



## Gratitude and forgiveness: Convergence and divergence on self-report and informant ratings

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### ABSTRACT

Gratitude and forgiveness are theoretically linked character strengths that tend to be studied in isolation from other strengths. We examined gratitude and forgiveness in the same sample using self and confidant reports to better understand how strengths converge and diverge with personality factors, emotional vulnerabilities, and positive psychological processes. Data suggest that gratitude and forgiveness uniquely relate to personality factors, emotional vulnerabilities, and positive psychological processes with forgiveness evidencing stronger relations than gratitude. Forgiveness also appears to be more robust than gratitude due to the unique effects of forgiveness diminishing correlations between gratitude and other variables. Confidant data demonstrated that strengths were observable by others and related to observer perceptions of well-being. Results are discussed with an emphasis on the benefits of studying character strength profiles.

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### 1. Introduction

Character strengths have captured the interest of scientists in recent years (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, most research tends to examine strengths in isolation from other strengths. This approach increases scientific precision but limits knowledge by failing to acknowledge the presence and influence of other character strengths on human functioning. The purpose of this study was to examine gratitude and forgiveness within the same sample to better understand conceptual links with other personality traits, psychological variables, and well-being.

Conceptual clarity is essential to advance understanding of character strengths. Thus, we briefly consider how researchers conceptualize gratitude and forgiveness. Gratitude has been described as a moral virtue, attitude, emotion, habit, personality trait, and coping response (Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). Perhaps the most common view defines gratitude as “the recognition and appreciation of an altruistic gift” (Emmons, 2004, p. 9). Central to the concept of forgiveness is the idea of a freely chosen, pro-social, motivation in which the desire to seek revenge and avoid contact with a transgressor is overcome and an increase in positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors occurs (Fincham, 2000; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Both definitions highlight the social,

or interpersonal, nature of gratitude and forgiveness and offer an initial conceptual link between these character strengths.

Gratitude and forgiveness are interpersonal strengths that produce well-being through a combination of reflection, positive emotions, and adaptive social behaviors and relationships that facilitate well-being (Fredrickson, 2004; Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009; Watkins, 2004). Empirical data suggests that gratitude and forgiveness are associated with pro-social behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; McCullough, 2000), positive psychological outcomes such as optimistic appraisals of life, positive memory biases, and relationship satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Watkins, Grimm, & Kolts, 2004), physical health benefits (McCarty, Atkinson, Tiller, Rein, & Watkins, 1995; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and well-being (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Toussaint & Friedman, 2008). Gratitude and forgiveness require distinct attributions (Fincham et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 2002) but share a common, fundamental component of empathy (Farrow et al., 2001; Lazarus, 1991; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Thus, gratitude and forgiveness are conceptually linked as positively valenced, pro-social, empathy-based character strengths associated with psychological and physical health.

Gratitude and forgiveness also evidence similar relations with Big Five personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999). Forgiveness tends to be positively correlated with agreeableness and negatively

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correlated with neuroticism (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). A similar profile exists for gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002). More recent work redefining extraversion suggests that it too, may be correlated with gratitude and forgiveness (Ashton, Lee, & Paunonen, 2002; Lucas, Diener, Grob, Suh, & Shao, 2000). We sought to extend prior findings by examining each character strength in relation to the Big Five while controlling for the unique influence of the other character strength.

The unique qualities of gratitude and forgiveness may be most pronounced in how they relate to emotional vulnerabilities and positive psychological processes. In general, empathic emotions tend to increase positive and decrease negative affect (Batson, 1990). Consistent with this theory, grateful people are less likely to respond with anger after being hurt by others (McCullough et al., 2002). Abandoning angry feelings also appears to be fundamental to forgiveness (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Enright, 2001; McCullough, 2000). As with anger, character strengths also show inverse relations with depressive symptoms (Brown, 2003; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). Indirect evidence also suggests that forgiving people may be less lonely. For example, forgiveness creates closeness in romantic relationships (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006) and promotes social connections in general (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005). Thus, character strengths are expected to negatively correlate with emotional vulnerabilities.

