The Relationship between Emotional Competence, Forgiveness, and Happiness among Adolescents

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Abstract

Perceived happiness of an individual depends on the cognitive and affective evaluation and acceptance of one’s life experiences. Happiness is a state of mind resulting in cheerful disposition, improved health, enhanced social relationships and positive developmental outcomes. Emotional Competence, forgiveness and happiness are internal dispositions with cognitive, affective and behavioural components. Emotional competence involves understanding, accepting, using appropriate emotions and managing one’s emotions for adaptive functioning. Forgiveness is accepting the hurt, letting the hurt go, releasing the anger against unjust violations and extending empathy, compassion and love to the perpetrator of an offense. The present empirical investigation explores the relationship between emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness among adolescents. Measures of Emotional Competence Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire are used to assess the variables under the study. The study was carried out on a sample of 237 adolescents with the aim of finding out the relationship between emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness. The result indicated a positive correlation between emotional competence and happiness. However no significant relationship was found between forgiveness and happiness. Gender differences were observed in happiness and four dimensions of emotional competence. The investigation has implications for the education, counselling and training of adolescents.

Key words: emotional competence, happiness, forgiveness, adolescents

Pursuit of happiness, alleviation of pain, means to contentment and a good life have been the subjects of discourses and interventions in religious and philosophical disciplines. Perceived happiness of an individual depends on the cognitive and affective evaluation of one’s life experiences. Chaplin (2009) examined the factors that make children and adolescents happy and found that there is an age difference in terms of what makes them happy. He concluded from review of the previous research on happiness, that there are various factors which lead an individual to be happy. With the beginning of positive psychology movements the study of individual’s strengths and resources, happiness or well being, quality of life, etc has gained momentum. There is a marked shift from the traditional pathology focused approach to strength and resources based approach and the positive aspects of human life like joy, happiness, faith, hope, and so on are given adequate emphasis (Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi, 2000). But there are only a few studies that have explored the happiness of children and adolescents and what makes them happy (Chaplin, 2009).

This study attempts to explore the relationship between emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness among adolescents. It is assumed that adolescence is a time of opportunity and development. The development of interpersonal competencies such as emotional competence and forgiveness could lead to positive adaptive outcomes and subsequently to greater happiness. The emotional competence and forgiveness could be situated within the personal intelligence of Gardner’s (1999) theory of multiple intelligences. The personal intelligence includes interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Interpersonal intelligence denotes a one’s ability to understand others-their motivations, desires and plans and work with them effectively. The intrapersonal intelligence is the
Emotional Competence

Emotional competence is the ability of an individual to manage one’s and others emotions and use emotions effectively. Emotionally intelligent individuals make use of emotions for guiding their behaviour and thinking to enhance the results (Weisinger, 2006). According to Ciarrochi and Scott (2006), emotional competence is the application of emotional intelligence to actual situations of emotional interaction. It is the ability to deal with emotions and emotionally charged situations (Ciarrochi and Scott, 2006). Salovey and Mayer (1990) conceptualized emotional intelligence as four overlapping abilities such as to perceive emotions, use emotions, understand emotions and manage emotions (as cited in Salovey and Grewal, 2005; Devassy and Raj, 2013). Goleman defined emotional competence as the learned skill for realizing one’s own and others’ emotions, for motivation of self and for managing emotions in us and in others’ (Goleman, 1999). He identified six factors of emotional competence namely- ‘self awareness, self regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills and group working skills’.

Emotional intelligence and emotional competence are crucial for successful outcomes in adolescent life. It enhances an individual’s leadership skills and moral competence (Devassy and Raj, 2013). Emotional intelligence has a positive impact on leadership effectiveness, leadership emergence and organizational outcomes, and highly emotional intelligent leadership is associated with transformational leadership (Hui-Wen, Mu-Shang Yin and Nelson, 2010). The inability to understand and interpret, and respond to the emotions in peers inhibited adolescents ability to make friends (Rebecca, 1999). Emotional intelligence is negatively correlated with depression (Schutte et al. 2002; Riaz, Shahzad, and Ansari, 2009) and positively correlated with subjective wellbeing (Salovey and Mayer, 1990, Goleman, 1995; Saarni, 1999), happiness (Hafen, Singh and Laursen, 2011; Chee, and Choong, 2013) and dimensions of happiness such as satisfaction with life and positive affect (Zacher, Mckenna, and Rooney, 2013; Gupta, 2011). However there are not many studies that have explored the relationship between emotional competence and happiness.

