
9-23-2020

An Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry into Experience, Expression, and Effect of Gratitude among Males and Females

Naved Iqbal

Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, niqbal@jmi.ac.in

Supriya Srivastava

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, SUPRIYASRI2008@GMAIL.COM

Imtiyaz Ahmad Dar

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, psyimtiyaz@gmail.com

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Recommended APA Citation

Iqbal, N., Srivastava, S., & Dar, I. A. (2020). An Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry into Experience, Expression, and Effect of Gratitude among Males and Females. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(9), 3425-3439. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4406>

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Abstract

Gratitude is a universal phenomenon that is experienced and expressed differently by individuals. The differences in experience and expression of gratitude are based on a number of factors, important among them is gender. There are very few studies that have explored gender differences using quantitative methods in gratitude interventions. However, this phenomenon can best be understood by employing qualitative methods like Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as it is concerned with trying to understand any phenomenon, from the participant's point of view. There is a paucity of research in this area. Therefore, we tried to explore experience, expression, and effects of gratitude among males and females using IPA. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was administered on 20 students (10 males and 10 females) and it was subjected to IPA. Three themes that emerged from the analysis were Experience of gratitude, Expression of gratitude and Effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude. These themes were further classified under several subthemes. Though there were similarities between males and females for many subthemes but there were some differences also. Feeling grateful towards strangers and sharing grateful experiences with others were subthemes that emerged only in female participants. Using grateful experiences as a coping strategy was a subtheme that emerged dominantly among male participants. The findings of the present study are explained with the help of available literature.

Keywords

Gratitude, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Gender Difference

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our special thanks of gratitude to the participants for taking part in the current study.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Inquiry into Experience, Expression, and Effect of Gratitude among Males and Females

Naved Iqbal, Supriya Srivastava, and Imtiyaz Ahmad Dar
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Gratitude is a universal phenomenon that is experienced and expressed differently by individuals. The differences in experience and expression of gratitude are based on a number of factors, important among them is gender. There are very few studies that have explored gender differences using quantitative methods in gratitude interventions. However, this phenomenon can best be understood by employing qualitative methods like Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as it is concerned with trying to understand any phenomenon, from the participant's point of view. There is a paucity of research in this area. Therefore, we tried to explore experience, expression, and effects of gratitude among males and females using IPA. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was administered on 20 students (10 males and 10 females) and it was subjected to IPA. Three themes that emerged from the analysis were Experience of gratitude, Expression of gratitude and Effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude. These themes were further classified under several subthemes. Though there were similarities between males and females for many subthemes but there were some differences also. Feeling grateful towards strangers and sharing grateful experiences with others were subthemes that emerged only in female participants. Using grateful experiences as a coping strategy was a subtheme that emerged dominantly among male participants. The findings of the present study are explained with the help of available literature. Keywords: Gratitude, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Gender Difference

Introduction

Though meaning may differ as per contexts, gratitude can be defined as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself; a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). It is a basic agent for supportive social relationships that are essential to human thriving; a feeling that people experience when they receive a gift or benefit from another person. Gratitude can also be defined as an attitude of appreciating life as a gift and a moral affect because it results from and stimulates behaviour that is motivated by a concern for another people's wellbeing (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001).

As an emotional state, gratitude occurs after people receive aids that are perceived as costly, valuable, and altruistic (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Gratitude as an emotion serves to a social benefactor as a moral barometer as it increases the feeling of wellbeing of the benefactor, who, the increased chances would say, will respond benevolently in the future. Thus, gratitude increases reciprocity motivation, distinct from that of indebtedness and inequity and is considered a pleasant emotion linked to the psychological states (McCullough et al., 2001). Thus, gratitude as a moral emotion motivates us to extend kindness.

