

Impact of Gratitude Intervention on Psychological Predictor of Moral Disengagement among Adolescents: A Pre-Post Experimental Study

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Abstract: Positive Psychology-based interventions can help individuals build a positive self-concept and improve it by increasing positive emotions. Adolescents suffer various issues as they are in a critical period for the development of self-esteem. During this stage, Positive psychology-based interventions can play a significant role in building and enhancing self-worth and self-concept. Gratitude-based interventions develop a positive self-image of adolescents and help them cope with the challenges that adolescents face during this transitional stage. The goal of this study was to develop an effective intervention for promoting gratitude by enhancing self-esteem among adolescents from 17-19 years ($M = 17.36$, $SD = .52$). Pre-post experimental research design with the intervention was used wherein pre and post-assessments were conducted on both the experimental and control group each consisting ($n=100$) participants. College students from both private and public institutions were included. Responses were collected using gratitude, self-esteem, and moral disengagement questionnaires. In this study, counting blessing intervention was given to the experimental group for a period of two weeks, followed by a post-assessment. Analysis was conducted by using SPSS 23. Study results showed no change in the relationship between pre-and post-tests for the control group regarding the correlation between person-product moment. However, there is a change in the relationship between the pre and post-test for the experimental group. Results from a two-way analysis of variance indicated a substantial increase in the post-test of the experimental group for gratitude and a decrease in aggression and moral disengagement. Results of the study revealed that participants of the experimental group reported feeling more positive after performing counting blessing intervention. The study concluded that gratitude intervention is associated with enhancing gratitude and self-esteem among adolescents by decreasing the level of moral disengagement.

Keywords: Counting Blessing Intervention, Gratitude, Self-Esteem, Moral Disengagement

Introduction

Positive psychology introduced a more constructive approach to exploring human nature and reducing the impact of negative emotions that lead them morally disengaged by inducing positive emotions in an individual. Gratitude has grown excessively courteous among social and developmental scientists and theorists since the development of positive psychology. Individuals are classified into positive and negative emotions.

After the emergence of positive psychology, different researches began on topic like gratitude, kindness, happiness, hope, self-esteem and character. Positive psychology based interventions are designed to induce positive emotions among individuals in which individuals experience positive emotions like hope, gratitude, happiness and kindness.

Recently, gratitude has come to be famous in psychology books and is the subject of a developing frame of scientific work. The construct of gratitude is garnering attention in the field of positive psychology, which aims to understand how positive emotions and character traits influence the individual. The area of positive psychology is developing an interest in positive youth psychology and positive education. It plays an important role in the well-being and positive functioning of adolescents. It focuses on enhancing and

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building individual strengths and positive emotions and examining the different aspects of human personality.

Having gratitude increases one's sense of morals, ethics, and self-worth. Some theorists contend that people who cultivate gratitude have greater levels of happiness, self-awareness, and self-esteem. People who have a more appreciative mindset have the highest levels of self-esteem, according to experimental studies. In a study conducted by Kong et al. (2014), it was hypothesized that practicing thankfulness boosts people's self-esteem.

According to the majority of experimental research, teenagers who are more grateful also tend to have stronger self-esteem and fewer negative feelings. According to Majeed et al. (2023), there is a positive correlation between gratitude and self-esteem among college students, indicating that these are positive emotions.

According to Bandura (2014), in the adolescent stage, individuals have the capacity to learn and develop behaviors that benefit them socially and morally. According to the study, college students will morally disengage from committing unethical behavior, which will further cause them to experience negative emotions and low self-esteem in order to maintain their self-image.

Moral disengagement defines as psychological phenomenon in which individual conceptualize negative and improper behavior, in which they get involved in negative and unethical behaviors while escaping the internal conflicts and result in engaging in such negative and inappropriate behaviors. Morality is a broad social behavior that is closely linked to human life (Ulfiah, 2021).

According to a study by Emmons & McCullough (2003), college students enhanced participant's well-being. Researchers reasoned that practicing gratitude interventions helps individuals enhance positive things and reduces negative emotions and behaviors. Gratitude listing intervention proved to be effective for school and college students. According to Froh et al. (2008), young adolescents (ages 11-14) who were using the gratitude listing method had a greater level of gratitude and fewer negative emotions relative to participants who were in neutral event conditions.

Sheldon & Lyubomirsky (2006), suggested that effects of gratitude listing intervention are greater when individual are intrinsically motivated to complete the activity and continue to practice gratitude for longer periods of time. Therefore, gratitude is a matter of concern for adolescents who face negative life events and emotions. Hence using gratitude intervention may have potential emotional and psychological health benefits for them.

In the gratitude-based journal, participants listed their responses to a variety of statements. Each group has seven days to complete the assignments listed in the journal. It includes detailed guidelines and includes things like expressing gratitude to your family. Participants were asked to perform it every day and share how they felt before and after. These responses will lead to the development of certain themes.