Forgiveness

The conflicts, negative life events and transgressions into the legitimate rights of others are very much part of daily human experiences. The bitterness, anger and resentment resulting from these negative experiences lead an individual to be unhappy, revenge oriented and block normal development and growth. Hence the virtue of forgiveness has been central to many theistic religions. Through the precepts, role models and theological discourses these religions teach its followers to forgive and seek forgiveness (Krumei, Mahoney and Pargameant, 2008; West, 2001). In the recent decade the construct of forgiveness has been explored in the secular and non religious writings especially in the context of managing shame, guilt, depression, counselling and psychotherapy (West, 2001). A literature survey by Davis, Hook and Worthington Jr. (2008) has yielded over 700 empirical investigations on forgiveness. Forgiveness has been conceptualized in many ways. These conceptualizations are based on forgiveness as dispositions, occasion or event specific, decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness (Worthington, 2005b), intrapersonal and interpersonal forgiveness (Pargament et al., 2000). Worthington and Scherer (2004) and Davis, Hook and Worthington Jr. (2008) have made distinction between emotional and decisional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness refers to replacing of unforgiveness and negative emotions, with forgiveness, prosocial, positive and love-based emotions. Decisional forgiveness is ‘cognitively mediated behavioural intention’ rooted on one’s beliefs about future interactions with a transgressor. Toussaint
and Friedman (2009) conceptualized emotional forgiveness as ‘the extent to which negative emotions such as anger, fear, hurt, and bitterness can be replaced with more positive emotions such as peace, love, and joy’ towards the self and others. Enright and Coyle (1998) defined forgiveness as an interpersonal process, and in genuine forgiveness, the transgressed one chooses to abandon his or her right to resentment and retaliation, and instead offers mercy to the offender (as cited in West, 2001).

There are empirical studies suggesting the relationship between forgiveness and health. Worthington Jr., Witvliet and Miller (2007) reviewed the literature on forgiveness and health observed that forgiveness is an emotion focused coping strategy to promote health as an altruistic motive can affect both physical (Worthington and Scherer, 2003) and mental health (Allan et al., 2006). Forgiveness is correlated with positive affect, self esteem (Karremans et al., 2003) and hedonic and eudaimonic happiness (Maltby, Day and Barber, 2005). However the relationship between forgiveness and happiness has not been consistent across the researches. Failure to forgive is related to poor mental health, depression and anxiety (Brown, 2003; Karremans et al., 2003). Research has also shown the positive outcomes of forgiveness in the corporate world (Stone, 2002). But forgiveness has not been taught as a skill in academic curriculum (West, 2001).

Happiness

The construct of happiness has been the subject of discussion for centuries. It has received increased focus in research in the past few years and focused on the employment, income, marital status family and societies using both objective and subjective measures (Chaplin, 2009). The construct of happiness is vague, multidimensional and has multiple layers of meaning. Fave et al. (2011) defined happiness as a ‘transient emotion’ the experience of fulfilment and accomplishment, as well as a long-term process of meaning making and identity development through actualization of potentials and subjective goals. The Freudian and later psychoanalyst’s concept of happiness revolve around four different but overlapping experiences: pleasure, joy, ecstasy and contentment (Aktar, 2010). Norrish and Vella-Brodrick (2008) viewed happiness or subjective well being as two dimensional, with a cognitive component denoting overall satisfaction with life and an affective component with the presence of positive affect and absence of negative affect. They conceptualized happiness from a hedonic view and eudaimonic view and based it on the recent perspective in positive psychology. Happiness form a hedonistic perspective aims at the maximum attainment of pleasure and minimum experience of pain, and an individual with such an orientation experiences this happiness when pleasurable experience and sensory gratification which outweighs the experience of pain and suffering. Eudaimonic happiness results from the actualization of one’s potentials and fulfilment of one’s real and true self (Ryan and Deci, 2001 cited in Norrish and Vella-Brodrick, 2008). Happiness according to this perspective is achieved by the realization of individuals’ potentials and virtues. The positive psychological view integrates and develops hedonic and eudaimonic happiness.