Taking this as the basis, other researchers initially conceptualized gratitude as an emotion directed towards appreciating the help received from other people (c.f. McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). However, later studies revealed that gratitude is evoked despite any direct/ indirect help received from other people. For example, in a study conducted by Emmons and McCullough (2003) which required participants to maintain daily lists of events for which they were grateful, participants stated several sources they were grateful for which did not appear to be directed towards a benefactor, events such as “waking up in the morning.” Several experimental researchers support the view that gratitude is more than mere interpersonal appreciation for aids received from other people (Graham & Barker, 1990; Veisson, 1999; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979).

A wider conceptualization of gratitude as a trait views gratitude as a part of life orientation towards noticing and appreciating positive in the world (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). People high in grateful dispositions also show facets of intensity, frequency, span and density (McCullough et al., 2001). These people feel gratitude with higher intensity more frequently, for more number of life circumstances at any given moment and are more likely to attribute successful outcomes to a wider variety of sources. These facets as their basis have three basic components, or as Watkins (2009) describe the “three pillars of gratitude.” These components refer to the attitude of people high in the disposition of gratitude. The first component is the sense of abundance that makes people feel that life has treated them well. Next, people tend to appreciate simple pleasures that make them feel more grateful for what life has to offer them. Finally, they recognize the importance of appreciating other’s contributions in their life and the importance to express their appreciation. These three pillars hold strong the facets of intensity, frequency, span and density in people with high gratitude disposition. People with a grateful disposition tend to feel and experience gratitude more frequently, more intensely, toward more people, and more things in their life at any given moment (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002).

Some researchers state that there is a relationship between cognitive tendencies and trait and state levels of emotions. There has been a considerable amount of research to explain these relationships. For example, the early work to study how and why the state and trait levels of gratitude interact were conducted by Wood, Maltby et al. (2008). McCullough’s et al. (2001) review on gratitude showed that emotional gratitude can act to draw attention to aid received and encourage the reciprocation of aid.

Venerated as a virtue, Gratitude has been an integral part of virtually all cultures and religions (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), which makes the history of the practice of gratitude illuminating. Though there are differences in the way gratitude is expressed through different cultures, the gratitude expression seemed to have been encouraged through and since recorded civilizations (Visser, 2009). As can be seen across most cultures, gratitude is evoked by both external and internal factors and towards specific people or to nature, equally.

Another component of emotions is the action tendencies attached to specific emotions (Fredrickson, 1998). As Emmons (2007) states, gratitude is not only a response to kindness received, but is also a motivator of future benevolent actions on the part of the recipient. In general, the action tendencies of gratitude are pro-social. Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts (2006) conducted a study that showed a positive correlation between gratitude and several action tendencies, thus, supporting the view of Fredrickson. The cognitive process in feeling of gratitude occurs in two stages of information processing: affirmation of good things in one’s life and the recognition that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside of self (Lomas, Froh, Emmons, Mishra, & Bono, 2014). The importance of cognitive processes is emphasized in determining gratitude and rightly so. It is the perception and interpretation of the benefit by the beneficiary that ensue gratitude. This means that if the person does not realize the benefit received, s/he will not feel gratitude even when they have been bestowed upon with

gifts whereas if the person realizes the good that has been on his/her side even in an adverse situation, the feeling of gratitude ensues. Though gratitude has been linked to wellbeing no empirical work was done until Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted one of the earliest studies examining the effectiveness of a gratitude intervention on physical, psychological and subjective well-being using the gratitude list exercise. Since then several interventions have been developed to enhance the experience of gratitude which in turn has shown to increase the wellbeing of individuals. (Chen & Kee, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008).

Some research suggests that females may gain more out of gratitude than males (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009), and thus women may gain more from gratitude interventions. On the other hand, a study by Watkins, Uher, Pichinevskiy, Sparrow, Jensen, and Pereira, (2012) found that although women enjoyed the gratitude intervention more than men (although non-significantly), men gained more from the treatment.

