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Chapter

Gratitude and Happiness: The Causes and Consequences of Gratitude

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Abstract

In this chapter, we review recent research on the relationship between gratitude and happiness. First, we show how gratitude is a critical component of the good life. Because gratitude is vital to wellbeing, it is important to establish the causes of state and trait gratitude. We explain an appraisal approach to grateful emotion and show how certain benefit interpretations are critical to the experience of gratitude. In this context, we describe an encouraging new paradigm that has been applied to the study of gratitude: cognitive bias modification. This experimental approach has helped to establish the causal status of interpretations to gratitude, and we describe how this methodology should help to understand gratitude in future research. Recent research on the cognitive antecedents of gratitude has shown that the nature of the benefactor matters to experiences of gratitude, and in this regard, a divine benefactor may create a unique experience of gratitude. Gratitude scholars have now turned to the question: How does gratitude enhance happiness? We present research and theories that have attempted to speak to this issue. Finally, we explore the question: Who benefits most from gratitude interventions? Research has supplied some surprising answers to this question.

Keywords: gratitude, happiness, subjective wellbeing, positive psychology, gratitude to god

1. Introduction

“In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give and that it is with gratitude that life becomes rich.” -Dietrich Bonhoeffer ([1], p. 52).

It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer wrote this while he was in a German prison for his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler. In this passage, Bonhoeffer brings out several important truths that are relevant to this chapter. First, that most humans experience far more good than bad in their life, and second, that gratitude enhances our experience of the good in life. Indeed, the theme of this chapter is that gratitude enhances subjective well-being (SWB) because it amplifies the good in life.

2. Gratitude is a critical component of the good life

Is gratitude important to the good life? Following others, we define the good life as using one's strengths in a way that produces enduring happiness. Thus, happiness and satisfaction with life are central components of the good life. In this section, we will attempt to establish that gratitude does indeed enhance happiness. First, a plethora of studies established that gratitude is strongly correlated with happiness [2, 3]. However, a multitude of correlations does not increase the likelihood that gratitude actually *causes* happiness. Providing stronger support for causation, several prospective studies have shown that gratitude predicts increased well-being over time [4, 5], and a number of experimental studies have manipulated gratitude exercises and shown that gratitude increases happiness [3, 6–8] (for reviews, see [9, 10]). In short, correlational, prospective, and experimental studies have supported the conclusion that gratitude is a critical component of the good life.

3. What causes gratitude?

As we have seen, gratitude is important to human flourishing. Because gratitude is vital to SWB, it is vital to understand what causes gratitude. To discuss the causes of gratitude, however, we need a basic definition of gratitude. Here we will define gratitude at two levels of analysis: state and trait. The emotional state of gratitude may be defined as a positive emotional response to a benefit that one believes was largely provided by someone else [10]. We define “benefit” in a wide sense as it may be the addition of a positive event in one's life, but it may also be an aversive event that does not happen or even positive aspects that are perceived from a negative event. Although many definitions of gratitude merely require that one perceives that the benefit came from an outside source, we include the source as “someone” because the outside source is personalized in some way. Although some recent work has tried to argue that the source of the benefit can be oneself, we believe that this confuses gratitude with pride, and thus is not a helpful direction for the study of gratitude.

The trait or disposition of gratitude is simply one's propensity to experience state gratitude. Thus, a grateful person—or one high in trait gratitude—experiences grateful emotion frequently across a wide variety of circumstances. Stated differently, one high in the disposition of gratitude has a low threshold for state gratitude. There are now several measures of trait gratitude with good psychometric properties that researchers can use [2, 3, 11].

What causes a grateful emotional response? In exploring the antecedents of gratitude, we take an appraisal approach [12, 13]. In brief, the appraisal theory of emotion argues that each distinct emotion is caused by its own distinct appraisal or construal. An appraisal is simply one's interpretation of an event. Thus, if one interprets a gift of flowers as a kind, thoughtful act, one is likely to experience gratitude. If, however, one sees the flowers as an attempt to manipulate them in some way, one will probably not feel grateful.