The determinants of happiness could be many. The cognitive variables such as self esteem, locus of control, intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Huebner et al., 2006); love, zest, hope and gratitude (Park and Peterson, 2006); closeness to the mother during adolescence (Flouri, 2004) and spirituality (Holder and Coleman, 2008) are some of the determinants. The environmental factors including neighborhood (Homel and Burns, 1989); temperamental factors such as harm avoidance, novelty seeking and self directedness (Gracia and Moradi, 2012); positive social relationships with family and peers (Rossarin et al., 2013, Holder and Coleman, 2009) also impact an individual’s happiness. Adolescents’ school life and related factors such as school attendance, high self esteem and economic status and participation in extracurricular activities (Rossarin et al, 2013); education which results in extensive social networks and greater involvement with the wider world (Wan-chi Chen, 2012) are other major determinants of adolescent happiness or subjective wellbeing.
Rationale of the study

With the emergence of the Positive Psychology movement, studies have examined the level of happiness in adult populations. But there are only a few studies on adolescent happiness and on what makes them happy. A few studies have assessed the relationship between college students’ happiness and forgiveness with mixed or inconsistent results. Studies on the relationship between emotional intelligence and happiness have been explored sufficiently. However, studies on the contribution of emotional competences on happiness have not been adequately assessed. Moreover, studies on Indian sample that have explored the relationship between emotional competence and happiness especially eudaimonic happiness are few in number. In the new era of EQ way of developing adolescents for achievement, happiness and satisfaction in life, the study on the relationship between adolescent emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness can enhance their holistic development. The study also could give insights into the training and education of adolescents; hence the present study is relevant and significant.

Hypotheses

The primary objective of the study was to explore the relationship between adolescents’ emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness. The research also sought to assess the variations on these three variables based on gender and socio-economic status. Four hypotheses were formulated and tested for significance in this empirical investigation: a) there will be a positive and significant correlation between dimensions of emotional competence as measured by Emotional Competence Scale (ECS) and happiness as measured by the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ), b) there will be positive and significant correlation between the dimensions of forgiveness as measured by the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) and happiness, c) there is no significant gender difference among adolescents on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness, d) there is no significant difference among adolescents from different socio-economic status on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness.

Method

Sample: The participants of the study included 237 adolescents (82 males and 155 females) between 16 to 18 years of age drawn from two pre-university colleges in Bangalore. The sample was chosen using convenience sampling technique and informed consent was sought from the participants before the survey was administered.

Measures: Three standardized and valid self rating measures were used in the study.

1. Emotional Competence Scale (ECS): We measured the emotional competence of the adolescents using the Emotional Competence Scale developed by Sharma and Baharadwaj (1995). It consisted of 30 items a five point likert scale in measuring five emotional competencies. The scale has a test-retest reliability of .74 and split half reliability of .76. The validity of the scale was arrived at with factor A and C of 16 PF questionnaire and was found to be .64 and .69.

2. Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS): Forgiveness was measured by the Heartland Forgiveness Scale developed by Yamhure Thompson, Snyder and Hoffman (2005). The measure consists of 18 items on a seven point scale. The scale measures three dimensions of forgiveness, the forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of situations. The measure was adapted and standardized with permission from the authors for the Indian adolescent population. The reliability of the scale by Cronbach alpha was 0.72 and the intrinsic validity was found to be 0.518 based on the square root of Guttmann split half reliability. This is a satisfactory measure of the intrinsic validity of the inventory.

3. The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ): We measured the happiness of the sample using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire developed by Hills and Argyle (2002) and which is
available on public domains. The measure consists of 29 items on a six point scale. The measure available was standardized on the Indian adolescent population. The reliability of the scale by Cronbach alpha was 0.80 and the intrinsic validity was found to be 0.56 based on the square root of Guttman split-half reliability. This is a satisfactory measure of the intrinsic validity of the inventory.