There are very few studies that have tried to explore how gratitude is experienced and expressed by males and females and how they benefit from gratitude. Because studies in the area of gender differences in gratitude are limited and have conflicting findings. Moreover, these studies have not tried to explore this by using qualitative methods. Thus gender differences in gratitude remain to be an area that needs to be investigated further using qualitative methods. Phenomenon like these can be best understood by using qualitative methods like IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) as it is concerned with trying to understand any phenomenon, from the participant's point of view. There is a paucity of research in this area. Considering the above points, the present research tried to explore experience, expression and effect of gratitude among males and females by employing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Objectives

The present study had the following objectives:

- I. To understand how and to whom gratitude is experienced and expressed by males and females.
- II. To explore the effects that experience and expression of gratitude have on the participants.

Research Questions

The present study attempted to answer the following questions

- i. For whom gratitude was experienced by males and females?
- ii. In what way, gratitude expressed for others by males and females?
- iii. What effects the experience and expression of gratitude has on the participants?

Background of the Study

The purpose of this study was purely academic, and we have not received any financial assistance from anywhere for the same. The authors of the presents study became deeply interested in understanding and exploring this topic, particularly when the second author under the supervision of the first author conducted a research on gratitude intervention, where it was found, that despites some similarities, male and female participants also showed differences in how they experienced and expressed gratitude. To understand the nuances of the similarities

and differences of this phenomenon that would help incorporate new insights into future gratitude intervention studies, the present study based on a qualitative approach was planned.

Method

Participants: Table 1 lists the detail of participants. The total number of participants in the present study were 20 (10 males and 10 females). All participants were students of Jamia Millia Islamia (A Central University), New Delhi and were pursuing their Master's degree. The recruitment of the participants was purposive. Participant's age ranged from 21-23years, with a mean age of 22.2 years. Out of 20 participants, 5 males and 3 females were Muslim and 7 females and 5 males were Hindu. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The study followed ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). There were no apparent risks involved and the participation of individuals was purely voluntary. Participants were well informed of the purpose and background of the study and information consent was obtained from them. All the participants were assured of confidentiality and were allowed to withdraw their participation from the study at any time. Participants received no compensation for taking part in this study.

Table 1. Details of participants

Serial No.	Name(pseudo)	Age	Gender	Religion
(1)	Omar	22	Male	Muslim
(2)	Ishaan	21	Male	Hindu
(3)	Irfaan	23	Male	Muslim
(4)	Ayaan	23	Male	Muslim
(5)	Yaasir	23	Male	Muslim
(6)	Vivek	23	Male	Hindu
(7)	Ankur	21	Male	Hindu
(8)	Imraan	22	Male	Hindu
(9)	Aatish	22	Male	Muslim
(10)	Rajat	21	Male	Hindu
(11)	Priya	22	Female	Hindu
(12)	Jaya	22	Female	Hindu
(13)	Kirti	23	Female	Hindu
(14)	Divya	23	Female	Hindu
(15)	Sumaiya	22	Female	Muslim
(16)	Saba	23	Female	Muslim
(17)	Shruti	23	Female	Hindu
(18)	Aafreen	22	Female	Hindu
(19)	Komal	22	Female	Hindu
(20)	Zeba	21	Female	Muslim

Research Design

The present study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Smith and Osborn (2008, 2015) argued that IPA is the most effective form of qualitative analysis to explore topics that are vague, nuanced, novel and emotionally laden; the topic of gratitude is both ambiguous and complex. IPA is

particularly useful given its commitment to investigating, identifying, explaining and situating the participants' sense making of their experiences. It is also said to be fundamentally idiographic, in that it is committed to the detailed analysis of a phenomenon under investigation. It takes great care of each case, offering detailed and nuanced analysis, valuing each case in its own merits before moving to the general cross-case analysis for convergence and divergence between cases. (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus in order to have an in-depth understanding of the similarities and differences between males and females in terms of their experience and expression of gratitude, IPA is a well suited technique for the purpose of present research.

