Gratitude, Forgiveness, & Humility As Predictors Of Thriving Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

The concept of optimal level functioning has been reduced to aspects like productivity, efficiency and goal orientation; while the most essential ones like social relations, meaning, engagement and autonomy which constitute flourishing have been overlooked. In the absence of the latter, humans tend to merely survive than thrive. Thriving occurs only when positive functioning is at its fullest range in all three dimensions - mental, physical and social. Studies show that positive functioning can be facilitated by experiencing positive emotions. In line with this finding, this study attempts to explore the relationship between three mutually reinforcing positive emotions, gratitude, forgiveness and humility on thriving (optimal functioning), and also determine their prediction level on the various constructs of thriving which include relationship, engagement, mastery, autonomy, meaning, optimism and subjective wellbeing. The samples for the present study were identified from PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore district, TamilNadu. About 70 students (mean age – 21 years) from the total population were chosen by convenience sampling method. The sample size was determined based on the number of predictors using G*power 3.0 statistical software. The samples were administered with the Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et.al, 2002), The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et.al, 2005), The Healthy Humility Inventory (Quiros, 2012), and The Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (Diener et.al, 2014). Data collected will be coded for statistical analysis, and the statistical analyses will be performed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20, and the SEM PLS path modeling using Visual PLS software. Specific statistical analysis like Mean, Standard Deviation, Regression were employed to analyze the quantitative data collected for the study, to check the strength of the responses for the items in the each of the dimensions.

Keywords

Humility, Gratitude, Forgiveness, Thriving, Relationship, Engagement, Mastery, Autonomy, Meaning, Optimism, Subjective Wellbeing

Introduction

Each and every individual in this world is unique; and so are his/her ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. But underlying this individuality is a common desire – to lead meaningful, happy and content lives. Though the concepts like meaning in life and happiness are highly subjective, the means to realize them have been objectively studied by positive psychologists all over the world. Such studies indicate the important role of optimal functioning in achieving the ultimate goals of life.

Optimal human functioning is all about flourishing and realizing one's potential. In this rapidly evolving world, innovations are made in all walks of life as means to discover one's potential and help reach this optimal level of functioning. But at present, given these advancements, are we really operating at our best and leading a happy and meaningful life? For most of us, the answer is no. This is greatly because of our distorted perception about this subject matter. In our attempts to create and execute plans to attain overall well-being, we have been focusing our attention solely on aspects of 'functioning' like performance, efficiency, productivity and goal motivation; rather than 'optimal functioning' which constitute attributes like social relations, meaning, engagement and autonomy. Overlooking the latter has led us to merely survive than thrive.

As described by Deiner et.al (2014), Thriving refers to "the state of positive functioning at its fullest range - mentally, physically, and socially". *Thriving* is similar to optimal functioning concept discussed by Martin Seligman and MihalyCsikszentmihalyi (2000); it is composed of seven core dimensions - (1) *subjective well-being (SWB)* in the form of high life satisfaction and positive feelings, (2) *supportive and enriching relationships*, (3) *interest and engagement* in daily activities, (4) *meaning and purpose in life*, (5) a sense of *mastery* and *accomplishment*, (6) feelings of *control and autonomy*, and (7) *optimism*. These constructs together constitute thriving; hence it cannot be defined by any single dimension. In order to get a better understanding about this concept, it is necessary to be familiar with these seven components.

Subjective well - being (SWB), considered as the strongest predictor of thriving is the "scientific term for happiness and life satisfaction—thinking and feeling that one's life is going well". According to Diener (1984), SWB involves 'high life satisfaction, frequent positive feelings, and infrequent negative feelings'. It also involves 'feelings of self-acceptance and ability to be optimistic and view the past, present, and future in a positive perspective' (Ryff, 1995; Seligman, 2011).

The second component *Relationship and Support* is the need to feel the belongingness and connectedness with others (Ryan &Deci, 2000); to have positive relations (Ryff, 1995) and social connection, strong emotional and physical interaction with others, intimacy, and love (Seligman, 2011). It also involves the feeling of support, trust and respect for each other.

