

Mental Health and Gratitude in a Community with Social Violence

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Abstract

In recent years, Mexico experienced the violence, fear and terror of a drug-war. Juarez, Mexico is a border town where the highest levels of violence were registered during this war. Violence in all its forms, has been related to poor physical and mental health, therefore some of its manifestations are anxiety, phobias, sadness, depression, hostility, paranoid ideation, among other mental disorders. Positive psychology is a branch of psychology that promotes better quality of life and prevention of mental illnesses through the enhancement of positive emotions and values. Studies have shown when people go through an adverse situation, they still experience positive emotions, such as gratitude. It was the goal of the study to understand psychological distress (such as paranoid ideation, depression, hostility among other psychological problems) and its relationship with gratitude. A group of 315 college students answered the SCL-90-R , a measure of psychological problems, and the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6). Significant and negative correlations between each of the SCL-90-R subscales and gratitude were obtained, that is, as gratitude increases, psychological distress decreases. It can be concluded that positive emotions, particularly gratitude, might improve the way people cope in difficult situations.

Keywords: Mental health, gratitude, positive psychology, violence

Introduction

Drug-related violence in Mexico during the past years (2008-2013) was one of the cruelest and bloodiest atrocities lived in this country. The National Victimization and Public Perception Survey of 2011, reported 22,714,967 crimes committed during 2010 (INEGI, 2012). It was reported that 2010 was the bloodiest year in which 15,273 people were killed

(Thomson, 2011). Many killings took place along the international border with the United States (US), as drug gangs battled one another fighting for control of smuggling routes into the US. Juarez City was one of the border towns that registered the highest drug-related violence during these years (National Geographic, 2015).

Given the high incidence of violence in Mexico, particularly in Juarez City, the violent acts became part of the daily routine. People would witness murders during day light in shopping malls, convenience stores, stop lights, and gas stations. Moreover, other crimes such as carjacking, housejacking, extortion, robbery and kidnapping became more frequent events in the community.

Violence has been found to be associated with poor physical health, suicide, mental health problems, somatic symptoms and other medical conditions (Ribeiro, Andreoli, Ferri, Prince, & Mari, 2009). Thus, experiencing violent events has negative consequences in mental health for those who directly or vicariously witnessed the violence (Gurrola et al., 2014). Some of the psychological consequences of living in a violent environment are anxiety, that produces physical and psychological damage; phobias, sadness, depression, dissociation, anger, hostility, paranoid ideation, among other disorders (Gurrola et al., 2014).

Positive psychology is a branch of psychology that conceptualizes the human species in a constructive view, and promotes quality of life and prevention of mental illnesses through the enhancement of human positive qualities (Poseck, 2006). Many confuse positive psychology with a spiritual philosophy of self-help, however positive psychology is deeply rooted in the scientific method (Poseck, 2006). Moreover, positive psychology studies how gratitude, resilience, hope and other positive characteristics related to personal growth, prepare the individual to face and thrive though adversities (Poseck, 2006).

Previous investigations have found that, during stressful and difficult periods of time, in the middle of sadness and anxiety, there are positive emotions that emerge together with these negative emotions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). One of those positive emotions is gratefulness, which had been considered one of the most unstudied emotions (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007). Gratitude is conceptualized as an affect, a behavior, or a personality trait (Wood, Joseph, & Linley, 2007). Also, it is an emotion that involves not only interpersonal appreciation of other people's aid, but one's abilities when working independently or in an environment in which such successful work was possible (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010).

In a study, positive emotions were evaluated after September 11th attacks where terrorists hijacked airplanes and crashed into twin World Trade

Center towers in New York City, US. After the attack, people had experienced anxiety, uncertainty, sadness and terror, but they also reported feeling grateful to be alive or to know their loved ones were safe (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). The authors concluded that positive emotions function as key ingredients in coping and thriving through hard times (Fredrickson et al., 2003).

