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THE QURANIC CONCEPT OF *SHUKR* (GRATITUDE) AND ITS CONVERGENCE WITH POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

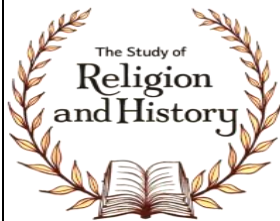
Gratitude has emerged, over the past two decades, as one of the most extensively researched constructs in positive psychology, with empirical work consistently linking it to elevated subjective well-being, reduced depressive symptomatology, strengthened relationships, and improved physical health. This article presents the Quranic concept of Shukr alongside the foundational empirical literature on gratitude in positive psychology and identifies both substantial convergence and a critical theological distinction between the two traditions. The article begins by defining gratitude as a psychological construct and positive psychology as a scientific discipline, before examining the Quranic treatment of Shukr through multiple verses and an authenticated Hadith. It then reviews the core empirical mechanisms through which gratitude is theorized to support well-being, drawing on the foundational studies of Emmons and McCullough (2003), Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008), Wood, Froh, and Geraghty (2010), and Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005). The article argues that where positive psychology treats gratitude as a self-regulated cognitive-emotional practice whose object is often left conceptually unspecified, the Quran anchors Shukr in a permanent, relational, and theologically defined object of gratitude, Allah, a structure that directly addresses limitations gratitude researchers have themselves identified regarding the durability and circumstantial dependence of secular gratitude interventions.

Keywords: *Shukr, gratitude, positive psychology, Quran, Hadith, subjective well-being, Islamic psychology, hedonic adaptation*

1. Introduction

The scientific study of gratitude began in earnest with the emergence of positive psychology as a distinct field at the close of the twentieth century. Prior to this, psychological research had been overwhelmingly oriented toward the study of pathology, and constructs such as gratitude, which did not map onto any recognized disorder, received comparatively little empirical attention. The Quran, revealed across the seventh century CE, by contrast addresses gratitude, termed *Shukr* in Arabic, as one of its most recurring and theologically central themes, embedding it within a comprehensive account of the relationship between the human being and the Creator.

The purpose of this article is not to claim that the Quran anticipated the specific experimental methodology of contemporary positive psychology, a claim that would be historically anachronistic and is not advanced here. Rather, the article argues that the Quranic treatment of *Shukr* addresses, through its theological structure, certain limitations that gratitude researchers have themselves identified within the secular literature, particularly concerns regarding the durability of gratitude interventions and their vulnerability to changing life circumstances. To make this argument with the necessary clarity, the article proceeds in a deliberate sequence: it first defines gratitude and positive psychology as they are understood in the contemporary literature, then presents the Quranic concept of *Shukr* through multiple verses and an authenticated Hadith, then examines the core empirical mechanisms identified by gratitude researchers, and finally brings the two traditions into direct conversation.



2. Defining Gratitude and Positive Psychology

2.1 What is Gratitude?

Within the psychological literature, gratitude is most commonly defined as a positive emotional state that arises from the perception of having received a benefit from another, combined with the recognition that this benefit was not necessarily owed. Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008) describe gratitude as an attribution-dependent state that results from two distinct stages of information processing: first, recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome, and second, recognizing that there is an external source responsible for this positive outcome. This second condition is what distinguishes gratitude from more general positive affect such as joy or contentment. A person can feel joyful without attributing that joy to any particular source, but gratitude, by definition, requires the identification of a benefactor, whether that benefactor is another person, an impersonal force such as nature, or, as is relevant to the present discussion, the divine.

Beyond the momentary emotional state, researchers have also studied gratitude as a stable personality trait, often referred to as a grateful disposition, defined as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with thankful emotion to the role of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). This distinction between gratitude as a transient state and gratitude as an enduring disposition has practical significance, since interventions designed to cultivate gratitude generally aim to strengthen the disposition over time rather than to produce a single grateful feeling.

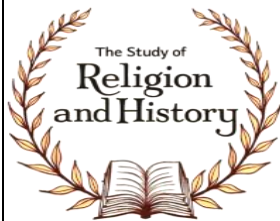
2.2 What is Positive Psychology?

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the conditions and processes that contribute to positive psychological states, well-being, positive relationships, and flourishing individuals and institutions. The field was formally established in 1998 when Martin Seligman selected it as the central theme of his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, arguing that psychology had, for the better part of a century, concentrated almost exclusively on repairing pathology, treating depression, anxiety, and trauma, while neglecting the equally legitimate scientific question of what enables human beings to flourish. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), in the foundational paper that launched the field as a distinct area of inquiry, argued that the exclusive focus on pathology had produced a model of the human being lacking the positive features, hope, wisdom, creativity, and perseverance among them, that make life worth living, and called for a science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions.