The next construct is *Engagement*(also known as flow),which refers to being completely absorbed into one's activities often requiring challenging one's skill level resulting in immersion and concentration on the task in hand (Seligman &Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Meaning and purpose are essential components for well-being. This is to do with beliefs that one's life is meaningful and purposeful; or rather the 'pursuit of meaningful goals and a sense of purpose in life which lead to life satisfaction' (Ryff, 1995; Seligman, 2011).

Another important component *Mastery* is the need for competency; 'the capacity to manage one's life and surrounding world effectively' (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1995; Seligman, 2011); achieving one's goal and ambitions give a sense of accomplishment. Mastery is therefore a combination of attributes like learning, skills, accomplishments, self-efficacy and self-worth.

The next one being *Autonomy* is referred as 'the universal urge to be causal agents of one's own life and act in harmony with one's integrated self'. It does not mean to be independent of each other, but rather having a sense of free will when doing something or acting out of one's own interests and values (Ryan &Deci, 2000).

The last dimension is *Optimism*, which according to Scheier& Carver (1985), is the 'global expectation that good things will be plentiful in the future and bad things scarce'.

While the components of thriving have been understood, it is essential to know about all the factors that predict or influence SWB, relationship, engagement, mastery, autonomy, meaning and optimism. This would allow individuals to effectively work their way into achieving optimal functioning in their lives. In response to this call, the field of positive psychology came into existence; *"to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive."* (Sheldon, Fredrickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, &Haidt, 2000)

The three main concerns / pillars of positive psychology are: Positive Emotions (e.g., joy, gratitude), Positive Individual Traits (e.g. optimism, resilience), and Positive Institutions (e.g., families, social relationships). Among them, positive emotions(also known as "tiny engines" of positive psychology) play a prominent role in fostering psychological well-being and happiness. According tobroaden and build theory, "positive emotions appear to broaden peoples' momentary thought–action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources" (Fredrickson 1998, 2001).When consciously experienced on daily basis, they can be nourishments for enriching health and well-being.

Among those numerous positive emotions experienced in our day to day life, three of them have been identified to be very crucial in promoting psychological well-being among individuals. The first emotion identified is Gratitude, which is a feeling of appreciation or thankfulness in response to receiving a benefit. Gratitude is a discrete emotion that occurs when individuals recognize they have benefited from another's actions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).Robert Emmons (2001) stated that being grateful allows one to celebrate the present, block negative emotions, develop a higher sense of self-worth as well as resistance to stress. Studies show that gratitude is associated with positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors, which in turn are linked to greater well-being. It is a predictor of subjective well-being (Sapmaz et al., 2015), happiness and greater life satisfaction (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Szcześniak&Soares, 2011). Cultivating gratitude gives rise to numerous positive behaviors like relationship maintenance (Lambert et al., 2010) and pro-social acts (McCullough et al., 2001; 2002; Bartlett and DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006) which are in turn related to well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2012). It promotes a variety of positive emotions like hope, humility and optimism (McCullough et al., 2002; Kruse et al., 2014). It's a benefit not only for the individuals who practices it; but also for those around them and towards whom they feel thankful.

While gratitude enables one to block negative emotions; the second emotion, Forgiveness, is all about letting go of the negative emotions like the want for revenge along with releasing unpleasant thoughts of bitterness and resentment. Forgiveness is seeing that an injustice was done, recognizing it as an injustice, but choosing to cancel the moral debt owed (McCullough et al., 1997). 'Forgiveness is not excusing, condoning, tolerating, or forgetting that one has been hurt because of the actions of another'. It is rather letting go of those negative thoughts, negative behaviors and negative feelings toward the offender (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). In related literature, forgiveness not only contributes to decrement of negative feelings, but also to frequency of positive feelings (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) and increased life satisfaction (Thompson et al., 2005).

