Gratitude and Social Well-Being

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.” (G.K. Chesterton, 1986)

1. Introduction

Gratitude has a long standing in fields such as philosophy and theology. It is the virtue that is the cornerstone of many world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Carman & Streng, 1989; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Though many popular books, world religions, and philosophers have exhorted the importance of gratitude and expressing it for centuries, psychology has only started to investigate the effects and implications of gratitude in the past decade. Currently, there is a substantial amount of research that have shown gratitude’s benefits and improvement on subjective, psychological and physiological well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood, Joseph, & Maltby, 2009). One specific way that gratitude has shown to positively impact well-being is that it increases social well-being. A person’s social well-being plays an important role in their overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Researchers have found that gratitude has important social functions that can enhance social bonds (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Algoe, 2012). Therefore, for this literature review, we will examine current research findings on gratitude’s influence on social well-being, and demonstrate that there is robust evidence that gratitude increases social well-being. Finally, we will present theories that explains the mechanism behind gratitude, evaluate current studies and give directions for future research.
It is important to keep in mind that this review is only a cursory overview. However, this review contains the majority of the research that have demonstrated the effect of gratitude and social well-being, with the exception on research on gratitude and prosocial behaviors. Research on prosocial behavior is mentioned in passing, but due to limitations, this literature review does not explain in detail the findings in this area.

2. Definition of Gratitude

The Latin root of gratitude is *gratia*, which means *grace*. Grace, by definition, is an *undeserved merit*. It is receiving something without earning or deserving it. The derivatives of this root “have to do with kindness, generosity, gifts, the beauty of giving and receiving, or getting something from nothing” (Pruyser, 1976, p. 69). Building upon the etymology of gratitude, researchers have largely defined the emotion of gratitude by the cognitive processes of the beneficiary (a) *acknowledging* the receiving of a benefit, and also (b) *recognizing* that there is an external source (i.e. benefactor) for this positive outcome (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Robert, 2004). Another way researchers have conceptualized ‘benefits’ is to perceive them as *gifts* (Watkins, 2004) or as *blessings* (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). These gifts and blessings can range from a best friend driving two hours to save you from a broken-down car, to a neighbor watching your dog, or the gift of being able to wake up this morning. By conceiving the benefits received as gifts or blessings, it embodies the idea that these benefits received are not merited on our own, nor did we deserve them.

On the other hand, some researchers have expanded the definition of gratitude to “a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). According to Lambert, Graham and Fincham (2009), this broader definition, that
encompasses a general state of ‘thankfulness’, is more pertained to a lay understanding of gratitude. Though this definition captures a wider scope, it does not involve the nuanced perspective of how gratitude is directed to another source; it is not possible for one to be grateful for oneself (Watkins, 2014). The other-directedness of gratitude forms the basis of many psychological research (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Algoe, 2012; Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013; Kruse, Chancellor, Ruberton, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Therefore, in aligning with the majority of gratitude research, this literature review will also define gratitude as the receiving of benefits that involves a benefactor—a human or non-human source (e.g. God, fate, luck; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh et al., 2008; Watkins, 2004). It is the unique ability to appraise the small and large goods and events in life as gifts that makes gratitude such a wonderful emotion. It truly is “the highest form of thought, and…is happiness doubled by wonder” (Chesterton, 1986).

3. Gratitude and Relationships

3.1 Gratitude is intrinsically relational

As an expansion of Emmon’s definition (2003), Watkins (2014) says that there are four appraisals necessary for eliciting gratitude: (a) recognizing the gift, and that it is from an external source, (b) recognizing the goodness or value of the gift, (c) recognizing the goodness of the giver and (d) recognizing the gratuitousness of the gift (Watkins, 2014). In order to experience gratitude, one must be able to recognize both the gift received and the giver. The other-directedness of gratitude is crucial for understanding its influence on social well-being and relationships—gratitude is an emotion that has a recipient, as it is directed towards another individual. Thus, gratitude is intrinsically relational. None of the appraisals are focused on the
self. Gratitude, as an other-focused emotion, serves as a social lubricant and enhancer in relationships (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013).

It should be noted that gratitude is not the only emotion that is other-focused—elevation and admiration have also been characterized as “other-praising” (Algoe and Haidt, 2009). Algoe and Haidt’s study (2009) demonstrated that all three other-praising emotions—elevation, gratitude and admiration—have positive influences on social relationships. All of these three distinctive emotions collectively demonstrate a greater predictor for relationship enhancement than self-focused emotions. Though these three emotions are different from one another, the authors noted that the “relationship-building motivation was clearest for gratitude” (p. 123). This demonstrates that out of all other-focused emotions, gratitude is functionally most suited to enhance social relationships.