Theoretical Foundation

Fredrickson presented an intriguing theory of thankfulness in the larger framework of pleasant emotions. As to Fredrickson's (2001) "Broaden and Built" hypothesis, people who had positive emotions and were glad or grateful demonstrated improved behaviors and had the potential to create long-lasting personal resources. Positive emotions cause people to boost their own emotional, cognitive, and personal resources. It is likely to get rid of bad feelings and increase resilience to combat bad things that happen to people and the things they do. Gratitude has the power to transform one's mental model, broaden one's cognitive style, and build powerful social and personal networks.

Research revealed that people with high levels of gratitude tend to think broadly, copy more readily and adaptably, act less negatively and against the law, and be less morally disengaged. Another study found that listing blessings rather than problems or occurrences resulted in better self-reported levels of optimism, appreciation, and self-worth among 221 teenagers.

Method

Sample and Procedure

After the official approval from authorities and informed consent from participants, participants from public and private institutions, ages ranging from 17 to 19 years old (gender = 50% male, 50% female), were included. The current investigation used a quantitative, intervention-focused pre-post experimental study design. Two research conditions were breached in this study. The study included both a control group and an experimental group. Three phases were used in the study: (1) pre-intervention (baseline measurement), (2) gratitude meditation and intervention for 14 days, and (3) post-intervention measurement.

The goal of the study was presented to the participants, who were also reassured that their participation was completely voluntary and that the information gathered would be kept private. The participants received a consent form and an information sheet. Using random sampling, 200 participants were split into experimental and control groups in the classroom. A Phase-I measure was supplied to each participant. Phase I was completed and Phase II was conducted after two days. Each group was given 14 days to complete the diary and gratitude form activities. Every group has its own journal (Compton & Hoffman, 2019). During this stage, the experimental group received a thankfulness diary with daily entries for seven days and a gratitude form for fourteen days. Participants received regular reminders to complete assigned tasks and write in their journals. Gratitude diaries include exercises like expressing thanks to family members and compiling a list of items for which one is thankful. Detailed instructions for creating a gratitude diary were also provided. The participants were asked to convey their feelings and execute them every day.

To look into the fundamental goals of the current study, statistical analysis was done on the data. SPSS version 23 was used for the analysis that followed the data screening. Descriptive statistics were performed for each scale utilized in the study to verify that the data were normal and that general patterns were being seen. The internal consistency was assessed using an estimate of alpha reliability. The Pearson Product Moment correlation was calculated in order to observe the patterns of relationships between the study variables. Multiple analysis of variance, independent sample t-test, and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were employed to determine the mean differences between and within groups.

Measures

The Gratitude Questionnaire: GQ-6

It is a self-report Questionnaire, consists of six items, were used to measure the level of gratitude in the participants. The scale is a seven point Likert type ranging from -1 strongly disagree to -7 strongly agree. The alpha reliability of the GQ-6 is .82 (McCullough et al., 2002). GQ-6 was applied in the pre-test and posttest in present study. The alpha reliability of GQ-6 is .63 in the pre-test and .76 in the post-test measurement of the present study.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

It is a 10-item scale measures individual's self-worth. It is 4-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Test-retest reliability is .82 - .88. Reversed score items are 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9.

Moral Disengagement Scale

It was developed by Bandura (1996). It consists of 32 items. The scale is a five-point Likert scale rated from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The scale has no reverse items. High score on the scale shows high moral disengagement. In the present study, the alpha reliability is .81 in the pre-test measurement and .83 in the post-test measurement.

Analysis and Results

The correlation analysis (Table 1) shows a correlation between variables in the pre-test for the control group, and the below diagonal shows the correlation between variables in the post-test for the control group. Results showed that self-esteem has a significant negative correlation with Gratitude. Furthermore, moral disengagement has a significant negative correlation with self-esteem, while there is a non-significant positive relation with gratitude in the post-test of the control group.

Table 1

Correlation among Study Variables Pre-Post test (Control Group) (n= 100)

S#	Variables	1	2	3
1	Gratitude		-.089	.016
2	Self-Esteem	-.259**		.053
3	Moral Disengagement	.191	-.224*	

Above diagonal = Pre-test, below diagonal= Post-test.

*p<.05. **p<.01.

Note: VAR = Variables; Gra =Gratitude; SE =Self-Esteem; MD = Moral Disengagement

Table 2

Correlation among Study Variables Pre-Post-test (Experimental Group) (n = 100)

S#	Variables	1	2	3
1	Gratitude		.000	.243*
2	Self-Esteem	.219*		-.155
3	Moral Disengagement	.186	-.461**	

Above diagonal = Pre-test, below diagonal= Post-test

*p<.05. **p<.01.

