

Chapter 90

Gratitude and Happiness in Adolescents: A Qualitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Gratitude is important for social and emotional health. Research suggests that there is a relation between experiencing and expressing gratitude and happiness. The aim of this chapter is to review current research regarding gratitude development and happiness, adolescent gratitude development, and to discuss future recommendations. This chapter also discusses a study examining adolescent perspectives on the meaning of being thankful. To obtain adolescent perspectives on the meaning of being thankful, adolescents (N = 1,098) wrote essays describing what being thankful meant to them. Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze themes within the essays. Percentiles were calculated for the most recurrent themes across essays (Appreciation = 54.07%, Family = 31.42%, Positive Emotions = 28.81%, Assistance/Support from Others = 25.99%, Friendship = 21.18%, and Downward Comparison = 16.60%). Understanding gratitude development in adolescents can aid in creating effective interventions, potentially increasing adolescent well-being and happiness.

INTRODUCTION

Gratitude is a construct that is highly valued across cultures, and in most cultures, there are different ways of expressing one's thanks. But, how is gratitude defined? There is no single definitive definition. Gratitude has been conceptualized as, "a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or moment of peaceful bliss" (Emmons, 2004). Gratitude has also been viewed as "a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality

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trait [and] a coping response” (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, p.377). Gratitude seems to create many positive benefits. For example, feeling grateful may remind people of a positive event, and expressing gratitude to others often strengthens relationships (Seligman, 2011). Reciprocation and helping others has also been linked to feelings of gratitude. “Gratitude opens your heart and carries the urge to give back—to do something good in return, either for the person who helped you or for someone else” (Fredrickson, 2009 p. 41).

Happy people seem to flourish more internally and externally (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). While we can identify happiness in ourselves or in another, defining happiness is more challenging. What exactly *is* happiness? Happiness is defined in “terms of frequent positive affect, high life satisfaction, and infrequent negative affect” (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). According to authentic happiness theory, happiness is the main component of positive psychology and consists of three subjective features—positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, 2011). Similarly, the term happiness is itself a subjective measure of life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011). In comparison, Seligman’s well-being theory posits that one of the central topics of positive psychology is the construct of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement are the measurable aspects that contribute to well-being (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotion consists of happiness and life-satisfaction (Seligman, 2011), and therefore happiness continues to play a part of positive psychology and optimal health and functioning.

This chapter has four main foci. First, the authors review previous research regarding gratitude development in adolescents in general, and more specifically, research regarding the many possible benefits that increasing gratitude can have for adolescents. Next, the authors discuss the relation between happiness and gratitude. The chapter then explores several issues, controversies, and problems related to the topic of gratitude in adolescents and provides a detailed description of unpublished research examining adolescent perspectives on the meaning of being thankful. Finally, the authors suggest applications for the future within the field of positive psychology. The aim of this chapter is to review current research as well as share new research regarding gratitude development and happiness, specifically within adolescence, and to discuss future recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Gratitude development in adults yields positive effects. In adults, gratitude is related to positive emotions and wellbeing, including the emotion of happiness (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Further, there is a positive relation between gratitude and prosocial behavior (Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017), as well as a positive relation between gratitude development and subjective well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude is also incongruous with negative emotions and may even mitigate the presence of negative feelings, such as greed, envy, or anger (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). In addition to gratitude’s positive effects on positive emotions and subjective well-being in adults, research has found that gratitude has a positive relation with health: the greater the gratitude, the better the health (Singh, Khan, & Osmany, 2014). Clinical trials suggest that gratitude can lower blood pressure and improve immune functions (Emmons, 2014; Emmons & Stern, 2013). Gratitude, therefore, seems to benefit people emotionally, physically, and socially.

While gratitude research with adults has exploded since 2000 with the popularization of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), there is a need for additional gratitude development

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