Results

Table 1:
Correlation between the scores on the dimensions of emotional competence and happiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Competence Scales</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adequate depth of feeling (ADF)</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.797504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate expression and control of emotions (AEC)</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.553317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to function with emotions (AFE)</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.074686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to cope with problem emotions (ACPE)</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.011192*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of positive emotions (EPE)</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.003071*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Scores</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.004724*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the result of correlation analysis between the scores of five dimensions of emotional competence, total emotional competence score and happiness scores. The total emotional competence score, the scores on ability to cope with problem emotions, and encouragement of positive emotions are correlated significantly with happiness scores at .05 level of significance. Hence the stated hypothesis that there will be a significant correlation between the dimensions of emotional competence and happiness is accepted.

Table 2:
Correlation between the scores on the dimensions of forgiveness and happiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forgiveness Scale</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness of Self</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>0.131589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness of Others</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.734814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness of Situations</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.749268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.343106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the correlation between the scores on three dimensions of forgiveness scale, total forgiveness scores and happiness scores. There is a negligible negative correlation between forgiveness and happiness. The correlation is not statistically significant and hence the stated hypothesis that there will be significant correlation between the dimensions of forgiveness and happiness among adolescents is rejected.

Table 3:
The difference between male and female adolescents on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Happiness</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>122.22</td>
<td>17.85</td>
<td>2.876**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>115.52</td>
<td>15.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>28.86</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The result of the independent sample t-test carried out to find the gender difference on emotional Competence, forgiveness and happiness scores, indicates that there is a significant difference between male and female adolescents on the happiness scores. The female sample has a higher mean score (M=122.22) compared to male adolescents (M=115.52). No significant gender difference was found among adolescents on total forgiveness and three dimensions of forgiveness scale. Statistically significant gender difference was observed on four of the dimensions of emotional competence such as adequate depth of feeling, adequate expression and control of emotions and ability to function with emotions, with males having higher mean (M=17.33, 19.22, 18.62 respectively) compared to female adolescents (M=16.08, 17.84, 17.20 respectively). However on the dimension of encouragement of positive emotions females have a higher mean (M=22.68) compared to the male sample (M=21.27) and the gender difference is statistically significant at .01 level of significance. Hence the null hypothesis that there is no significant gender difference among adolescents on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness is partially rejected.

Table 4:
Difference among adolescents from various socio-economic statuses on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Socio-Economic Status</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>118.85</td>
<td>18.58</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>119.69</td>
<td>19.04</td>
<td>-0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>85.49</td>
<td>12.96</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>119.69</td>
<td>19.04</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>120.52</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>119.69</td>
<td>19.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>120.52</td>
<td>15.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows the results of independent sample $t$-test conducted to find the difference among adolescents from low, middle and high socioeconomic statuses. There is no significant statistical difference among adolescents on happiness, forgiveness and emotional competence based on the socioeconomic statuses. Hence the null hypothesis stated that there is no significant difference among adolescents from different socioeconomic statuses on emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness is accepted.

Discussion

The correlational analysis shows that emotional competence and happiness are positively correlated among adolescents. The positive relationship is augmented by the two dimensions of emotional competence, the ability to cope with problem emotions and encouragement of positive emotions. The result is in concurrence with some of the previous research that has explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and happiness (Hafen, Singh and Laursen, 2011; Chee, and Choong, 2013). The ability to cope with problem emotions include the abilities to understand and realize the causes of misery, strange circumstances, aroused negative feelings and aggression, the impact of misfortunes, and the ability to keep aside negative ruminations and superfluous feelings. These abilities to understand, realize and mobilize the emotional resources of an individual can make one happy. Happiness involves the feeling of satisfaction about oneself, one’s life experiences, feeling of having control over events of one’s life, experience of joy, excitement and alertness, confidence, decisiveness, energy, influence on others, and sense of purpose and meaning in life.

The ability to encourage positive emotions includes the ability to enjoy the moments of happiness, to relate freely and joyfully with others, participate in family and social functions, have a cheerful disposition and make optimal use of opportunities to be happy and to make merry. The ability to encourage positive emotion are related to happiness because both of these involve an interest in interpersonal relationship, having warm feelings towards them, making influence on others and events of life and having fun with others people. The management of emotions plays an important role in adjustment and life satisfaction. Previous research has found positive correlations between emotional intelligence and self-esteem and happiness (Riaz, Shahzad and Ansari, 2009; Gupta, 2011) and negative correlations between emotional intelligence and depression (Riaz, Shahzad and Ansari, 2009). Emotional intelligence is at times considered as one of the predictors of happiness (Furnham, and Christoforou, 2007). However the other dimensions of emotional competence, adequate depth of feelings, adequate expression and control of emotions and ability to function with emotions have not significantly contributed to happiness.

