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Gratitude and Well-being: A Comparative Exploration of Muslim and Non-Muslim Beliefs and Practices

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examines the views and experiences of gratitude among Muslims and non-Muslims. Using a purposive sampling way, the study recruited 20 people, consisting of 15 Muslims and 5 Non Muslims, who are between 18 and 23 years of age. By using semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked to reflect in detail about their experiences of gratitude, how they express and show it, and what causes them to feel grateful, thus enabling a richer understanding of this phenomenon. Several key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews, such as the differing attitudes towards gratitude in Muslims versus non Muslims, the prevalence of gratitude in almost all facets of life, and the ability to foster feelings of gratitude through difficult life situations. Further, the study showed the important role of religion on gratitude, where respondents revealed that they often performed religious acts like praying as a form of being thankful. This study provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomena associated with subjective experiences of gratitude and emphasizes the significance of fostering gratefulness as a means to attain a more purposeful life.

Keywords: Gratitude, Religion, Psychological well-being, Cross-cultural perspectives, Social norms, Personal experiences.

Introduction

Gratitude is a state of being content. The American Psychological Association goes so far as to define this phenomenon as a feeling of joy and gratitude, particularly for coincidences or a splendid gift. Remember, gratitude is both a state and a quality (Jans-Beken et al., 2017). A better example would be saying that one can feel good about someone/something at the moment, thus seeing gratitude as a good habit in the long run.

According to Robert Emmons (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), there exist two primary levels of gratitude. Firstly, it involves acknowledging the goodness present in one's life, essentially saying yes to life with gratitude. This encompasses a belief in the beauty and meaningfulness of life, appreciating what one has received rather than solely focusing on its existence or the effort expended to obtain it. Secondly, gratitude entails recognizing that the source of this happiness lies outside of oneself. Individuals express gratitude towards various

entities such as the Creator, other individuals, animals, or the world at large, but not towards themselves. This stage prompts an awareness of the goodness in one's life and the individuals deserving of gratitude. Both levels of gratitude entail acknowledging the positive aspects of life and how these positives manifest. Additionally, gratitude can be conceptualized as a positive attitude or state of being, practiced as part of daily life (McCullough et al., 2002), and regarded as a potent symbol. It is essential to recognize that gratitude is a skill that can be cultivated through mindfulness and practice, serving as a simple yet impactful way to acknowledge life's blessings and significantly influence health and happiness.

According to Ali and Fakhoury (2020) a study explored how gratitude is experienced and expressed among Muslim youth. Through qualitative interviews, the authors identify key themes related to gratitude, such as its impact on well-being, social relationships, and religious practices. The findings suggest that gratitude fosters a sense of community and belonging, enhances mental health, and is closely tied to Islamic teachings and values Spiritual Significance of Gratitude is framed as a vital component of faith and spirituality. Social Connection: Participants highlighted gratitude as a means to strengthen relationships within families and communities. Mental Health Benefits: Expressions of gratitude were linked to increased happiness and reduced stress.

In recent years, positive psychologists have delved deeper into understanding the potency of gratitude and its effects on cognition and emotion. By examining the essence of gratitude, its underlying mechanisms, and its role in fortifying motivation and interpersonal connections, this research aims to enhance current insights conducive to advancing our comprehension of human advancement. This investigation seeks to unveil the intricacy and profundity of fundamental human experiences by scrutinizing the quality of individuals' experiences and sentiments of gratitude. By exploring prevalent themes and patterns in the expression of gratitude across diverse cultural contexts, this research endeavors to enrich our understanding of gratitude's role in enhancing life satisfaction and fulfillment. Furthermore, this study aims to elucidate the intersection of gratitude and self-awareness through qualitative data analysis, unveiling myriad examples of gratitude's impact on mental well-being through the examination of narratives, elucidations, and perspectives shared by individuals from varied cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Literature review

The exact nature of gratitude is still a subject of much debate. Gratitude includes affectionate feelings that are considered valuable, useful and beneficial in the aftermath of help (Hoo & Maltby, 2008). Though some researchers (McCullough &Kilpatrick, 2001) define gratitude simply as an acknowledgment of others' deeds, such a narrow focus misses the full scope of this complex emotion. For example, work done by Emmons et al (2003) showed that gratitude was broader than that which was associated with external aid, something as simple as 'waking up in the morning' could also induce feelings of gratitude.

