

The Positive Psychology of Christian Repentance: An Analysis of Hope, Gratitude, and Forgiveness

Alex Forbis

University of Texas at Austin

Polymathic Scholars Program, Faculty Mentor: Dr. Wendy Domjan

Research Question

In what ways does Christian repentance bring about psychological benefits?

Repentance

- **Definition:** Repentance was defined as “a complete change in mind or thinking,” with the Christian connotation of “a radical turning away from sin.”
- Repentance was found to be an active, ongoing process in the daily life of a Christian. One that involved perpetually confronting and changing thoughts and behaviors of oneself that were contrary to the teachings of what the Bible showed about the true character and intentions for humans as God’s creations.

Hope

- **Definition:** Hope was defined from Snyder (2002), where hope was “the perceived ability to produce pathways to achieve desired goals and to motivate oneself to use those pathways.”
- These concepts of hope theory, of “agency” and “pathways,” were shown to exist in various ways in the process of Christian repentance. The desire to overcome sin and life obstacles was shown to be motivated by many beliefs, such as the sacrifice and accomplishment of Jesus on humanity’s behalf. While the ability to achieve those goals was more than feasible due to the limitless power and influence believed to be held by God. This process of maintaining hopeful thoughts and motivations via repentance was shown to emulate hope theory and thus potentially reap its benefits.
- **Benefits:** Those exhibiting high hope showed increased positive affect, increased long-term psychological adjustment, and higher willingness and capacity to form new strategies and ideas.

Forgiveness

- **Definition:** Forgiveness was defined by Thompson et al. (2005) as “the framing of a perceived transgression such that one’s responses to the...[transgressions] are transformed from negative to neutral or positive.”
- The command to extend genuine forgiveness is explicit in the Bible, though shown to be a difficult call to follow. Thus repentance of the Christian for their lack of forgiveness involves the daily, intentional effort to develop a propensity to forgive, involving a variety of practices that seek to permanently change the tendency to harbor ill will and ruminate on negative emotions.
- **Benefits:** Expressing forgiveness is shown to aid emotional regulation and promotes social support, mechanisms positively correlated with increased health and well-being.

Gratitude

- **Definition:** The definition of gratitude was adapted from Emmons (2004), where gratitude was when one “[affirms] something good has happened to them [and] they recognize that someone else is largely responsible for [that] benefit.”
- Gratitude in Christian repentance was shown to be connected to the psychological theories of gratitude. Christians are explicitly commanded to express gratitude to God and fellow humans, where the absence of gratitude towards the two parties is sinful. This requires an active, daily effort to change the mind into one that naturally expresses gratitude to all, leading to the various psychological benefits that come with the focus of being grateful.
- **Benefits:** Expressing gratitude is shown to produce happiness, improve social relationships, and promote a positive memory bias.

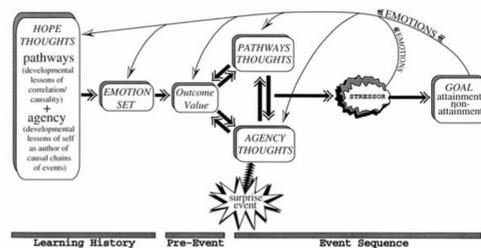


Figure 1. Schematic of feed-forward and feedback functions involving agency and pathway goal-directed thoughts in hope theory. Source: C. R. Snyder.

References

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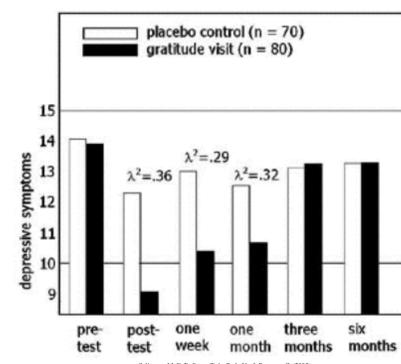
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Table 1
Means, standard deviations, internal consistency, and correlations of gratitude, forgiveness, orientations to happiness, and measures of subjective well-being (N = 143).

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gratitude	—							
2. Forgiveness	.42***	—						
3. Life of meaning	.45***	.32***	—					
4. Life of pleasure	.19*	.04	.37***	—				
5. Life of engagement	.16	.22**	.66***	.35**	—			
6. Life satisfaction	.34***	.36***	.37***	.20*	.24**	—		
7. Positive affect	.43***	.46***	.61***	.26**	.57***	.38***	—	
8. Negative affect	-.17*	-.63***	-.06	.14	.02	-.25**	-.20*	—
M	24.70	61.99	20.90	20.24	19.64	15.87	35.00	25.54
SD	3.51	8.43	3.76	3.89	3.58	3.68	5.24	6.53
Coefficient alpha	.72	.84	.78	.77	.71	.87	.82	.86
Score range	6-30	18-90	6-30	6-30	6-30	5-25	10-50	10-50

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

“The tendency to grant forgiveness [was a] strong predictor predicting the experience of positive emotions, and forgiveness was the strong predictor predicting the reduction in the experience of negative emotions” (Chan, 2013).



Conclusions

- The theology and practices behind Christian repentance involve many psychological constructs, in this case hope, gratitude, and forgiveness, that have been shown to promote happiness, health, and well-being.