Though gratitude requires one to recognize the gift, simply recognizing the gift is not sufficient. Gratitude is only experienced when one recognizes the goodness of the benefactor when they see the gift. In fact, focusing on the blessings alone can lead to an increased self-focus, as the attention is on what is received and not on the giver. This self-focus serves as the distinction between indebtedness and gratitude—the increase in self-focus makes people feel obligated to return a favor that was received, instead of feeling grateful (Mathews & Green, 2010). When participants felt indebtedness, they reported feeling less close and less committed to their benefactors. On the other hand, when one feels gratitude, they are also able to attend to the giver’s benevolent intentions (Tsang, 2006b). This suggests that with gratitude, one is able to focus on the benefactor as well as to the gifts. This demonstrates the importance of other-focused attention and emotions in creating closeness in relationships. Without acknowledging the goodness of the giver, the beneficiary perceives the gift as more of a burden, rather than joy and
gratitude. Therefore, out of all the other-focused emotions, gratitude is one of the most relationally binding emotions—it is intrinsically relational.

3.2 Gratitude Forms and Builds Relationships

One factor that promotes intimacy and closeness in relationships is the *perceived responsiveness to the self*, which describes the extent to which one is cared for and understood (Reis, Clar, & Holmes, 2004). Gratitude, as an other-directed emotion, is an emotion that contributes to this reappraisal (Watkins, 2014). As aforementioned, when one feels gratitude towards the benefactor, one is able to appraise the benevolent intentions of the giver. Several studies demonstrated the positive influence of gratitude on relationships. Algoe et al. (2008) was the first research to demonstrate how gratitude functions positively in relationships using naturally occurring events. In their experiment, they investigated the role of gratitude in predicting the strength of the relationships between the Big and Little sisters across three sororities in a large public university. The researchers studied this “naturally occurring gratitude” (pg. 425) forming when older members gave new members gifts daily for a week until the “Revelations.” The Revelations is the day where the little sisters find out who their big sisters are at the end of a gift-giving week. After following many new sorority members for a week and recording their gratitude for the gifts, the authors found that gratitude predicted significantly how integrated the little sisters felt to the sorority, the interaction between the little sister and big sisters at the Revelations, and interactions a month after the Revelations. In addition, researchers found that these predictions were independent of the extent to which the new members liked the gifts. This research is one of the first to illustrate how gratitude is more than mere reciprocity of benefits, but rather, it plays a significant role in building relationships.
Gratitude can facilitate relationship-building by creating a desire to spend with one’s benefactor (Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & Desteno, 2012). In the first study, researchers demonstrated how gratitude led participants to make the choice to spend significantly more time with their benefactor—a confederate who stayed to help participants fix a staged computer malfunction. The willingness to spend time, that is, social affiliation, with a benefactor enhances and builds their relationships. Furthermore, Study 2 demonstrated how gratitude can also lead to socially inclusive behavior towards the benefactor, even if it was at a greater cost for the participant. However, both Algoe et al. (2008) and Bartlett et al. (2012) only examined gratitude and the initial formation of new relationships; their results may not be sufficient in explaining the role of gratitude in long-term relationships. In the early stages of relationships, the exchanges between two parties are more likely to be based on general reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). On the other hand, long-term relationships have a communal orientation, where there is a sense of responsibility for another person’s welfare and also a genuine care for his or her needs (Clark & Mills, 1979). Thus, communal orientation contrasts with only being concerned with repaying benefits received, and forms one of the larger distinctions between a new and long-term relationship.

3.4 The Power of Expressing Gratitude

Various studies have shown that expressing gratitude, as opposed to experiencing gratitude, may have a stronger influence on social relationships. Expressing gratitude has been shown to significantly “enhance one’s relationship’s communal strength” (Lambert, Clark,
Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010, p. 574), and other researchers have demonstrated that expression of gratitude forms the mechanism to which gratitude positively influences dyadic relationships (Algoe et al., 2013). Most research that have examined the effects of expressing gratitude had operationalized this by asking participants to either verbally express gratitude or write thank you letters (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Lambert et al., 2010). Empirically, expressing gratitude is found to increase the perception of communal orientation in the expresser (Lambert et al., 2010), and also on the partner. It is highly likely that expressing gratitude translates into reality, and amplifies (Watkins, 2014), the act of grace that the benefactor gave.