Note: VAR = Variables; Gra = Gratitude; SE =Self-Esteem; MD = Moral Disengagement

The person product moment was again computed to find the relationship between the variables and compare the values of correlation in the pre-test and post-test in the experimental group. In Table 2, the above diagonal shows the correlation between variables in the pre-test for the experimental group, and the below diagonal shows the correlation between variables in the post-test for the experimental group. Results suggest that in the pretest of the experimental group, Gratitude has a non-significant positive correlation with self-esteem. Self-esteem has a non-significant negative correlation with moral disengagement. However, in the post-test of the experimental group, self-esteem had a significant positive relationship with gratitude.

Furthermore, Moral Disengagement has a non-significant positive correlation with gratitude while a negative significant relation with self-esteem in the post-test of the experimental group, which reveals that when an individual has a higher level of gratitude and self-esteem, then the level of moral disengagement will not be high. However, if we compare the level of correlation among study variables in the pre-test and post-test, the relationship can be seen to be stronger in the post-test. In the post-test measurement, we can see some of the relations are strong in the post-test, and some of the relations were not found to be significant in the post-test.

Group Differences among Study Variables

Group differences among the study variables were measured by using an independent sample t-test.

Table 3

Mean Differences between Control and Experimental Group in the Pre-Test on All the Study Variables (n=200)

Var	Control (n=100)		Experimental (n=100)		t	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Gra	30.46	4.61	30.19	4.85	.403	.687	-1.05	1.59	-
SE	24.31	3.41	24.34	3.26	-.082	.935	-9.70	.893	-
MD	106.36	15.57	105.91	15.80	.203	.839	-3.92	4.82	-

Note: Gra= Gratitude; SE= Self-Esteem; MD= Moral Disengagement; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; CI= Confidence Interval; UL= Upper Limit; LL= Lower Limit; p= significant value.

Results in Table 3 demonstrated that the mean group differences were tested using an independent sample t-test between the control and experimental groups in the pre-test. The table shows that the p-values are not significant for all study variables, which means that there were no significant differences in the control group, and the experimental group had no differences in the pre-test and were balanced on the study variables before intervention.

Table 4

Mean Differences Between Control and Experimental Group in the Post-Test on All the Study Variables (n=200)

Var	Control (n=100)		Experimental (n=100)		t	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Gra	31.13	5.44	34.25	5.36	-4.083	.000	-4.62	-1.161	0.57
SE	24.27	4.48	27.51	4.59	-5.059	.000	-4.51	-1.92	0.71
MD	104.33	17.54	96.72	17.31	3.090	.000	2.75	12.7	0.43

Note: Gra= Gratitude; SE= Self-Esteem; MD= Moral Disengagement; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; CI= Confidence Interval; UL= Upper Limit; LL= Lower Limit; p= significant value.

Table 4 represents the group differences between control group and experimental group in the post-test on study variables. According to the findings, the mean difference is found to be significant on Gratitude, self-esteem and Moral disengagement. It implies that Experimental group were higher on Gratitude and self-esteem while lower on Moral disengagement. However, there were significant differences among the two groups.

Group Comparison in the pre-test and post-test

Paired sample t-tests were used to test the within-group differences in the pretest and post-test (n=100)

Table 5

Mean on the Study Variables in the Control Group Across Pre-Test and Post-Test (n=100)

Var	Pre-text (n=100)		Post-test (n=100)		t	df	95% CI		UL
	M	SD	M	SD			p		
Gra	30.46	4.61	31.13	5.44	-1.007	99	.316		-1.08
SE	24.31	3.41	24.27	4.48	.085	99	.933		-.897
MD	106.36	15.57	104.33	17.53	.974	99	.332		-2.09

Note: Gra= Gratitude; SE= Self-Esteem; MD= Moral Disengagement; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; CI= Confidence Interval; UL= Upper Limit; LL= Lower Limit; df= Degree of freedom; p= significant value.

Table 5 represents the mean differences calculated through paired sample t-test in the control group for pre-test and post-test. The table shows that p-value is not significant for any study variable which means that the control group participants scores on study variables remains stable in the pretest and post-test.

Table 6

Mean on the Study Variables in the Experimental Group Across Pre-Test and PostTest (N=100)

Var	Pre-text (n=100)		Post-test (n=100)		t	df	95% CI		UL
	M	SD	M	SD			p	LL	
Gra	30.91	4.85	34.25	5.36	-7.205	99	.000	-5.17	-2.94
SE	24.34	3.26	27.51	4.59	-7.083	99	.000	-4.05	-2.28
MD	105.91	15.80	96.72	17.31	5.261	99	.000	5.72	12.65

Note: Gra= Gratitude; SE= Self-Esteem; MD= Moral Disengagement; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; CI= Confidence Interval; UL= Upper Limit; LL= Lower Limit; df= Degree of freedom; p= significant value.