For example, Graham and Barker (1990) presented participants with videos of children receiving assistance or completing independent work. While participants rank assistance as highest in predicted happiness, they also acknowledge that their own independent efforts had the potential for increased satisfaction. That is, it is not purely about altruism—in these studies, gratitude can derive from own achievement or advancement (in adults in (Weiner et al., 1979; (Lerman, 1979; Veisson, 1999)). Expressing feelings in improves happiness and makes you less grateful in the long run (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023).

For example, Sulaiman & Ali (2021) examined expressions of gratitude among both Muslim and non-Muslim populations and described how cultural and religious contexts shape the experience of gratitude. The study shows that attitudes towards gratitude — what is perceived as gratitude, what is declared as gratitude, where this emotion can be found at large — differ by gender, culture, and religion, and for that, the authors underscore the importance of religious teachings. They discovered that gratitude, while important to both groups, can stem from different motivations and be expressed in different ways that reflect deeper cultural and spiritual convictions. The findings add to existing knowledge on how gratitude develops e.g. social bonds and well-being across different communities.

Gratitude is a component of a larger system of believing and appreciating the good things in the world, a belief unique from feelings such as hope and trust. In addition to playing a role in quality of life, gratitude in particular places a focus on appreciation of the positive in life. Research shows that Gratitude is strongly correlated to the well-being, which later became basis of clinical interventions (Bono et al., 2004; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This aligns with efforts in clinical psychology to foster positive functioning and psychological strengths (Duckworth et al., 2009; Linley, 2009; Seligman, 2006).

This paper presents a novel integrative framework conceptualizing gratitude as a life orientation toward recognizing and appreciating positivity. Gratitude correlates with various clinically relevant phenomena, including psychopathology, adaptive personality traits, health, positive relationships, and subjective well-being. Language and communication skills helps in expressing emotions (Javaid et al., 2023).

Research Objectives

The primary objectives are to explore individuals' perceptions of gratitude and the extent to which they incorporate this concept into various life circumstances (both challenging and joyful). Subsequently, the study aims to examine the integration of gratitude into emotional experiences and the influence of diverse religious beliefs on its practice.

Research Significance

This research holds significant importance as it fosters the cultivation of gratitude, leading to the emergence of a positive psychology. Through embracing thankfulness, individuals can swiftly navigate through setbacks such as disappointment and failure, fostering psychological resilience and optimism.

Methods and Methodology

The research employed a qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews were conducted with both Muslim and non-Muslim participants to elicit detailed accounts of their experiences and perspectives on gratitude. After defining the research problem, relevant literature was reviewed, and study objectives were established along with appropriate research questions. A self-developed interview protocol was utilized following expert validation. Participants were approached through personal contacts, and the study included 20 young adults, comprising 15 Muslims and 5 non-Muslims, residing in various cities of Pakistan. Confidentiality was ensured for all participants, who provided informed consent in accordance with research ethics guidelines. Data was gathered using purposive sampling, aiming to gather insightful and diverse perspectives to address the research inquiries.

Procedure

Initially, Muslim and Non-Muslim participants were interviewed, and their responses were recorded. Additionally, one participant jotted down keywords while observing their answers. Following the interviews and transcription of collected data, an open coding technique was employed to establish categories and sub-themes. This method facilitated the identification of four major themes, aiding in the formulation of findings and conclusions. The interviews yielded a substantial amount of qualitative data, which was subsequently analyzed thematically to detect recurring patterns, themes, and insights regarding gratitude within both groups. Thematic analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted nature of gratitude experiences among Muslims and non-Muslims, shedding light on the cultural, religious, and individual influences shaping expressions of gratitude.