Within this framework, gratitude occupies a central place among the character strengths and positive emotions that positive psychology studies empirically, alongside constructs such as hope, optimism, resilience, and meaning. Seligman's later PERMA model, comprising Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, identifies gratitude as one of the most reliably measurable contributors to the positive emotion and relationship dimensions of well-being (Seligman, 2011).

3. The Quranic Concept of *Shukr*

The word *Shukr* and its derivatives appear repeatedly throughout the Quran, addressing gratitude not as an occasional sentiment but as a structural orientation of the believer toward the source of all blessing. This section presents several of the most significant verses, together with a Hadith that extends the Quranic treatment of gratitude into the domain of human



relationships, in order to establish the breadth and theological depth of the Quranic concept before it is brought into conversation with the secular psychological literature.

3.1 Gratitude and Divine Increase

وَإِذْ تَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ لَنْ يَزِيدَكُمْ شُكْرُكُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ وَلَنْ يَكْفُرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

"And remember when your Lord proclaimed: If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more. But if you are ungrateful, surely My punishment is severe."

(Surah Ibrahim, 14:7)

Classical exegetes have read this verse as establishing a structural, divinely guaranteed relationship between the expression of gratitude and the continuation or expansion of blessing. The verse is notable for the breadth of what it addresses: gratitude here is not confined to a single ritual expression but is presented as a disposition of the self toward its Sustainer, one that classical scholarship elaborates as encompassing recognition in the heart, acknowledgment on the tongue, and corresponding action through the limbs.

3.2 Gratitude as Self-Benefiting

وَمَنْ شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ

"And whoever is grateful, his gratitude is only for the benefit of himself. And whoever is ungrateful, then indeed, my Lord is Free of need and Generous."

(Surah Al-Naml, 27:40)

Spoken by Prophet Sulayman upon witnessing a miraculous sign, this verse establishes a principle directly relevant to the psychological study of gratitude: that the practice of gratitude is not a transaction that benefits its divine recipient, who is described as free of need, but is instead a practice whose primary beneficiary is the grateful person themselves. This Quranic insistence that gratitude is, in its effect, self-benefiting anticipates the central empirical finding of the positive psychology literature, namely that the practice of gratitude produces measurable improvements in the well-being of the one who practices it, a finding examined in detail in Section 4.

3.3 Gratitude to People as Gratitude to Allah

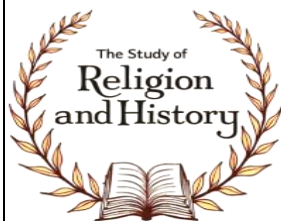
لَا يَشْكُرُ اللَّهَ مَنْ لَا يَشْكُرُ النَّاسَ

"He who does not thank people has not thanked Allah."

(Sunan Abi Dawud 4811; graded authentic by Al-Albani)

This Hadith, narrated by Abu Hurairah and recorded across multiple major collections including Sunan Abi Dawud, Jami al-Tirmidhi, and Musnad Ahmad, extends the Quranic structure of gratitude into the interpersonal domain. The classical commentary explains that since Allah is the ultimate bestower of every blessing and human beings are merely the means through which He delivers His blessings to one another, gratitude toward the human intermediary is in fact a constitutive part of gratitude toward the divine source. This Hadith is of particular significance for the present argument because it demonstrates that the Quranic and Prophetic tradition does not treat gratitude toward Allah and gratitude toward people as competing or separate practices, but as a single, integrated structure in which interpersonal gratitude is theologically grounded in, rather than opposed to, gratitude toward the ultimate benefactor.

4. The Mechanisms of Gratitude in Positive Psychology



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Having established both the conceptual definitions and the Quranic treatment of gratitude, this section turns to the empirical mechanisms that positive psychology has identified as explaining the relationship between gratitude and well-being.

4.1 The Foundational Experimental Evidence

Emmons and McCullough (2003) conducted three studies examining the effects of a sustained gratitude practice on psychological and physical well-being. In the first two studies, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, a hassles condition focused on daily irritations, a gratitude condition focused on listing things for which they were grateful, and either a neutral or social comparison condition, and asked to maintain weekly or daily records of their mood, coping behaviors, health behaviors, and overall life appraisals. In a third study, individuals with neuromuscular disease were randomly assigned to a gratitude condition or a control condition. Across all three studies, the gratitude-outlook groups demonstrated heightened well-being relative to the comparison groups on several though not all outcome measures, with the effect on positive affect emerging as the most robust and consistent finding.

Froh, Sefick, and Emmons (2008) extended this experimental paradigm to early adolescents, randomly assigning eleven school classes to a gratitude, hassles, or neutral control condition. The gratitude condition, in which 221 sixth and seventh grade students kept daily records of things for which they were thankful, was associated with enhanced self-reported gratitude, greater optimism, increased life satisfaction, and decreased negative affect relative to the comparison groups, with gratitude showing a particularly robust relationship to satisfaction with school experience.