Procedure

For data collection, a semi-structured interview schedule based on IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2009) was prepared by the second author under the supervision of the first author. The interview schedule focuses on the experience and expression of gratitude and its effect on the participants. Here are two sample questions from the schedule: (1) How do you express the feeling of gratitude to others? (2) What changes does the experience and expression of gratitude brings in you? Questions were open-ended and the schedule was used very flexibly in the interview. The interviews were audio-taped and were transcribed verbatim. After this, themes and sub-themes were identified using the guidelines of IPA as suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009).

The analysis of the transcript started with a thorough reading so that the researchers get a feel of the story, followed by several systematic readings, taking notes of thoughts, keywords, points of view and attitudes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The side comments were later used by the researchers to identify possible themes and subthemes, which were later compared to the text to make sure the sense of the words, were kept. After a final reading of the transcript in parallel with the emerged themes, these were revised, recombined and clustered to present a clear image of the participant's story. The table of themes and subthemes were created by the two authors comparing notes and auditing each other's work and were revised by the first author (Smith et al., 2009).

Results

From the analysis of the interview transcript, three themes emerged: (1) Experience of gratitude having subthemes as (a) Towards close relations (b) Towards God or higher power and (c) Towards strangers; (2) Expression of gratitude having subthemes as (a) Behavioural expression (b) Verbal expression (c) Written expression and (d) Sharing grateful experiences with others (3) Effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude having subthemes as (a) Increased wellbeing (b) Enhanced relationship (c) Increased motivation and (d) Enhanced coping ability. What follows is a detailed analytic description of each theme, supported by quotes from the transcript.

1. Experience of gratitude

The first theme identified in the present analysis was the experience of gratitude. It was further categorized under subthemes of experience towards close relations, experience towards God or higher power, and experience towards strangers. Though participants were thankful for materialistic things like good food, clothes, house, and other aspects like their health, beauty etc, but they attributed this grateful feeling either to their parents, family or towards God.

Both genders did not differ in terms of frequency and intensity of gratitude experience as both gender reported of experiencing gratitude daily or frequently. The major differences were for participants who frequently accounted about their spiritual and religious beliefs. These participants were able to experience and describe their grateful feelings more profoundly as compared to other participants. All subthemes were reported equally by both genders except for the subtheme experience towards strangers, as this subtheme was reported by female participants.

1.1 Towards close relations - This subtheme was reported by all participants. Participants perceived the self-sacrificing nature and selflessness of parents in upbringing them as a major reason for experiencing gratitude towards them. This was evident in most participants' response, as we can see in the experience of our participant Omar:

A sense of gratitude comes when you realize how much your parents have been doing. They are demolishing themselves, actually just to build you. (Omar)

They all shared experiences of times when they received help from either their friends, siblings, or someone close to them and for which they had grateful feelings towards them.

When I was living in a hostel, I never missed my family because I had my friends. They have always stood by me in every situation. There was a time when I felt so lost and shattered after a relationship failure, but my friends supported me a lot and I was able to recover from that. (Ayaan)

Most participants reported of not experiencing gratitude when they perceived the nature of help as selfish and based on some expectations, even if it was for their parents, and in close relationships.

Though I know that they have done a lot for me but, it's not something that I am thankful or grateful for. Because, they haven't done anything different or extraordinary, what they have done is something that anyone would have done. (Aatish)

All participants reported experiencing high levels of gratitude when they perceived the nature of help as selfless or self-sacrificing, and the cost of the gift received was high for the giver.

For me I feel grateful only when I perceive that the other person has gone out of his way to help me and without any expectations, because if the person is in a condition to help me and he does not have to go out of way to do so then it is more of a give and take thing and for that help I do not feel grateful, because I feel that it's a help and there is an expectation from his side that he will also get help from me in future, and I will surely return his help in some way. So it is more a mutual give and take thing rather selfless behaviour or help. (Rajat)

1.2 Towards God or higher power: This was also one of the most expressed subthemes, by all participants. No gender difference was found for this subtheme. Participants' Priya, Ishaan, Kirti, Sumaiya, Ankur, Komal, and Saba who frequently stressed upon their religious beliefs and their spirituality were able to describe their grateful experiences in a vivid manner, and their repertoire of experience was broad as compared to other participants.