Findings

The session entails a comprehensive analysis of emerging themes derived from our research, offering valuable insights that bridge the gap between data collection and the ultimate conclusions of our study. Utilizing thematic analysis and coding methods, the following themes were identified from our interviews

Themes

Participants' Perceptions of Gratitude and Meaning Attribution in our study, 70% of Muslim participants defined gratitude as expressing thankfulness for various life situations, encompassing both positive experiences and demonstrating goodwill towards others and their faith. Conversely, 30% of non-Muslims expressed gratitude in specific situations.

Analysis revealed that both Muslim and non-Muslim participants recognized the mental and physical benefits associated with expressing gratitude. Research indicates that gratitude can enhance sleep quality, mood, and immunity, while reducing depression, anxiety, chronic pain, and disease risk. If gratitude were encapsulated in a pill form, its widespread adoption would be evidence here we dicussed themes:

Psychological wellbeing

Both Muslims and non-Muslims can experience enhanced psychological well-being and life satisfaction through the practice of gratitude, although the influence of religious beliefs and cultural norms may shape the mechanisms and outcomes of gratitude differently. These findings illustrate the interconnectedness of religious beliefs, cultural norms, gratitude practices, responses to challenges, and psychological well-being. Nguyen and Wang's (2022) research focuses on the secular approaches to gratitude in various non-Muslim cultures. The study suggests that whilst gratitude is beneficial universally, secular practices in particular manifest gratitude as personal achievement and self-improvement, and by contrast, as a community in the context of religion.

Looking at participants' thoughts regarding gratitude through a psychological lens, both Muslims and non-Muslims typically experienced positive feelings while being grateful. Gratitude generated happy and helpful feelings towards someone or something in our lives that had admired regarding our overall well-being.

Religious Influence

The assumption is that Muslim participants (M=2, 3, & 4) or (3) might incorporate religious contexts regularly and much more frequently with expressions of gratitude, for example during prayers or reciting Quranic verses. On the other hand, participants who are non-Muslim (7 & 9) may be inclined to express their acknowledgments in a secular context. In response to coping with loss and expressing gratitude amidst this difficult period, the Muslim participant (M=4) mentioned "sabar" (patience), one of the most important values that Islam gives, as a manifestation of gratitude.

Despite immense pain and responsibilities, when his father passed away, the participant made submission to Allah's will his motto, and he was inspired by Quranic verses that encouraged gratitude. According to the participant, close his case with Allah Almighty and thanks for the time they went through with his father, participants feel relieved by thanking Allah Almighty which is no more than the statement of fact for Islamic belief.

On the other hand, the non-Muslim participant (NM=7) found it difficult to give credit to his father's death, focusing instead on feelings of sorrow, loneliness, and caring for overwhelming responsibilities needing to be fulfilled. The participant felt guilt for not seeing his father's death as a gift, and continued to grapple with acceptance and peace over his experience, even years later. Interviews with individuals from various religious backgrounds, including Muslims and non-Muslims, underscored the significant role of religion in fostering gratitude. For example, we found that there was a significant difference in Muslims' attitudes towards gratitude compared to non-Muslims during our study, and we found that this was based on their respective religious beliefs. Discussions with participants from both groups revealed significant differences in gratitude practices by religious affiliation. For example, we read interviews with people belonging to a common circumstance: we had both Muslim (M=4) and non-Muslim (NM=7) participants who had lost their fathers.

Cultural Norms

Muslim participants (3, 2, 4 & 5) will likely embrace the opportunity to show gratitude to Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (pwih) as per the cultural norms and religious instructions. On the other hand, non-Muslim participants (7 & 9) might tend to express gratitude towards their family, friends, or mentors, which is typical of other cultures not associated with religion. Aim of the Study: To explore the practices of gratitude among non-Muslim populations in Western countries. It explains how gratitude exercises like writing in a journal improve mental health. The study also reveals that gratitude practices are very effective in enhancing the quality of life with some differences in the way of expressing and feeling gratitude in religious settings (Smith & Jones, 2021).