Forgiveness and happiness was not significantly correlated in the sample of study. In fact there exists a negligible negative correlation between these two variables. The association between forgiveness and happiness has been ‘less robust across studies’ (Toussaint and Friedman, 2008). Our finding is consistent with the study of Muñoz Sastre and colleagues who found a very weak correlation between forgiveness and happiness (Muñoz Sastre et al., 2003). This finding is contrary to the outcomes of some previous researches which have shown a positive though very low correlation between forgiveness and happiness (Maltby, Day and Barber, 2005). Forgiveness is often employed as
a remedial strategy for healing and patching up broken relationships with others. Forgiveness is used in treating anger and depression, guilt, marital dysfunction, sexual abuse, compulsions, terminal illness, etc. (West, 2001). One probable reason for this weak relationship between forgiveness and happiness could be the lack of emphasis, especially in the Indian context on forgiveness as a positive and proactive strategy for well being or happiness for the normal population.

The gender differences found with male adolescent having higher mean score on the dimensions of emotional competence, adequate depth of feeling, adequate expression and control of emotions, ability cope with emotions and encouragement of positive emotions is consistent with social expectations. The male sample has higher means compared to the females on all dimensions except on the encouragement of positive emotions. From a socio-cultural perspective, the male adolescents are expected to be emotionally strong, express and manage emotions adequately, but when it comes to the development and expression of positive emotions of kindness, love, empathy and positive affect women are expected to outdo men.

Though studies have found women to be more forgiving (Worthington, Sandage and Berry, 2000, Miller, Worthington, and McDaniel, 2008 cited in Rijavec, Jurcec and Mijocevic, 2010), overall studies on gender differences in forgiveness have given mixed results and there is no strong evidence for gender differences in forgiveness (Rijavec, Jurcec and Mijocevic, 2010).

Gender differences in happiness were observed among the adolescents in the present study. However other studies on gender differences in happiness have obtained mixed results (Rijavec, Jurcec and Mijocevic, 2010). Some of the researchers have found decline in female happiness scores in the past few decades and increase in the subjective well-being for men (Stevenson, and Wolfers, 2009). Rousseau (2009) found young women to be happier and that their happiness falls when they start working and declines further, while happiness in males increases as they start working and they continue to be happier even after retirement.

Significant differences are not found among adolescents from various socio-economic backgrounds on any of the variables under investigation. One probable reason for this could be attributed to their complete dependence on their parents and significant others for their economic and other basic needs. Moreover parents today strive to fulfill the needs of adolescents even when it is quite hard and difficult to do so. Hence the economic status of parents does not affect adolescent emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness. Though research has shown the relationship between economic status and happiness among adolescent with high self esteem, school attendance and participation in extracurricular activities (Rossarin, et al., 2013), some other studies indicate that childhood economic status and happiness are not related (Hui-Chuan Hsu, 2010).

Limitations of the study
The investigation does not provide a causal relationship between emotional competence, forgiveness and happiness. It only shows the relationship. This study being conducted on a small sample cannot be generalized to a large adolescent population. Though the participants were motivated for the study and ensured of confidentiality and anonymity of responding, the objectivity could have been affected. Socially desirable answers especially to Forgiveness scale could not be completely ruled out. The study has not looked into the various other factors that could have influenced the adolescents’ happiness.

Conclusions
The present empirical investigation established the relationship between adolescent emotional competence and happiness and gender difference among the adolescents on happiness and emotional competence. The study has implications for educationists, counsellors and trainers for including these variables in curriculum and intervention programmes. The gender difference established on the variables under investigation, calls for gender- specific skill training for the enhancing emotional competence and happiness of adolescents. The fact that forgiveness is not related to happiness in the sample draws the attention to introduce and enhance forgiveness as a positive and proactive strategy to
enhance happiness. However further research in this regard to assess the impact of forgiveness intervention as a positive and proactive strategy is necessary.

References


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