From the seminal research of Tesser and colleagues [14] to the present, researchers have held that three primary appraisals of an event cause gratitude: value, altruism, and cost. Thus, one is more likely to experience gratitude when they value a benefit, when they think the benefactor provided the benefit from altruistic motives (i.e., it was given primarily for the beneficiary's benefit), and when they interpret the benefit as being costly for the benefactor to provide.

Recent research has supported the importance of value and altruism appraisals to gratitude. For example, when surveying faculty regarding a significant raise that they received, the more they valued the raise and felt the university provided the raise for the faculty's benefit, the more gratitude they reported [15]. Indeed, the psychological value of the raise predicted gratitude above and beyond the objective value of the raise. What was interesting about this study is how strongly value drove gratitude, and this finding is consistent with Forster et al. [16].

These findings emphasize the importance of understanding the psychology of valuing an event, and we believe that progress in understanding how humans value an event is important to understanding the causes of gratitude. We propose that this relates closely to an understanding of *appreciation*, a cognitive process that is essential but not identical to gratitude [17]. What is appreciation? Whereas some have defined appreciation quite broadly, we feel it is most helpful to limit appreciation to cognitive processes (although it undoubtedly affects and is influenced by emotion). In this regard, we put forth Janoff-Bulman's definition of appreciation as most helpful to advancing research on appreciation. According to Janoff-Bulman and Berger [18], when we appreciate something there is an "Appraisal of increased value or worth ... We increase its perceived value in our eyes" (p. 32). When our home appreciates, its monetary value increases. When we appreciate something, the psychological value of the object increases for us. A review of the psychology of appreciation is beyond the limits of our chapter [10, 17], but hopefully, this discussion will foster future research on valuing and appreciation.

We have seen that altruism and value are critical appraisals to the experience of gratitude. But recent research has questioned the importance of cost appraisals to gratitude [16]. Indeed, in the Watkins et al. study [15], appraisals of the cost to the university for faculty raises showed very low correlations with gratitude for the raise, and in a simultaneous multiple regression, cost was no longer a significant predictor of gratitude. We found these findings surprising because obviously, providing these raises presented a significant objective cost to the university. Following up on this finding, McLaughlin and associates manipulated cost to the benefactor in a scenario study [19]. Although this was an intentionally large cost manipulation, it had no impact on recipients' gratitude. Moreover, self-reported cost appraisals were not correlated with gratitude. Indeed, participants appeared to be insensitive to the costs to the benefactor. Once again, however, value appraisals showed robust correlations with gratitude. Taken together, this evidence suggests that people make a more global appraisal of the "goodness of the giver" [10], rather than a more detailed analysis of the benefactor that would include cost. We suggest that future research continue to investigate the importance of cost appraisals to gratitude.

In sum, research supports the idea that appraisals of value and altruism are cognitive antecedents of gratitude. Are there other cognitive characteristics that shape gratitude responses? Recent research has shown that the characteristics of the benefactor impact gratitude. In the scenario study described above, McLaughlin et al. [19] manipulated the type of benefactor. They found that people were more grateful to an individual benefactor than to an institution (in this case, the university), for an equivalent monetary benefit. Thus, the characteristics of the benefactor seem to determine grateful responses. Clearly, more research on this issue is needed.

The nature of the benefactor brings up another interesting question: What if the source of the benefit is supernatural, rather than a human? Recently, a major research effort has commenced investigating gratitude to God. Although research has consistently demonstrated that religious/spiritual people tend to be more

grateful [2, 3], gratitude to God appears to be particularly important to spiritual well-being. In a prospective study, Watkins et al. found that trait gratitude to God at time 1 predicted increased religious well-being at time 2, after controlling for baseline levels of religious well-being, Big-5 personality traits, and time 1 trait gratitude [20]. Thus, gratitude to God may prove to be an important variable in the psychology of religion and spirituality.