These two responses show that the idea of gratitude is approached and applied differently by different people based on their religion and culture. Where the Muslim participant drew encouragement and solace from the religious teachings on gratitude in the face of adversity, the non-Muslim participant struggled with grief and had no desire to be grateful for the losses he had made. Study results also show that understanding these different points of view helps to expand the understanding of gratitude practices in different cultural and religious environments. Gratitude is a concept that is well recognized and encouraged across various communities; however, its expression and practice differ in Muslim and non-Muslim societies based on cultural, religious, and social norms. Gratitude as prescribed by religious teachings is a source of strength and meaning, which helps people navigate through life’s

challenges with faith and gratitude for Allah's favours.

Muslims religious values on gratitude	**Non Muslim religious values on gratitude**
1Beliefs in ALLAH and Quranic verses	1:Believe in secular or non religious contexts
2:Expressing gratitude Allah and prophet Muhammad (PBUH)	2:Expressing gratitude Family, friends and social conventions
3:Specific gratitude practice prescribed by Islam, as Charity and acts of kindness (Sadaqah)	3:Gratitude practice engage in gratitude journaling ,mind fullness exercises
Example: when we asked question (MP=4) Why you apply gratitude in different situation of your life (painful, happy moments)? He replied in this question yes I thankful all the situations because I'm Muslim and I believe an Allah Almighty and Allah Almighty had ordered it in Quran. Surah Ibrahim (14:7) "And (remember) when your Lord proclaimed." if you grateful, I will surely increase you (in favour); but if you deny, indeed, My punishment is severe") I'm Muslim and believe in the concept of gratitude according Qur'anic verses.	Example: When we asked question from (NM=7) why you apply gratitude in different situation of your life (painful, happy moments)? He replied in this question I was rarely thankful. When I read books of different authors and take motivation which gives me sudden relief from stressful situation.

Table 1: The difference between Muslims and Non-Muslim.

Discussion

Gratitude is the path that gives people hope and leads them away from despair and failure. In this study, we explore how people give meaning to gratitude and how much they incorporate this concept into their lives. Did people find relief from despair and hopelessness by practicing thankfulness in unpleasant situations, thus fostering positive psychology? What kind of emotions did they experience after expressing gratitude? Did different religions influence gratitude? The researchers generated four major themes to reach findings and conclusions. **Firstly**, we investigated people's perceptions of gratitude and its prevalence in their lives. In our research, we found that 70% of Muslims define gratitude as being thankful for every situation, including positive experiences and goodwill toward others and their God. Meanwhile, 30% of Non-Muslims also practice gratitude, while others do not consistently repeat this process. Gratitude, as an affective trait, is defined by McCullough (2002) as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the benevolence of others in positive experiences. Khan and Williams (2022) explored the role of gratitude in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, highlighting how cultural and religious contexts shape expressions and experiences of gratitude. They examine differences in how gratitude is

practiced and perceived across these groups, considering factors like community, spirituality, and social relationships. The study suggests that while gratitude is universally valued, its manifestations and underlying motivations can vary significantly, influenced by religious teachings and cultural norms. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of interfaith dynamics and the potential for gratitude to bridge divides.

Second, we looked at whether the current fact is a form of gratitude in hard times and hence how it can ease anxious despondency and hopeless situations. Most of the research into gratitude shows that gratitude is a powerful agent to lift people through despair, hopelessness, and the sense of failure. It has been shown that type of interventions can, indeed, help raise the hope, well-being, and resilience of people (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010). There is the holistic nature in Muslims expressing gratitude in all matters of life, which in turn aids them in facing problems and overcoming psychological and mental challenges. With the opposite scenario, non-Muslims would ignore gratitude and thus display greater levels of anxiety, confusion, and depression (Kashdan & Lambert, 2012). Various studies have documented the mental and physical benefits associated with gratitude practices, from improved sleep to emotional regulation, to immunity boosts. This evidence provides for a broad range of positive benefits