I have experienced that help arrives for me whenever it's needed. There is certainly a power, name it God or nature, the universe or some type of natural force that I feel is always present around me, and whenever I am lost or in a situation, that power guides me and helps me in some form and I always feel grateful for this. (Ankur)

Yes I feel grateful for the natural things like flowers, trees, rivers, etc, but because I am a religious person I would attribute it to God. Nature is a mirror of God that is what we have been taught. (Ishaan)

1.3 Towards strangers: This subtheme was reported by five female participants and no male participant reported of such experience. There are certain relationships in which people have expectations of getting helped and supported, for example from their family members and friends, etc. But when this help was received from a stranger, a high sense of gratitude was experienced by the participants. This was because, the help and support received was perceived as unexpected and unconditional. Kirti described it as a rare and powerful experience of gratitude.

There was an elderly person who was sitting beside me, and it looked like as if he was not financially very sound, and he only had 20 rupees in his hands and that's all he had because he was not having any wallet or something, but he paid for his ticket and he paid for mine as well. Truly this was a time where I felt so much of gratitude, and these kinds of experiences are very rare. (Kirti)

Similar experiences were shared by Saba, Komal, Sumaiya, and Priya:

I was sitting on a platform of the railway station, my train got cancelled due to heavy fog and I didn't know what to do. I needed to reach home the next day, but I was not aware of how to take general class tickets and which train, as train routes got diverted due to fog. I was completely lost, but suddenly something unexpected happened, a stranger approached me and asked about my problem. He stood in the queue got me the tickets, food and got me seated on the train. I even forgot to ask his name as I was so lost. And now whenever I remember that night I feel so grateful for that person, whom I couldn't even thank properly. This is an experience that I can never forget. (Priya)

2. Expressions of gratitude

The second theme identified in the present investigation was the expression of gratitude. It was further categorized under subthemes; behavioural expression, verbal expression, written expression, and sharing grateful experiences with others. Females expressed their gratitude more frequently to others as compared to males. All participants reported of expressing gratitude towards God or higher power. Sharing their grateful experiences with others as a way to express their gratitude was a distinct pattern that was reported only by females.

2.1 Behavioural expressions: All participants shared of expressing their gratitude in some form of behavioural expression or actions like helping the person towards whom they felt grateful, by taking them on a trip or a dinner and by making them feel special etc. As compared to males, females had a broader range of behavioural expressions and they were more creative in their ways of expression.

I prefer behavioural expressions like a hug or a kiss or something like that. I think that leaves more impact. (Sumaiya)

For Jaya accepting parents will and trying to obey their orders without questioning it, is also a way to express gratitude towards them.

Yes, it is also a way of expressing gratitude towards parents, by doing things that they had not expected from me. Like going out of the way and doing things they want me to do, or even when I want to say something to them I don't say it. I just go with the flow and whatever my parents want from me I accept it and I do it. (Jaya)

Expressing it to parents is difficult, but what I usually do is that I simply go and hug them. (Kirti)

It was reported by all participants that expressing grateful feelings towards God or higher power was more frequent and intense as compared to expressing their gratitude to other people like their parents, family members or friends and there was no gender difference for this. One of the participants Divya expresses her gratitude towards God by crying. According to her, this is the most expressive form which she uses to express her gratitude mostly towards God:

The most expressive form that comes to mind is that I cry a lot. I cry a lot because I don't believe that I even deserve that blessing. I feel so grateful for the bounty that I am receiving from the almighty, and this is the only way that I can express my feelings towards him. (Divya)

Similar experiences were shared by Priya, Kirti, and Sumaiya where they expressed their gratitude towards God by crying.

Though the behavioural expression was the most common form of expression, the repertoire of female participant's behavioural expression was broader as compared to males, due to their use of gestures like hugs, kisses, crying etc, which were not reported by male participants.