In contrast, character strengths are expected to positively correlate with positive psychological processes including empathy, self-compassion, and acceptance. Research with college students suggests that gratitude positively correlates with both cognitive (i.e., perspective taking) and affective (i.e., warm feelings) aspects of empathy (McCullough et al., 2002). Several studies support a similar correlation between forgiveness and empathy (Brown, 2003; Fincham et al., 2002; Macaskill et al., 2002). Yet, warmth and perspective taking are not unique to empathy and are crucial aspects of self-compassion as well. Self-compassion reflects the ability to hold a kind and non-judgmental view of oneself and recognize similarities between oneself and others (Neff, 2003). Experimental results link self-compassion with forgiveness. That is, people asked to purposefully look for similarities between themselves and transgressors were more likely to be forgiving than others who did not do so (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008). No known study has examined self-compassion and gratitude.

Similarly, indirect evidence supports relations between character strengths and acceptance. Acceptance refers to the willingness to openly experience thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and life events. Acceptance allows individuals to experience events fully and respond according to situational demands (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). The ability to embrace negative events while responding with intention and flexibility is an inherent part of forgiveness. Thus, we would expect these constructs to be related. Prior work with college students provides initial support in that people reporting low levels of trait forgiveness reported a greater tendency to engage in avoidance based coping strategies (Maltby, Macaskill, & Gillett, 2007). Other studies suggest that trait vengefulness (or the tendency to be unforgiving) is associated with an increase in maladaptive, avoidance-based relationship behaviors (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998).

### 1.1. Current study

We wished to extend prior findings by investigating conceptually linked character strengths within the same sample. We sought to identify shared and unique features of gratitude and forgiveness by examining correlations between character strengths and personality factors, emotional vulnerabilities, and positive psychological processes. More specifically, we tested whether or not grat-

itude and forgiveness evidenced significantly different correlations with these variables and if correlations between one strength (e.g., gratitude) and a variable would change if the effects of the other strength (e.g., forgiveness) were controlled. In addition, we collected confidant data to learn if gratitude and forgiveness were observable by others. Confidant data is a practical source of information to augment self-reports (Vazire, 2006).

We hypothesized that character strengths would negatively correlate with emotional vulnerabilities and positively correlate with positive psychological processes. Our primary hypothesis was that gratitude and forgiveness would offer unique qualities evidenced by distinct correlations with personality factors, emotions vulnerabilities, and positive psychological processes. We also expected character strengths to be observable by others and correlate positively with confidant perceptions of a person's well-being.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 140 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large, public university. The sample included 113 females (80.7%) and 27 males (19.3%) with ethnicity as follows: 67 (47.9%) Caucasian, 26 (18.6%) Asian/Asian-American, 14 (10.0%) Hispanic, 8 (5.7%) Middle Eastern, 7 (6.5%) African-American, and 15 (10.7%) "Other." Mean age was 21.91 years (SD = 5.74).

### 2.2. Procedure

Methods and procedure were approved by the university institutional review board. Participants received research credit for undergraduate psychology courses. Participants completed a 60 min web-based survey in the research laboratory (Part One). Next, participants left the laboratory with materials (Part Two) to ask a confidant (i.e., "someone who is close to you and who knows how you think and feel") to complete paper and pencil questionnaires. Participants were given envelopes for confidants that contained an instruction sheet, informed consent, and a questionnaire packet. Instruction sheets asked confidants to complete questionnaires according to their perception of the participant. For example, confidants completed a measure of gratitude according to the degree to which they perceived the participant to be thankful or grateful. Confidants were instructed to refrain from sharing responses with the participant. Completed materials were returned to the laboratory using a sealed envelope. Compliance was exceptional: 137 of 140 (97.9%) packets were returned. Our high compliance rate may be explained by several factors including researchers verbalizing the importance of observer data to participants, email prompts for delinquent packets, and the decision to assign full credit only to participants who returned completed confidant packets (partial credit was assigned for missing packets). Credit incentives were described to participants in detail during informed consent.

## 2.3. Measures

### 2.3.1. Demographic information

Participants provided data on age, sex, and ethnicity.

### 2.3.2. Character strengths

The 6-item *Gratitude Questionnaire* (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) measured a general tendency to feel grateful and thankful

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