In a new published research, researchers have also empirically tested the role of expressed gratitude in novel relationships. Williams & Bartlett (2015) showed that expression of gratitude facilitates social affiliation with one another. In their study, when acquaintances expressed gratitude, the benefactor was more likely to leave his or her contact information, as a sign of willingness to continue a relationship. Williams et al. suggested that the social affiliation effect of expressed gratitude is likely due to the interpersonal warmth that expressed gratitude connotes. Therefore, in expressing gratitude, one creates an increased awareness of the benefactor as well as the beneficiary. Through this, relationships are strengthened, and the effect appears to be relatively long-term (Algoe et al., 2013).

3.5 Gratitude & Relationship Maintenance

In addition to forming and binding relationships, gratitude also appears to maintain relationships. Most research that investigates the mediation between gratitude and relationship maintenance are tested with long-term romantic relationships. There are evidence that
demonstrates how feelings of gratitude and also expressed gratitude predict the satisfaction of the relationship (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Algoe, Gable, & Maisel (2010) demonstrated how thoughtful actions predicted positively the quality of relationship the following day. The authors suggested that receiving thoughtful actions increased both feelings of gratitude and indebtedness. However, only gratitude provided accurate prediction of quality of relationship. This aligns with previous results. This demonstrates how relationships are beyond the paradigm norm of reciprocity, especially with close relationships (Gouldner, 1960). In a comprehensive series of studies, Gordon et al. (2012) demonstrates that appreciation plays a large role in maintaining the relationship. When the beneficiary feels grateful towards the benefactor, prosocial tendencies are displayed, which maintains the relationship. As a result of feeling appreciated, the benefactor also continues to perform maintenance behaviors. This suggests that gratitude and appreciation facilitates an upward spiral of positive affective states and maintenance behaviors.

Lastly, Lambert & Fincham (2011) demonstrated how expressed gratitude causes relationship maintenance because this creates a comfortable environment for partners to express relationship concerns, which the authors argue is a form of relationship maintenance. This study sheds new light into relationship maintenance, as this is the first study that does not use romantic partners as participants. In Studies 1 and 2, the authors used a correlational study to find a correlation between expressed gratitude and the comfort of expressing concerns in relationships. Then in Study 4, Lambert & Fincham (2011) demonstrated how expressed gratitude, compared to neutral or positive affect conditions, caused people to feel more comfortable in communicating relationship concerns by using an experimental design.
Gratitude appears to play a significant role in maintaining relationships. However, one must keep in mind that all of these studies have only investigated romantic relationships. This by nature is a biased sample of participants, as the nature of relationships differ largely from family, close friends, acquaintances and new relationships. There could be many confounding variables that may lead to an amplified maintenance effect when gratitude is felt or expressed. The strong affective states related to love may influence partners to be more motivated to maintain their relationship. Though Lambert & Fincham (2012) did not use romantic partners as participants, more evidence should investigate the relationship between gratitude and other forms of relationship maintenance—reciprocal behavior among friendships, frequency of time spent together, and the quality of these non-romantic relationships.


4.1 Gratitude has Social Functions

As an “inherently relational emotion” (p. 609), gratitude has social functions (Algoe et al., 2013). This means that gratitude, as an emotion, has a specific function that facilitates social relationships. This is not necessarily a novel idea. Other emotions, such as anger, embarrassment and joy, are shown to embody specific functions in social navigation (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). As we have explored thus far, gratitude plays a role in facilitating initial reciprocity behavior in early stages of relationships, and social inclusion, as well as increased communal orientation within long-term relationships. Conceptualizing gratitude as a social function forms the basis for a theoretical breakthrough in the area of gratitude and social relationship research (Algoe, 2012). In regards to gratitude as an emotion with social functions, it allows researchers to explore the
mechanisms behind how gratitude enhances social relationships, and advances gratitude research beyond correlation and speculator research.

4.2 Positive Emotions “Broaden-and-Build”

Barbara Fedrickson’s *broaden-and-build of positive emotions* is a well-established theory in the field of positive psychology. It is based on the conception that gratitude, along with other positive emotions, have social functions (Fredrickson, 2004; Fredrickson, 2001). This general theory describes how positive emotions have an evolutionary purpose in broadening our cognitive resources to build social resources, specifically, positive emotions broader one’s “individual momentary thought-action repertoire” (Fredrickson, 2004), pg. 1365). Furthermore, in broadening one’s thought-action repertoire, it motivates individuals to find new behaviors that can strengthen social bonds. Similarly, Fredrickson suggests that gratitude also broadens our thought-action tendencies because grateful individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior, which has been shown to enhance relationships (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006a). With gratitude, the beneficiary’s prosocial behavior is more likely to meet the benefactor’s needs, rather than a simple tit-for-tat reciprocity that is common. Furthermore, Fredrickson even suggested that gratitude builds one’s skills on how to love others. Through this gratitude-driven strengthening of bonds, these stronger relationships become social resources for individuals. Thus, individuals may be more resilient to future challenges (Fredrickson, 2004).