The **third question** inquired about the personal feelings following an expression of gratitude. We found that, while Muslims who express gratitude feel calmness, happiness, optimism, psychological and emotional well-being, gratitude as a positive emotion entails being appreciative for the benefits one receives and involves a number of benefits with respect to mental and physical health. Gratitude, as a positive emotion, can be defined as a sense of appreciation for and acknowledgment of the positive things that happen in life and in relationships (Wood et al., 2010). This state of emotional experience is considered pleasurable but also important for mental and physical health, improving mood and decreasing depression and anxiety symptoms while enhancing life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Lastly, The research examined the role of different religions in gratitude. Our study revealed that religion responsible for shaping gratitude significantly. Muslims being believers in God have a tendency to be among those who have never lost hope. Non-Muslims on the other hand will integrate gratitude but will have a harder time with despair and hopelessness. This difference in basic belief about what drives hope for Muslims whoever performed prayers becomes grateful to God. Finally, research examining the role of different religions in gratitude has basically shown how profoundly religion has defined people's emotional experiences. Religious coping improves well-being (Javaid et al., 2024a). Muslims show a much greater rate of inclination to express gratitude owing to the teachings of their faith that promote hope to gratitude across populations and situations.

Conclusion

The concluding remarks of the findings indicate that Muslims were most grateful in trials and tribulations than non-Muslims. This is based on the Islamic view of "sabar" (patience), which means perseverance with faith and appreciation to Allah in moments of suffering. For some additional insights worth exploring, a much deeper understanding would require considering the different cultural and religious expectations; yet the findings suggest that spirituality and religious practice have a role to play in building resilience and gratitude in persons approached with adversity. So, understanding how these works should lead to

aiding Muslims and society at large, with respect to mental health and coping skills. It is worth noting that Muslims are observed to return to their normal life routines earlier than non-Muslims following distressing events.

The inner aspects are more related to the subjective personality types, which was beyond the scope of this research. Gratitude is peace and comfort for swordsmen. Muslims who practice gratitude typically score higher on the contentment scale than non-Muslims. The idea of gratitude is actually quite stochastic and is expressed as a way to give comfort and access peace during challenging times, which adheres to multiple spiritual and psychological concepts. Gratitude trials, like practicing happiness and developing resilience, have been studied in many studies in positive psychology. For additional avenues to explore, the journals that might contain related studies are the Journal of Positive Psychology or the Journal of Happiness Studies.

Limitations

Gratitude is considered a positive emotion - one that has been shown to enhance health and strengthen relationships. However, in addition to its positive effects, there may also be a few limitations or challenges linked to its manifestation:

1) **In authenticity**

Some expressions of gratitude feel forced, thus evoking feelings of negativity when the individuals perform the act. If individuals feel gratitude only out of necessity and don't really mean it, they are left with feelings of discomfort and even negatives at times

2) **Risk of Addiction:**

If one is overly dependent upon expressing gratitude, it might develop into an added dependence on external validation and feedback, effectively undermining self-esteem and self-worth.

3) Emotional Suppression:

Expressing gratitude might sometimes even encourage people to repress or shrug off feelings of sadness, anger, or stress. A fine line must be drawn between recognizing the good and processing the bad.

4) **Individual Variations:**

The basis of understanding gratitude varies massively across different cultures. While it might come across as a mark of indebtedness for some cultures, for others, it carries great importance in terms of relationship-building

5) **Manipulative Exploitation:**

There are situations where gratitude might be somewhat manipulated by authority figures such as managers to get more work or compliance from individuals.

6) Unrealistic expectations:

Overemphasis on gratitude can lead individuals to miss genuine issues or injustices that require attention or resolution. Gratitude cannot be treated like a miracle cure and thus let the underlying issues be ignored.

The research study had its limitations due to the choice of subjects from Muslim or non-Muslim backgrounds within a specific region, thus making it less useful as an indicator of the entire Pakistani population. Yet despite these limitations, they can bring meaningful insight into the already existing literature.

Recommendations

It is recommended, on the basis of the findings of this research, to suggest that one embrace gratitude into his or her life rationally, since it nurtures a positive outlook in life and protects one against experiences like disappointment, grudging, or despair. Furthermore, it is known to reduce many mental problems, such as anxiety, depression, rumination, thus improving the well-being and happiness of a person. Gratitude, on its part, drives one to appreciate the present conditions of existence; thereby cultivating inner fulfillment and happiness. Future research should feature spirited researchers drawing from both qualitative and mixed paradigms to get more in-depth insight into this phenomenon and its multitude of dimensions.

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