Positive affect and behavior towards the transgressor and situation promotes eudemonic happiness, and subjective well-being (Malby et al., 2005; Sapmaz et al., 2015) and pro-social behavior (Bartlett &DeSteno, 2006). Self-forgiveness plays a vital role in enhancing personal growth because when people forgive themselves, their feeling, actions and beliefs concerned to the self, become more positive (Wohl et al., 2008). McCullough et al (2000) indicated that in interpersonal relationships where misunderstandings and conflicts are inevitable, forgiveness has a correction effect on them. Forgiveness, gratitude and well-being are strongly connected and mediated by affects and beliefs (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). Forgiving oneself, others or situations is essential to allow people to grow more compassionate and empathetic in a relationship.

The third important positive characteristic is Humility. This emotion is characterized by low self-focus, secure sense of self and increased valuation of others (Kruse et al., 2014). Tangney (2000), defined humility as an "accurate assessment of one's abilities and achievements; the ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations; an openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice; a keeping of one's abilities and accomplishments–one's place in the world–in perspective; a relatively low self-focus, a "forgetting of the self", while recognizing that one is but one part of the larger universe; an appreciation of the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world".

Being humble strengthens and sustains relationships, because humble people don't seek social dominance, but willfully learn from others, complimenting on their accomplishments, and responding positively to negative feedbacks (Reave, 2005; Exline, 2008). Humility is considered as a hypoegoic state (Leary & Guadagno, 2011) which facilitates greater openness, engagement and creative

problem solving (Swann & Bosson, 2010). It supports purpose which leads youth to learn, grow and develop in positive directions (Bronk, 2008). Feelings of humility are indicative of well-being and healthy functioning (Exline & Geyer, 2004) and its constructs - appreciation of others and openness has a significant relationship with subjective well-being (Sapmaz et al., 2015).

Gratitude, Forgiveness and Humility are those emotions within our control, i.e., we can choose to be grateful, forgiving and humble. They don't stop with only thinking and feeling, but also drive us to behave in a manner which benefits the self and the society. Moreover these emotions occur on more frequent/regular basis as we go about our daily lives. Saying 'Thank you', 'Sorry' and 'it's alright' have become most commonly used words, such that at times we tend to use them without implying its meaning. Today, even though less significance and meaning has been attached to such words; the thoughts, feelings and behaviors that accompany these emotions when truly experienced do wonders to the physical, psychological and social well-being of individuals. There are empirical evidences for the effect of gratitude, forgiveness and humility on SWB and relationship in particular. It is therefore essential to determine the association between these positive emotions and other areas of thriving, like engagement, meaning, mastery, autonomy and optimism. In order to get a clear understanding about the influence of these emotions on the various constructs of thriving and to determine their prediction levels, it is necessary to study their effects separately and in combination.

Theoretical model
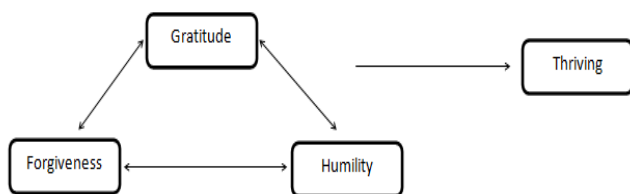
Objective of current study

This study aims to explore the relationship between three mutually reinforcing positive emotions: gratitude, forgiveness and humility on thriving (optimal functioning), and also determine their prediction level on the various constructs of thriving which include relationship, engagement, mastery, autonomy, meaning, optimism and subjective well-being.

Methods

This study is a descriptive one and the research design is explained in detail below.

Sample: The samples for the present study were identified from PSG College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore district, TamilNadu. About 70 students (mean age – 21 years) from the total population were chosen by convenience sampling method. The sample size was determined based on the number of predictors using G*power 3.0 statistical software.

Measures: In accordance with the aim of the study, the following questionnaires were used to assess the level of gratitude, forgiveness, humility and thriving of the participants.