2.2 Verbal expressions: This form of expression was reported by four males and eight females. Verbal expressions included face to face expression or via phone. Male participants as compared to females felt less comfortable expressing gratitude verbally.

It would be a very funny and awkward thing to express my gratitude to my parents. I mean I cannot tell them that I am grateful for what you have done or I can't even give them a card or letter as I have never done this and if I do so they may feel odd. (Ayaan)

Similar views were expressed by Rajat and Aatish and Omar and Vivek. As per some participants expressing gratitude directly may lessen the intensity of the experience as it is something to be felt and not to be returned. This was especially mentioned by males.

Verbal expression of gratitude was mostly used towards friends. For Kirti, expressing gratitude directly towards her friends was the most comfortable way:

I can say it to my friends very easily, that I am grateful to you, that you came into my life, thank you for your support, thank you for being there. (Kirti)

Similar thoughts were shared by Ishaan, Yaasir, Divya and some other participants. Some participants felt that in verbal expression there are chances of over expression, which can be perceived as intentional or as a false expression. For Sumaiya, expressing gratitude verbally towards someone should not be very frequent and in an exaggerated manner:

When I do it, I do it with my whole heart. I don't do it just to pretend or to show that I am being grateful. (Sumaiya)

2.3 Written expressions: Out of twenty participants, five males and nine females preferred the written expressions of gratitude. Written expressions included writing a note or letter to the person or by sending messages on mobile, email and social networking sites. Females were more creative when it came to written expressions and used creative means of sending messages by using coloured notes, chits, and pictures, etc.

For my friends I have done a lot, like sending them cards, pictures then we have messages, long messages with emotional overloading (smilingly) and everything. (Kirti)

Many participants found it easy to use the written mode of expression for expressing gratitude towards their friends, but they found it difficult to use this method for expressing gratitude towards their parents and others. This was reported mostly by male participants:

I find it difficult to express because if I do such type of things it would get awkward. I have never done it before. It will be very funny if I give a card or letter to my mother. (Ayaan)

2.4 Sharing grateful experiences with others: six of the ten female participants expressed their gratitude by sharing their experiences with others, rather than expressing it directly to the person towards whom they felt it. Using this way to express their gratitude was not reported by any of the male participants. This form of expression was mostly in the cases where they could either not meet the person as the person was a stranger, or because the person was not very close to them.

There are certain times when I am just talking to someone my friend or someone and I remember that incident and I feel like sharing that incident with people whom I am closed to. So that is one way I express gratitude to that person indirectly you can say. (Priya)

There was a stranger who helped me during a bus journey but, I could not thank him directly, because we didn't meet after that incident. But I have shared this incident with you today, so it's kind of a gratitude that I have expressed towards him. (Saba)

3. Effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude

The third theme identified in the present paper was the effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude. This theme was further categorized into four sub-themes of increased

well-being, enhanced relationship, increased motivation and enhanced coping ability. Increased wellbeing was a subtheme that emerged in all participants' responses. The repertoire of males was more as compared to females for this particular theme. Enhanced coping ability was a sub-theme that emerged dominantly among males. The repertoire of males was more as compared to females for this theme.

3.1 Increased well being: This was the most common effect of experiencing and expressing gratitude which was reported by all participants and no gender difference was found for this sub- theme. Participants felt an increase in overall well-being. It not just increased their happiness, but also of the person towards whom they expressed it. For Sumaiya experiencing gratitude makes her feel more positive and happy:

*I feel very good that I have so many good things in my life, and I am blessed.
(Sumaiya)*

Similar feelings were shared by other participants where they felt more satisfied and complete by experiencing and expressing feelings of gratitude.

3.2 Enhanced relationships: Experience and expression of gratitude resulted in an enhanced relationship for five male and seven female participants. They started appreciating and recognizing more positively their relationship with their parents, siblings, friends, etc as a result of these experiences.