4.2 Resistance to Hedonic Adaptation

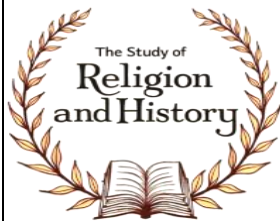
Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) propose a model in which a person's chronic level of happiness is governed by three factors: a genetically determined set point, life circumstances, and intentional activities, the deliberate practices and behaviors a person engages in. Their analysis assigns a substantial proportion of variance in sustainable well-being to this third, intentional-activity category, identifying gratitude practices among the activities with the strongest potential to produce durable increases in happiness, precisely because, unlike circumstantial changes, intentional activities can be varied and sustained in ways that resist hedonic adaptation, the well-documented tendency for the psychological impact of positive circumstances to diminish over time as they become familiar.

4.3 Reduced Materialism and Social Comparison

Wood et al. (2010), in their comprehensive review of the gratitude literature, document that gratitude is associated with reduced materialism and reduced upward social comparison, the tendency to measure one's circumstances against those who appear to possess more. Their review further establishes that gratitude is related to a wide range of clinically relevant outcomes, including reduced depressive symptomatology, and that gratitude can explain variance in well-being outcomes even after controlling for many of the most extensively studied personality traits in psychology.

5. Bringing the Traditions Together: Convergence and Critical Distinction

The convergence between the Quranic treatment of *Shukr* and the empirical gratitude literature is substantial. Both traditions identify gratitude as fundamentally relational, requiring the recognition of a benefactor rather than constituting mere positive mood (Froh et al., 2008; Surah Al-Naml, 27:40). Both identify gratitude as a practice that benefits the one who practices it more directly than it benefits any external party, a point made explicitly by Prophet Sulayman's declaration and confirmed empirically by the consistent finding that gratitude



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interventions improve the well-being of the practitioner (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Surah Al-Naml, 27:40). And both identify gratitude as a counter to the psychologically corrosive effects of comparison and the taking of blessings for granted (Wood et al., 2010; Surah Ibrahim, 14:7).

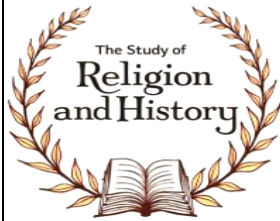
Despite this convergence, a critical distinction separates the two treatments, one that bears directly on a limitation gratitude researchers have themselves acknowledged. Wood et al. (2010) note that contemporary gratitude research has often proceeded without full conceptual clarity regarding the object of gratitude, observing that much of the literature treats gratitude as a generalized positive orientation toward life rather than as a relational response directed at a specific, identifiable benefactor. This conceptual ambiguity carries a practical consequence: a gratitude practice without a stable, permanent object is, by its own internal logic, vulnerable to the same circumstantial dependence that Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) identify as undermining sustained well-being. If gratitude is directed primarily at favorable circumstances rather than at a permanent source, the deterioration of those circumstances removes the basis for the gratitude itself.

The Quranic structure of *Shukr* resolves this ambiguity directly, and the Hadith on gratitude to people extends that resolution into the interpersonal domain. *Shukr* is gratitude directed at Allah as the permanent and unchanging source of all circumstances, favorable and unfavorable alike, while gratitude expressed toward human benefactors is understood as a necessary expression of, rather than an alternative to, this primary gratitude. Because the ultimate object of Quranic gratitude is theologically permanent rather than circumstantially contingent, *Shukr* is structurally positioned to remain stable across the very circumstantial fluctuations that the secular gratitude literature identifies as eroding the durability of gratitude-based well-being interventions.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to examine whether the Quranic concept of *Shukr* and the empirical literature on gratitude in positive psychology describe the same underlying human reality, and if so, what each tradition contributes that the other does not. The answer that emerges is twofold. First, the two traditions converge substantially on the basic structure of gratitude: both recognize it as a benefactor-dependent state rather than generalized positive mood, both identify it as self-benefiting for the one who practices it, and both treat it as a practice capable of countering the psychological costs of comparison and adaptation. Second, the two traditions diverge on a single point with significant practical consequences: positive psychology has identified, without fully resolving, an ambiguity regarding the object toward which gratitude should be directed, while the Quran resolves this ambiguity by anchoring all gratitude, whether expressed toward Allah directly or toward the human beings through whom His blessings reach us, in a single, permanent, and theologically secured source.

This conclusion does not require that the secular gratitude literature be considered incomplete or invalid on its own terms; the empirical findings reviewed in this article stand on their own methodological merits regardless of religious framework. It does suggest, however, that the Quranic treatment of *Shukr* offers a theologically coherent resolution to a conceptual gap that positive psychology researchers have identified but not yet resolved within their own literature, and that future interdisciplinary research examining gratitude practices anchored in a permanent religious object specifically, rather than gratitude as a generalized orientation, may extend the existing positive psychology literature in clinically and theoretically meaningful directions.



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