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ) - McCullough, Emmons and Tsang (2002) developed the scale which was designed to measure the gratitude of individuals using four dimensions: severity, frequency, period and intensity. The GQ-6 demonstrated excellent reliability score (α< .90) in prior studies (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) - The 18-item scale developed by Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen and Billings (2005) is used to measure the forgiveness levels of students. They define forgiveness as the framing of a perceived transgression such that one's responses to the transgressor, transgression, and squeals of the transgression are transformed from negative to neutral or positive. The source of a transgression, and therefore the object of forgiveness, may be oneself, another person or persons, or a situation that one views as being beyond anyone's control (e.g., an illness, ''fate,'' or a natural disaster). The scale consists of three sub dimensions which are *forgiveness of self*, *forgiveness of others* and *forgiveness of situation*. 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).

Healthy Humility Inventory (HHI) - The Healthy Humility Inventory (HHI), based on the concepts of humility developed by Tangney (2000) and Richards (1992), defines humility as "an unexaggerated open perception of the abilities, achievements, accomplishments and limitations of oneself and of others – a perception that focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the value of the non-self" (Quiros, 2012). This inventory developed by Quiros (2012), asks participants to rate themselves on characteristics of healthy humility. It consists of four dimensions which are *Other-focused, Spirituality, accurate Self-Assessment*, and *Openness*. The overall internal consistency is significant (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) - The Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) (Su, Tay and Diener, 2013) was developed to measure a broad range of psychological well-being constructs and represent a holistic view of positive functioning. The term 'thriving' denotes the state of positive functioning at its fullest range—mentally, physically, and socially. The CIT is a 54 item self-report measure with seven main scales of thriving: *Relationships, Engagement, Mastery, Autonomy, Meaning, Optimism* and *Subjective Well-being*.Subscales of CIT show good internal consistency with alpha coefficients ranging from .71 to .96.

Procedure

The participants were requested to read and sign an informed consent formwhich had details about the purpose and content of the study, before filling in the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

Data collected were coded for statistical analysis. All of the statistical analyses were performed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0, and the SEM PLS path modeling was done using Visual PLS software. Specific statistical analysis like Mean, Standard Deviation, Regression were employed to analyze the quantitative data collected for the study, to check the strength of the responses for the items in the each of the dimensions.

Results

Table 1 showing the Mean and Standard Deviation values of the variables used in the study.

Sl.No	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	Gratitude	30.17	5.75
2.	H-Openness	**08.60**	2.05
3.	H-Spirituality	12.10	3.13
4.	H-Other Focussed	14.06	3.34

5.	H-Self Perception	14.00	3.21
6.	F-Self	27.00	4.37
7.	F-Others	28.04	5.41
8.	F-Situations	25.20	4.96
9.	T-Relationship	62.44	8.95
10.	T-Engagement	**11.75**	2.18
11.	T-Mastery	54.20	9.54
12.	T-Autonomy	10.89	2.80
13.	T-Meaning	10.97	2.49
14.	T-Optimism	**12.32**	2.98
15.	T-SWB	32.37	6.89

From Table 1, it can be found that the mean scores for all the variables are average, indicating that participants have moderate levels of gratitude, humility and forgiveness (towards others, towards self and towards situation). As for the dependent variable thriving, mean value for the constructs engagement (11.75) and optimism (12.32) is high showing that they have more positive attitude and outlook and frequent experiences of flow in their activities. The other constructs of thriving, like relationship, mastery, autonomy, meaning and SWB are at moderate levels.This shows that the participants experience various positive emotions in their lives and such positive emotions maybe further rooted to attain the optimal level of functioning.

Table 2 showing the correlation matrix for Gratitude, Humility, Forgiveness and all the dimensions of Thriving.