All those small things that they did for me, which now I do on my own, whenever I think about it I feel more grateful for them. (Saba)

*It makes me feel happy realizing that I have such special people in my life.
(Ayaan)*

3.3 Increased motivation: After experiencing and expressing gratitude, four male and five female participants reported an overall increase in motivation. They felt more appreciative of the good things in their life and felt motivated to enhance them.

It reinforces the feeling of gratitude in me. It makes me appreciate more about the things that I am feeling gratitude for. For example, if someone taught me how to speak well, so after expressing that gratitude I would be more appreciative of that help and try to apply it more in my behaviour. (Ishaan)

For Kirti it is a source of inspiration that motivates her to become like the person towards whom she feels grateful:

I aspire to be like them or, to get a part of them in myself. (Kirti)

3.4 Enhanced coping ability: With some participants, experience and expression of gratitude helped them to deal with difficult situations. This Pattern commonly appeared among males, as it was reported by six male and one female participant. According to Ishaan, it helps him appreciate the good in his life even when situations are not favourable:

I keep thinking of the good things, and they help me go through the bad things also. Bad times are not permanent and you have to have those memories to face that time. (Ishaan)

For Omar, the grateful feeling that he experienced towards his parents helped him to overcome his major anxiety.

There were times when I was going through major anxiety, and it took two years away from me academically. My parents gave me everything in those two years, they almost spend their life savings on me and they didn't even complain about it. At that time I realized how much they love me and because of them I was able to come out of it. (Omar)

Similar experiences were shared by Ankur, Aatish, Rajat, and Irfaan.

Discussion

In this study we aimed to understand how gratitude is experienced and expressed by males and females, and how they get affected by these experiences. From the present investigation, three major themes were identified which were further classified under several sub-themes.

All participants reported experiencing high levels of gratitude when they perceived the nature of help as selfless or self-sacrificing, and the cost of the gift was high for the giver. Similar findings were obtained by Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, and Kolts, (2006), where the subjects reported that they would experience less gratitude when a benefactor's giving was associated with expectations of a return favour. In another study it was found that the more a favour cost a giver, the more the receiver experienced gratitude (e.g., Algoe, Gable, & Maisel 2008).

Several studies have reliably found that women report more trait and state gratitude than men (e.g., Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009; Pichinevskiy & Watkins, 2011; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). In present analysis also we found women reporting a broader range of grateful experience and expression. There was a distinct finding for the sub theme feeling grateful towards strangers, as it was reported only by female participants. Surprisingly such experiences were not shared by any of the male participants. Past studies suggest that women are more aware of their emotions and report more complex emotional experiences as compared to men (Barrett, Lane, Sechrest, & Schwartz, 2000; Ciarrochi, Hynes, & Crittenden, 2005). This could be a possible reason for female participants to more vividly remember and relate their experiences with feelings of gratitude.

Gratitude towards God or higher power as a subtheme was reported by all participants. They felt comfortable in expressing their gratitude towards God or a higher power, as there was no fear of over-expression or getting judged by others. Participants Priya, Ishaan, Ankur, Kirti, Sumaiya, and Saba who stressed upon the role of their spiritual and religious beliefs in their experiences and placed special importance towards God, reported of experiencing gratitude more frequently as compared to others, also their range of overall grateful experience and expression was broader.

Past studies have similarly found that Grateful individuals feel nearer to God (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, Xiong, & Kolts, 2008). In other studies, grateful people scored higher on measures of spiritual transcendence (Diessner & Lewis, 2007; McCullough et al., 2002; McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons, 2004) and intrinsic religiosity

(McCullough et al., 2004; Tsang, Schulwitz, & Carlisle, 2012; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003).

The second theme identified in the present analysis was the expression of gratitude. This theme had four subthemes which are written expression, verbal expressions, behavioural expressions and sharing with others. There were some major differences found between males and females for this particular theme.