In table 6, the paired sample t-test shows that in the experimental group there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test measurement. Participants in the experimental group scored lower in moral disengagement. The results also show a significant increase in the scores in gratitude and self-esteem.

Between and within group differences Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)

Table 7

Two-way ANOVA to Test Differences in Pre-Assessment and Post-Assessment for Experimental and Control Group (N=200)

Var	Pre-test				Post-test				F	P	η_2
	Control		Experimental		Control		Experimental				
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Gra	31.46	4.61	30.19	4.85	31.13	5.44	34.25	5.36	21.71	.000	0.52
SE	24.31	3.41	24.31	3.26	24.2	74.48	27.5	14.59	16.42	.000	.040
MD	106.36	15.57	105.91	15.80	140.33	17.53	95.93	17.59	13.34	.000	.033

Note: Gra= Gratitude; SE= Self-Esteem; MD= Moral Disengagement; M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation; p= significant value.

Table 7, represents the within group differences and the differences between groups in the pretest and post-test measurement on study variables. Results show that two-way ANOVA appeared to be significant for all study variables. The estimate of effect size showed medium to high effect size ranging from .03 to .52.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of gratitude intervention on the outcome variables self-esteem and moral disengagement among the adolescents. The study was conducted on the adolescents (college students) of Pakistan. Further, the research study aim was based on the understanding that adolescents who are involved in undesirable behavior or immoral acts exhibits low self-esteem and gratitude.

The goal of the study was to apply gratitude intervention to foster grateful thinking, feeling, and behavior among adolescents. The survey method was used to collect the data from public and private college students through self-reported measures. A pre-post experimental study design with the intervention was applied, comprised of two research conditions. Participants of this study were assisted by the researcher in three phases: (1) pre-intervention (baseline measurement), (2) 14 days gratitude intervention and gratitude meditation, and (3) post-intervention measurement.

The finding from this study was that completing the gratitude activities and gratitude journal led to significant increases in gratitude and self-esteem and lower level of immoral behaviors from the pre-test to post-test, and that these increases were significantly greater in experimental group than changes reported by control group.

The reliabilities of scales indicate that scales are acceptable and reliable for satisfactory internal consistency. The first objective to explore the relationship between gratitude, self-esteem, and moral disengagement among adolescents. Each correlation is pointing in expected direction. However, if we compare the level of correlation among study variables in the pre-test and post-test relationship can be seen to be stronger in the post-test.

The study hypothesized that participants in the experimental group will have a higher level of gratitude and self-esteem and lower level of moral disengagement in the post assessment compared to participants in the control group which will be a proof for the efficacy of the intervention. According to the results of a Two-way ANOVA and independent sample t-test, participants in the experimental group scored considerably higher than those in the control group. These results are similar to existing literature, as McCullough and Emmons (2003) findings, counting blessing intervention employed for a periods of two weeks increased the level of gratitude participants who were in the gratitude intervention compared to participants who were not given any intervention. According to Deng et al., (2024), after gratitude based counting blessing intervention, the level of aggression significantly decreased among adolescents.

As a result, the study's hypothesis was accepted. A paired sample t-test was used to identify any change in the scores of participants of control and experimental group. The present findings showed that there were no significant differences and remain stable in the scores of the control group participants in the post-test measurement in the study variables. However, there were significant difference in the scores of the participants of the experimental group in the post-test measurement. This means that gratitude intervention and gratitude journal had a high efficacy on all the outcome variables of the study. All changes in the post-test measurement were consistent with the hypothesis of the study.

Conclusion

This study findings demonstrates the potential impact of gratitude intervention to promote positive psychological outcomes among adolescents. Gratitude intervention based on counting blessing approach and gratitude journal is an effective technique for enhancing gratitude and increasing the level of self-esteem and decreasing the moral disengagement in adolescents.

These findings may aid in the development of novel and cost-effective intervention for use in therapeutic settings as well as in educational institutes. It has the potential to divert individual's attention

away from negative aspects of their lives and assist them in experiencing greater happiness by focusing on everyday life blessings. Gratitude interventions are a valuable tool for preventing moral disengagement and promoting positive emotions and prosocial behavior among adolescents.

Limitations and Implications

The study has implications and limitations as well. Though the study provides benefits for the adolescents by enhancing gratitude and reduce the level of aggression and moral disengagement. The study findings could be used by psychologists, therapists, wellness centers and college counselling centers to understand how college student's responds to different positive psychology based interventions.

The study's limitations include its quantitative research design and the absence of a thorough investigation of the thankfulness interventions' impacts. To demonstrate a relationship between the suggested factors, a qualitative investigation is necessary. Second, the study does not determine the long-term benefits of the intervention because there was only one post-test measurement.

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