	Forg	Hum	Grat	Thriv	TRel	TEn	TMas	TAut	TMn	TOpti	Tswb
Forg	1										
Hum	.487**	1									
Grat	.458**	.588**	1								
Thriv	.299*	.454**	.640**	1							
TRel	.178	.356**	.501**	.706**	1						
TEn	.282*	.313**	.520**	.705**	.471**	1					
TMas	.130	.378**	.481**	.854**	.453**	.644**	1				
TAut	.342**	.155	.265*	.362**	-.011	.116	.204	1			
TMn	.128	.365**	.434**	.696**	.259*	.461**	.629**	.298*	1		
TOpti	.241*	.317**	.260*	.518**	.294*	.270*	.355**	.272*	.365**	1	
Tswb	.310**	.252*	.497**	.731**	.292*	.443**	.499**	.402**	.575**	.267*	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
(**Forg**-Forgiveness;**Hum**-Humility;**Grat**-Gratitude;**Thriv**-Thriving;**TRel**- Relationship;**TEn**- Engagement;**TMas**-Mastery;**TAut**- Autonomy;**TMn**- Meaning;**TOpti**-Optimism;**Tswb**- Subjective Well-being).

FromTable 2, gratitude, forgiveness and humility were found to be positively and significantly correlated to each other. This supports the basic notion that positive emotions sustain each other which may contribute to a positive upward spiral in the long run. Gratitude is significantly correlated to Thriving constructs: Relationship, Engagement, Mastery, Autonomy, Meaning, Optimism and SWB significantly and in a positive manner. This indicates the crucial role of appreciation in achieving the state of thriving. Humility was correlated positively to all the Thriving constructs and significant relationship can be seen

for all constructs but Autonomy. This may be due to the inclusive nature of humble people to focusless on self and more on others; prioritizing others interest and ideas over

theirs. Similarly Forgiveness has a positive relationship with all the constructs of Thriving, and also a significant one, except for Relationship, Mastery and Meaning. This could be because some people tend to ignore mistakes of people with whom they sharemeaningful relationships,explaining the less significant correlation with few constructs. Regardless, Thriving on the whole is positively and significantly correlated to Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness.

Figure 1 showing the SEM PLS path model - between the predictor variables Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness and the dependent variable Thriving.
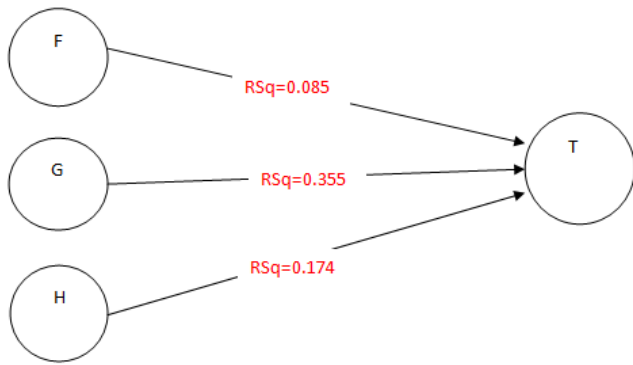
(**F** – Forgiveness; **G** – Gratitude; **H** – Humility; **T** – Thriving)

R Square is the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (Thriving) which can be predicted from the independent variables (Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness).The RSquare values of 0.085, 0.355 and 0.174 indicates that about8.5%, 35.5% and 17.4% of the variance in Thriving can be predicted from Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness respectively. This also means that other variables like emotional stability, vitality, resilience, self-esteem may also influence thriving.