However, it is important to note that this theory was not originally conceived with gratitude in mind. Fredrickson attempts to apply the *broaden-and-build theory* to the newly researched emotion—gratitude. Currently, minimal research has empirically tested Fredrickson’s hypotheses of how gratitude specifically broadens cognitive and social resources. Future research
should continue to examine the speculations that Fredrickson have noted and continue to expand the literature on how gratitude affects social bonds.

4.3 The Find-Bind-and-Remind Theory for Gratitude

One theory that is empirically tested is the *find-remind-and-bind theory* of gratitude (Algoe, 2012). It is based on the recognition that gratitude has specific social functions and somewhat developed from the *broaden-and-built* theory. Algoe’s theory is one of the more informative and comprehensive theories that attempts to explain how gratitude can enhance social well-being. According to Algoe, there are three components to gratitude: gratitude helps people (a) *find* or be motivated to find new dyadic relationships, (b) *remind* them to maintain their relationships and (c) *bind* the partners in the relationship closer to one another. These components all align with the research we have previously presented. Algoe suggests that the social functions of gratitude are to find, bind and maintain relationships. Firstly, individuals who express their gratitude are more likely to find new relationships because they will experience increased social affiliation with the benefactor. Secondly, the positive affective states related to gratitude can serve as a reminder of the importance of social relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Lastly, research on romantic relationships offers a vignette to how gratitude binds people by maintaining their relationship.

Algoe also suggests that *expressed* gratitude appears to be the effective form of achieving the social benefits of gratitude. This echoes what we have previously discussed, that giving voice to gratitude amplifies the positives in the relationship and allows both parties to be aware of the gifts received. Furthermore, as a prosocial emotion, gratitude will likely increase people’s tendency to reciprocate and to address the needs of the benefactor, which are relationship-
enhancing behaviors. One inherent strength of this theory is that it is largely empirically based. Algoe had conducted several research studies on gratitude and social relationships before she formulated this theory. The theory is based on what her and other researchers have discovered in this field of research. Therefore, it is an evidence-based driven theory, which decreases any self-serving biases and increases its reliability and validity. More research can therefore continue to develop the specifics of each of the three components in this theory.

5. Conclusions and Future Directions

Gratitude has consistently been demonstrated to show a positive influence on social relationships. It makes people direct their attention to a benefactor, and recognize the benevolence of the give. This increases social affiliation and the communal orientation of a relationship. Ultimately, gratitude leads individuals to find, remind and bind to their counterparts in their relationships. Research on gratitude and social well-being is comparatively more developed than other focuses in gratitude research. Other focuses have yet to discover a comprehensive theory that explains the mechanism behind gratitude and general well-being, or gratitude and psychopathology. This demonstrates that research on gratitude and social well-being is a promising field, and thus, more research findings can help us refine current knowledge and perhaps find more nuanced functions of gratitude.

For the next stage of research in this area, researchers should consider what other secondary emotions may be elicited from gratitude that may also lead to enhanced relationships. The find-remind-and-bind theory explores the direct relationship between gratitude and enhanced social-relationship. Other than gratitude, there are also other emotions that are associated with enhancing social relationships, and they are somewhat correlated with another. For example,
research have demonstrated a preliminary correlation between gratitude and trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), and also humility (Kruse et al., 2014). Furthermore, as seen in Lambert & Fincham (2011), appreciation appears to play an important role in increasing social well-being. Watkins (2014) hypothesizes that the more someone appreciates a gift, the higher the value is, which can subsequently affect one’s degree of gratitude. Therefore, future research can also investigate the possible mechanism behind the gratitude and appreciation.

It is quite miraculous how the simple appraisal of perceiving the benefits and help we have received in life as gifts and blessings can play such a significant role in enhancing new and close relationships. Gratitude—an emotion, personality trait, virtue—has revealed to be a blessing upon many people who are now practicing genuine regular thanksgiving. Though it is a simple word, gratitude reveals to be much more nuanced than psychologists had initially thought. The comprehensive illumination on how gratitude affects social well-being is a huge breakthrough in gratitude research as the scope of research extends beyond one’s personal affects and cognitive appraisals. Therefore, gratitude’s influence on social well-being is worth further investigation. Implications from research findings can have substantial influences on other areas—self-esteem, therapy techniques and child-rearing techniques. As the effects of gratitude on social well-being continues to grow, it will continue to motivate individuals to treasure others in their relationships and cultivate a grateful attitude rather than a self-entitled one. As Chesterton says, “all goods look better when they are seen as gifts” (Chesterton, 1989/1924, p. 78)

Reference:


