Trait Gratitude of Students by Gender

| Variable | Gender | N | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------|--------|-----|-------|-------|------------|-----------|----------|
| Gratitude | Male | 420 | 58.95 | 4.724 | - 4.800*** | 838 | .000 |
| | Female | 420 | 60.47 | 4.443 | | | |

Note: ***The mean difference is significant at 0.001 level.

According to Table 3, female students were higher in trait gratitude than males (mean score of females > mean score of males). This similar result can be found in the studies of Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski and Miller (2009).

Comparison of Trait Gratitude of Students by Grade

Again, in order to find out the mean differences in trait gratitude of participants significantly by grade, independent sample *t* test was conducted. The result was presented in Table 4.

Table 4 The Result of Independent Sample *t* test for Trait Gratitude of Students by Grade

| Variable | Grade | <i>N</i> | Mean | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-----------|-------------|----------|-------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Gratitude | First Year | 420 | 60.03 | 4.488 | 1.964 | 838 | .053 |
| | Second Year | 420 | 59.40 | 4.783 | | | |

Table 4 revealed the result that there was no significant difference in trait gratitude of students by grade ($p > 0.05$). The mean score for trait gratitude of first year and second year students were slightly different. This similar result can be found in the studies of Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski and Miller (2009).

Comparison of Trait Gratitude of Students by University

To examine whether University had influence on trait gratitude of students, one-way ANOVA was utilized. According to ANOVA results, there were significant differences in the trait gratitude of students according to University $F(2, 837) = 11.558$ at 0.001level ($p=.000$). In order to examine more detailed information of a particular group, Post-Hoc test was also conducted by Tukey HSD method.

Table 5 The Result of Tukey HSD for Trait Gratitude by University

| Variable | (I)Uni | (J)Uni | Mean Difference (I-J) | <i>p</i> |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Gratitude | University1 | University2 | -1.864*** | .000 |
| | | University3 | -.954* | .038 |
| | University2 | University1 | 1.864*** | .000 |
| | | University3 | .911* | .049 |
| | University3 | University1 | .954* | .038 |
| | | University2 | -.911* | .049 |

Note: *** The mean difference is significant at 0.001level.

* The mean difference is significant at 0.05level.

According to Table 5, there were significant differences in trait gratitude between students in University (1) and in University (2) at 0.001 level. And then, significant differences were found in comparing trait gratitude between students in University (1) and in University (3) at 0.05 level. Again, there were significant differences in comparing trait gratitude between students in University (2) and in University (3) at 0.05level.

Life Satisfaction of Students in Each University

First, descriptive statistics was used to find out life satisfaction of first year and second year students. The results were presented in Table 6.

Table 6 Descriptive Statistics for Life Satisfaction of Students in Each University

| Variable | Universities | <i>N</i> | Min | Max | Mean | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------|--------------|----------|-----|-----|--------|-----------|
| Life Satisfaction | University 1 | 280 | 109 | 183 | 151.16 | 13.345 |
| | University 2 | 280 | 118 | 194 | 158.50 | 11.665 |
| | University 3 | 280 | 97 | 181 | 151.05 | 13.482 |

In Table 6, the mean scores for life satisfaction of students in each University were greater than the theoretical mean score (120). Therefore, it may be said that life satisfaction of students in each University was satisfactory.

Comparison of Life Satisfaction of University Students by Gender

In order to test the mean differences in life satisfaction significantly by gender, independent sample *t* test was computed. The result was presented in Table 7.

Table 7 The Result of Independent Sample *t* test for Life Satisfaction of Students by Gender

| Variable | Gender | N | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------|--------|-----|--------|--------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Life Satisfaction | Male | 420 | 151.27 | 13.447 | -5.088*** | 838 | .000 |
| | Female | 420 | 155.87 | 12.772 | | | |

Note: ***The mean difference is significant at 0.001level.

According to table 7, there were significant differences in life satisfaction of University students by gender at 0.001level. Thus, it may be concluded that female students were higher in life satisfaction than male students. This result was similar to the result of Tariq, 2014 (female were greater life satisfaction than male).

Comparison of Life Satisfaction of Students by Grade

In order to examine the mean differences in life satisfaction of University students by grade, independent sample *t* test was computed. The result was presented in Table 9.

Table 8 The Result of Independent Sample *t* test for Life Satisfaction of Students by Grade

| Variable | Grade | N | Mean | SD | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------|-------------|-----|--------|--------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Life Satisfaction | First Year | 420 | 154.82 | 13.287 | 2.728** | 838 | .007 |
| | Second Year | 420 | 152.32 | 13.225 | | | |

Note: **The mean difference is significant at 0.01level.

According to table 8, the result revealed that there was significantly different in life satisfaction of University students by grade at 0.01level. It may be interpreted that first year students were higher in life satisfaction than second year students. Other studies revealed the same results (Hamarat, Thompson & Aysan, 2003; Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999).

Comparison of Life Satisfaction of Students by University

To examine whether University had impact on gratitude of students, one-way ANOVA was utilized. According to ANOVA results, there were significant mean differences in the life satisfaction of students according to University $F(2,837) = 30.847, p > 0.001$. Post-Hoc test was also conducted by Tukey HSD method for more information of a particular group.

Table 9 The Result of Tukey HSD for Life Satisfaction by University

| Variable | (I)Uni | (J)Uni | Mean Difference (I-J) | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------|
| Life Satisfaction | University1 | University2 | -7.336*** | .000 |
| | | University3 | .111 | .994 |
| | University2 | University1 | 7.336*** | .000 |
| | | University3 | 7.446*** | .000 |
| | University3 | University1 | -.111 | .994 |
| | | University2 | -7.446*** | .000 |

Note: *** The mean difference is significant at 0.001level.

According to Table 9, significant mean differences were found in comparing life satisfaction between students who attended in University (2) and those who attended in University (1) at 0.001level. Moreover, there were significant differences in life satisfaction between students who attended in University (2) and those who attended in University (3) at 0.001level. This result was similar with the result of Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin (1985).

The Relationship between Gratitude and Life Satisfaction

In order to determine whether there was any relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction, Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted.

Table 10 Relationship between Gratitude and Life Satisfaction of University Students

| Variable | Life Satisfaction |
|-----------|-------------------|
| Gratitude | .489** |

Note: **Correlation is significant at 0.01level (2-tailed).

According to Table 10, the result showed that there was a significant positive relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction at ($r=.489, p<0.01$) and moderate correlation. Watkins, Woodward, Stone and Kolts (2003) were found this similar result. Thus it may be interpreted that the higher the students' gratitude, the better their life satisfaction.

The Effect of Gratitude on Life Satisfaction of Students

In order to explore how well gratitude predicts life satisfaction of students and how many percent it predicts, a linear regression analysis was computed and model summary for gratitude was presented in Table 11.

Table 11 Model Summary for Gratitude

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | .489 ^a | .239 | .238 | 11.617 |

a. Predictors: (Constant), Gratitude

The linear regression analysis indicated that 24% of the life satisfaction of students can be predicted from gratitude. According to the results conducted by enter method; there was significant effect on life satisfaction by gratitude since they have positive correlations with each other. This result also supported the theory that gratitude has a significant effect on life satisfaction (Fredrickson, 2001). Then linear regression analysis was done to measure the life satisfaction by gratitude as in Table 12.

Table 12 The Result of Linear Regression Analysis of Gratitude as Predictor of Life Satisfaction

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficient | | Standardized Coefficient | t | p |
|------------|----------------------------|------------|--------------------------|--------|---------|
| | B | Std. error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | 69.998 | 5.171 | | 13.537 | .000*** |
| Gratitude | 1.400 | .086 | .489 | 16.210 | .000*** |

Note: ***Correlation is significant at 0.001level.

According to the above table, the resultant model of linear regression expression between gratitude and life satisfaction was presented in the following equation.

Note: LS = Life Satisfaction, G = Gratitude

| |
|-------------|
| LS= 70+1.4G |
|-------------|

Discussion

There has been studied gratitude and life satisfaction by some psychologists a few years ago. Thus, the researchers studied it due to interest. Based on the findings from this study, the following discussions and recommendations in relation to gratitude and life satisfaction of University students in this study were presented.

Both trait gratitude and life satisfaction of students were satisfactory. Concerning about gender difference in trait gratitude, female students were significantly higher in trait gratitude than males. Males consider that expressing gratitude is evidence of their vulnerability and that by showing gratitude, they could be perceived as weaker and less masculine (Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Sun & Kong, 2013). So, male students should be encouraged to express their gratitude and showing gratitude is a good manner and so they should not consider it as their weakness.

Concerning about gender difference in life satisfaction, female students were significantly higher in life satisfaction than males. Males are more likely to stress their independence from others whereas females are more likely to emphasize their relatedness to others (Cross & Madson, 1997). Martin, Fabes, Hanish, Leonard and Dinella (2011) suggested that the more children believe they are similar to their own gender group, the more likely will they prefer same-gender partners because of the increased likelihood of enjoyment, satisfaction and mutuality that they believe will result from these interactions. Thus, male students should be allowed to identify their independence for their personal control to be satisfied with their life.

In examining the grade difference in trait gratitude of students, there were no significant differences in trait gratitude of students by grade. The participants in this study were first year and second year students and late adolescents. They were slightly different in age. So it may be that they were not different in trait gratitude. Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono and Wilson (2011) also indicated no differences in gratitude across middle and late adolescents.

Again, concerning about the grade difference in life satisfaction of students, first year students had greater life satisfaction than second year students. People who have positive experiences face these changes more intelligently and effectively and solve their daily life problems easily and hence experience great satisfaction (Tariq, 2014). It may be because first year students attended to University only in this semester so, everything they encounter in their environment (e.g. School, Self, Friends) is new for them. Moreover, for them, transition from high school to University is a challenging time to social upheaval and social circle is larger. Then they may think that they were very smart and be able to do themselves really. In other words, they were adapted and satisfied with new things experienced in their present environments. Therefore, it may be that first year students were more satisfied than second year students.

Next, concerning about the significant mean difference in trait gratitude of students by University, there were significant mean differences in comparing trait gratitude of students in three Universities. The students in University (2) were highest in trait gratitude among those in the three Universities. In University (2), there were many different kinds of national races derived from different kinds of cultures. Different cultural conditions may lead to different attributions for one's evaluation of life satisfaction (Al-Attiyah & Nasser, 2016). Thus, the culture has an influence on how individuals respond to being given something (Summer, 2018). Thus, cultural background should be considered one of the factors affecting gratitude.

Concerning about the significant mean differences in life satisfaction of students by University, there were significant mean differences in comparing life satisfaction between students in University (2) and in University (1); between students in University (2) and in

University (3). The students in University (2) were highest in life satisfaction among those in the three Universities. Students in environments where there are greater opportunities for individual control may experience greater life satisfaction (Al-Attayah & Nasser, 2016). So, since University influences on students' life satisfaction, University should create environments where students can be received opportunities and satisfied with their environments.

Continuously, regarding the relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction, according to the result of this study, there was a significant positive relationship between trait gratitude and life satisfaction. Positive emotional experiences such as gratitude are positively related to life satisfaction (Kuppens, Realo & Diener, 2008). Therefore, people with tendency to be grateful reported greater life satisfaction (Fagley, 2012). Finally, in relation to the prediction life satisfaction from gratitude, the result showed that gratitude predicted life satisfaction significantly. Positive emotions such as gratitude are strong predictor of enhancing life satisfaction (Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008). Furthermore, some authors demonstrated the positive effect of gratitude on life satisfaction (Boehm, Lyubomirsky & Sheldon, 2011; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Thus, the more grateful people are, the more satisfied they will be in their lives.

Conclusion

Gratitude is a way for people to appreciate what they have instead of always reaching for something new in the hopes it will make them happier, thinking they cannot feel satisfied until every physical and material need is met (Mini, 2016). Living in competitive and consumerist society has made people self-centered. People focus on what they lack or what others have rather than being grateful for what they already have. And then it helps people refocus on what they have instead of what they lack.

The present study investigated that gratitude plays a causal role in the life satisfaction of University students in Sagaing Township. Moreover, gratitude is linked to life satisfaction and consequently it is necessary to adopt gratitude as an important habit and attitude (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). So the present study has been demonstrated that gratitude could be a contribution to understand life satisfaction. University students in this study are adolescents, specifically late adolescents. University life is important for them because they experienced new challenges and difficulties along their University life. So they need to be satisfied themselves in their respective environments. To be like that, they need to have positive emotions such as gratitude in their lives. So they need to be able to solve them with gratitude which leads toward happy, comfortable and successful life. From then, they will be able to lead to the growth and development of citizens and country effectively and successfully. Thus, they should be taught to have grateful emotions. Furthermore, teaching human beings to be grateful may be a new strategy for life satisfaction, since gratitude is an important component of the good life (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003).

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