Figure 2 showing the SEM PLS path model - between the predictor variables Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness and the dependent variables – Constructs of Thriving.
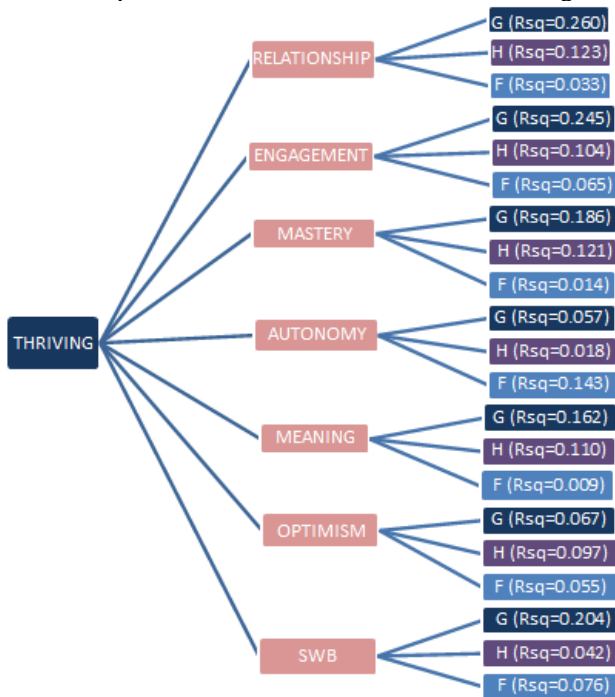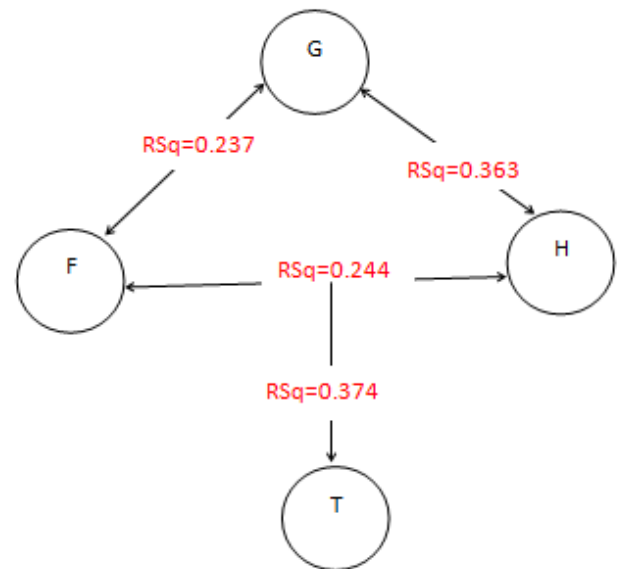

(**F** – Forgiveness; **G** – Gratitude; **H** – Humility)

The variance in relationship (26%), engagement (24%), mastery (18%), autonomy (5%), meaning (16%), optimism (6%) and SWB (20%) is predicted by gratitude.A relatively greater prediction for relationship and engagement can be seen, both of which require a sense of awareness and appreciation which are innate attributes of gratefulness. Similarly the second emotion humility predicts variance in relationship (12%), engagement (10%), mastery (12%), autonomy (1.8%), meaning (11%), optimism (9%) and SWB (4.2%) respectively. The relatively high variance in mastery and optimism may be related to the fact that humility

involves acknowledging one's strengths and weakness and progressing accordingly. Such trait forms the basis of mastery and skill building. As for forgiveness, it predicts a variance in relationship (3.3%), engagement (6.5%), mastery (1.4%), autonomy (14%), meaning (9%), optimism (5.5%) and SWB (7.6%) respectively.Low influence of forgiveness on these dimensions indicate the possibility of confusingforgiveness with the acts of excusing, condoning, tolerating or forgetting that one has been hurt.Such ambiguity mighthinder one from receiving the many benefits of forgiving.

Figure 3 showing the SEM PLS path model - between the predictor variables Gratitude, Humility and Forgiveness (combined) and the dependent variable Thriving.

(**F** – Forgiveness; **G** – Gratitude; **H** – Humility; **T** – Thriving)

From figure 3, it is evident that the three emotions, gratitude, humility and forgiveness mutually predict each other. Gratitude and forgiveness predict 23% of variance on each other; gratitude and humility predict 36% and for forgiveness and humility, prediction rate is 24% on each other. Further, the three emotions together predict 37% of the variance in thriving. This indicates the influence of other variables in predicting thriving which may include self-regulation, curiosity, creativity, courage, compassion, hope, spirituality, etc.