Residents from Juarez City experienced high levels of anxiety and psychological distress during the turmoil of the drug-war for many years. Thus, it was the aim of the study to understand the relationship between these negative psychological symptoms and positive emotions, particularly gratitude.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 315 college students from Juarez City, Mexico participated in the study. From the sample 222 were females and 93 were males. The mean age of the participants was 23.05 years old (SD = 0.59). In a scale from 1 to 10, the school grades ranged from 6.5 to 9.9, the grade average was 8.9. Fifty-three percent of the participants reported they worked, 86% were single, 13% were married or living with a partner.

Instruments

Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R). It is a self-report questionnaire for the assessment of psychological problems and psychological distress (Derogatis & Savitz, 1999). The test contains nine dimensions that measure somatization, obsessive compulsive, depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. The person is asked to rate the severity of their experiences with 90 symptoms over the past week on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 ('not at all') to 4 ('extremely'). The administration time is about 15 minutes.

Gratitude Questionnaire – Six Item Form (GQ-6). It is a self-report measure containing 6 items with a 7-point scale ranging from 1('totally disagree') to 7 ('totally agree'). Higher total scores reflect higher gratitude. It is an unidimensional measure with good psychometric properties (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

Results

The Person correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between each of the nine dimensions of the SCL-90-R and the gratitude total score. Table 1 shows the correlation coefficients between each of the psychological subscale and gratitude.

Table 1. Correlations between SCL-90-R subscales and gratitude

Subscale	Pearson Coefficient
Somatization	-.18 **
Obsessive compulsive	-.23 **
Depression	-.29 **
Anxiety	-.20 **
Phobic anxiety	-.19 **
Hostility	-.15 *
Interpersonal sensitivity	-.24 **
Paranoid ideation	-.25 **
Psychoticism	-.25 **

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to analyze the relationship between gratitude and psychological distress in a sample of college students from Juarez City, Mexico. From the nine subscales that composed the SCL-90-R, all were significant and negatively correlated with gratitude. This means that as gratitude increases, each of the psychological symptoms, represented in each of the SCL-90-R subscales, decreases. The size of the correlation coefficients ranged from small to moderate. The association between gratitude and the subscale of depression had the highest correlation coefficient (moderate size association), and the association between gratitude and the subscale of hostility had the lowest correlation coefficient (small size association).

These results relate to those reported by Fredrickson and colleagues (2003), even when people from the terrorist attacks had experienced sadness, fear, anxiety and anger, they also reported being grateful for being safe and for their loved ones. Fredrickson and colleagues proposed that positive emotions are key elements in superior coping and thriving through adversity.

Positive emotions produce a range of personal resources, such as resilience, optimism, gratitude, and creativity (Fredrickson et al., 2003). These positive emotions can definitely improve the way people cope in a difficult situation. Furthermore, research supports the idea that personal strengths, such as gratitude, perseverance, optimism, hope, among others, act as buffer mechanisms against mental illness (Poseck, 2006). Thus, it is highly possible that people from Juarez City, have inadvertently built these psychological resources as a way to deal with the psychological distress that violent and hostile environment produce.

It has been shown how negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety, produce physiological changes such as increased heart rate, vasoconstriction,

and blood pressure. A study concluded that experiencing positive emotions, such as gratefulness, can bring down the cardiovascular effects of the negative emotions (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). This rationale could relate to the significant moderate and negative correlation between depression and gratitude in this sample.

The present study had some limitations. The first limitation was that causality cannot be inferred. Also, this study was administered only in a student sample. For future studies, the investigation should be replicated in the general population to see the association between the two constructs. Moreover, for future studies, under the positive psychology perspective, it may be interesting to continue exploring how other positive emotions, such as resilience and hope, function as buffer mechanisms among Juarez City residents.

In conclusion, there are small to moderate associations between gratitude and symptoms of psychological distress in a sample of college students from Juarez City. The significant associations may be indicative of coping mechanisms students use to deal with the psychological damage of a drug-war.

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