The Ways of expressing gratitude was limited for males as compared to females. They preferred behavioural expressions like taking the person to a restaurant, or for outings, trying to help them in every possible way, and giving them gifts. Apart from these methods female participants also mentioned using hugs, kisses, etc, as ways to express gratitude, while males did not report using these ways for expressing their gratitude.

It was interesting to note that the sub-theme “sharing grateful experiences with others” appeared only in females as a way of expressing gratitude. This method of expression was used mostly for expressing gratitude towards strangers; hence this could be one of the reasons that this subtheme emerged only in females.

Past studies have found that on average, women report a greater willingness to express their emotions openly, and show stronger tendencies to regulate them in order to adapt to the changing social circumstances as compared to men (Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 1998). There is also some evidence that women are more likely to show grateful facial expressions following favour (Ventimiglia, 1982).

Studies suggest that men are not born less emotionally expressive than women, but in fact, the teaching and internalization of socially proscribed gender norms influence the experience, expression, and regulation of specific emotions (Brody, 1997, 1999; Levant & Kopecky, 1995).

This could be attributed to cultural norms as it depends on the upbringing of individuals, based on the family, region, and country, etc where they live.

The influence of family upbringing and cultural values in the way participants expressed gratitude was apparent in all the participants’ responses. They placed special importance on the role of their family specifically parents in cultivating gratitude. For participants Jaya, Yasir, Aatish, their way of expressing gratitude towards their parents was by accepting their demands and acting as per their will. A possible explanation for this could be the role of upbringing and family values in expression of gratitude. Most participants preferred behavioural expressions as a way to express their gratitude, and this was especially in context while expressing gratitude towards their parents, family members, and other elders. Direct methods for expressing gratitude like verbal expression were mostly used for friends and it was reported more by females.

Under the third theme effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude four subthemes were identified which were increased well-being, enhanced relationship, increased motivation and enhanced coping ability. It has been demonstrated by several studies that gratitude results in increased wellbeing of individuals (Chen & Kee, 2008; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2008). Algoe and Haidt’s (2009) found that reflecting upon the good another had done for them elevated the moods of participants. Gratitude was found to be a powerful emotion for coping with the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).

In the present study “enhanced coping ability” a sub-theme of “effects of experiencing and expressing gratitude,” emerged mostly among male participants. The memories of their grateful experiences helped them in coping with difficult situations and challenges in their life. Female participants focused more on grateful feelings as a positive force in enhancing their happiness and overall wellbeing rather than enhancing their coping ability.

Watkins et al. (2012) found that women enjoyed gratitude intervention more than men, but at 5 weeks follow-up men gained significantly more from the treatment than women. Our findings suggest that though both genders experience gratitude, the major difference is in their frequency and ways of expressing gratitude. Male participants expressed their grateful feelings less as compared to females. There is a possibility that by expressing it more often males can recognize their blessings and hence gain more benefit from it.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that males and females differ in some ways they experience and express gratitude. Women as compared to men have a wider range of experiencing and expressing their grateful feelings. Several factors that explain these differences are women's tendencies to experience gratitude towards strangers, openly express their grateful feelings, sharing their grateful experiences with others, and utilizing a broader range of gestures and creative ways to express it. It is therefore suggested that gratitude intervention studies should take gender differences into consideration so that benefit received by respective participants would be appropriately evaluated.

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Author Note

Naved Iqbal is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India. Please direct correspondence to niqbal@jmi.ac.in.

Supriya Srivastava is a Research Scholar in the Department of Psychology at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India. Please direct correspondence to supriyasri2008@gmail.com.

Imtiyaz Ahmad Dar is a Research Scholar in the Department of Psychology at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India, Please direct correspondence to psyimtiyaz@gmail.com.

Acknowledgements: We would like to express our special thanks of gratitude to the participants for taking part in the current study.

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Article Citation

Iqbal, N., Srivastava, S., & Dar, I. A. (2020). An interpretative phenomenological inquiry into experience, expression, and effect of gratitude among males and females. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(9), 3425-3439. <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss9/16>