Discussions And Conclusion

In this study the relationship between three positive emotions – gratitude, humility, forgiveness; and thriving was examined. The findings are addressed elaborately for each emotion.

Gratitude was found to have a positive and significant relationship with all the dimensions of thriving. Being the strongest predictor for relationship (26%), engagement (24%) and SWB (20%), these findings are in line with other research works which show that being grateful has beneficial effects for social relationships (Lambert et al., 2010) and psychological well-being (Froh et al., 2008). A grateful person acknowledges positive situations in their lives; develop positive responses towards them and in turn

feel grateful by nature. Such positive approach serves as reinforcement for achieving fullest range of mental, physical and social functioning. This may be the reason why gratitude was found to influence thriving the most (35%).Practicing gratitude by writing gratitude letters and diaries predict happiness and well-being (Seligman et al., 2005).

Humility was next to gratitude as a positive predictor of thriving at 17%. It has significant relationship between all the constructs of thriving, influencing relationship (12%), mastery (12%) and meaning (11%) the most. A humble person has relatively less self-focus, ability to accept criticisms, openness to new ideas and greater sense of appreciation for the people and the world which are essential for maintaining good social relationships. They also have high sense of self-understanding and self-control which enables them to manage their lives and surrounding world effectively. This is similar to findings of previous studies which show that humility indicates well-being and healthy functioning (Exline& Geyer, 2004).

Forgiveness was found to predict autonomy (14%) the most, among all the dimensions of thriving.So when a person chooses to forgive, his/her sense of free will to decide for oneself and the ability act in accordance to one's values/interests also increases. Forgiveness was found to predict other dimensions in less proportion, which may be attributed to the concept of pseudo forgiveness given by Emmons et al. (2007). According to this concept the forgiveness levels of individuals change day by day according to the daily incidents and needs of individuals; wherein one finds difficulty in internalizing forgiveness on a consistent base. For such people forgiveness cannot be determined as a contributor of psychological well-being. Regardless of the person or situation, one should be forgiving in order to achieve the maximum benefits of physical, mental and social well-being. Nevertheless, forgiveness (towards self, others and situations) had a significant and positive influence on thriving as a whole.When letting go of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors one tends to be at peace with oneself by replacing them with positive emotions and consequently increasing the chances to better relationship, engagement, and other aspects that constitute thriving. Thus moving away from anger and resentment towards forgiveness has a positive effect on the overall functioning of an individual.

It was determined through correlation and regression analysis that the three emotions mutually predicted and reinforced each other. Gratitude, associated with qualities such as empathy, forgiveness, and the willingness to help others (McCullough et al, 2002), not only helps us feel good, but also inspires us to do good. Gratitude increases self-awareness giving more understanding about one's strengths and limitations which are characteristics of humble people. Humility helps appreciating the different ways that things and people can contribute to the world that further inculcates grateful nature. Both gratitude and forgiveness are pro-social and empathy-basedemotions associated with positive psychological and physical health capable of reinforcing each other. Individuals with high scores on measures of humility were most likely to be forgiving (Powers et al., 2007; Davis, 2011). This could bebecause they are willing to acknowledge flaws (theirs as well as others) which allow one to seek and give forgiveness. Thus these three emotions tend to trigger upward spirals towards greater well-being in the future, by broadening people's thinking and attention (flexible and open to information) and helping them build personal resources like social bonds, resilience and such. They promote the well-being of self and others and consequently plant and nurture the seed for human functioning. This is evident from the current findings that combinations of these three emotions predict almost 37% of optimal human functioning. These emotions help in building strong and supportive relationships, in managing one's life and surrounding environment effectively, increasing the feelings of optimism and thereby promoting SWB. Having determined a positive and significant relationship between these emotions and thriving, it is essential to practice gratitude, humility and forgiveness on daily basis in order to achieve the maximum benefits associated with thriving or optimal human functioning.

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