Although research is still developing in this area, a few observations can be made. In one study, participants were randomly allocated to recall a benefit received from a human benefactor, a benefit they received from God, or a “happy occasion” [21]. In terms of appraisals, gratitude to God looked very much like gratitude to humans. In other words, the same appraisals that predicted gratitude to humans predicted gratitude to God. This study, however, did not assess spiritual appraisals such as whether participants interpreted the benefit as a sacred gift. Thus, future work should emphasize spiritual appraisals to identify the unique appraisal structure of gratitude to God. We look forward to seeing more research in this developing area.

We have seen that gratitude is associated with a distinct appraisal structure. But do these appraisals actually *cause* the emotion of gratitude? Much of appraisal research uses designs that are not able to determine whether these appraisals are cognitive antecedents to the emotion under study. However, cognitive bias modification for interpretation (CBM-I) is a paradigm that can more definitively determine the causal status of the cognitive antecedents of emotion [22]. The cognitive bias modification paradigm typically uses computer tasks to modify target cognitive biases. These tasks involve a number of trials, and if the participant adopts the target bias, this makes the tasks easier for them. In CBM-I, participants are forced to disambiguate scenarios in a positive or negative direction. Initially, CBM-I was used to change interpretation biases related to anxiety and depression [22]. For example, the participant would be presented with a scenario where they are speaking in front of a crowd. The crowd laughs and it is unclear whether they are laughing because they think your speech is funny, or because they think you are foolish. Participants are forced to disambiguate the scenario in either a positive or negative way by completing a word fragment at the end of the scenario (for an example disambiguation trial, see below). CBM-I has been very successful in changing interpretive biases known to underlie anxiety and depression [22]. Moreover, often in these studies changing the participant’s interpretation bias also changes their emotion in the expected direction. Thus, encouraging a positive interpretation bias through the disambiguation trials decreases one’s anxiety. Changing the cognitive bias and one’s subsequent emotion lends more credence to the causal status of interpretation/appraisal biases to emotion [22].

Cognitive bias modification has been used successfully to modify cognitive biases associated with emotional disorders [22], but until recently, this approach has not been used to modify cognitive biases that are thought to be causes of positive emotions. Recently, Watkins and associates [23] used CBM-I in an attempt to modify interpretation biases important to gratitude. Participants were randomly allocated to either grateful or non-grateful disambiguation training using benefit scenarios. Following is one of the disambiguation trials:

You have missed a day of class and when you return to class an acquaintance has copied their notes of the previous lecture for you. Your professor posts all of their PowerPoint slides online, so you wonder why your acquaintance copied their notes for you. In the end, you feel that your friend’s assistance was (c_ _siderate / p_ _ntless)

“Considerate” completes the scenario in a grateful manner, whereas “pointless” was the completion of non-grateful training. Participants in the grateful training find it easier to complete the word fragment with “considerate” if they adopt a grateful interpretation bias.

Training resulted in large effect sizes on grateful interpretation bias. Moreover, compared to non-grateful training, grateful training produced greater gratitude and higher value and altruism appraisals for a benefit of episodic memory. Thus, this study was able to more definitively establish that particular appraisals cause grateful emotion. In short, when an individual appraises an event as “someone has done something important for me,” they will probably experience gratitude.

Research has provided us with useful information as to the cognitive antecedents of state gratitude. Now we turn to the causes of trait or dispositional gratitude. What makes a grateful person? Much could be discussed here about distal causes of trait gratitude (e.g., secure attachment), but here we will focus on more proximal causes of dispositional gratitude. To understand the causes of trait gratitude it is imperative that we comprehend its constituents. We propose the following cognitive characteristics of trait gratitude. First, grateful people should be more prone to noticing blessings in their life. Anecdotally, this is what many who engage in daily counting blessings exercises report: it forces them to look for and notice the good things in their day. Thus, grateful people should have the tendency to look for and notice benefits in their life. Second, grateful people should exhibit a more grateful interpretation style. Those high in dispositional gratitude should value or appreciate benefits that come their way. Given our discussion above, they should also be more likely to appreciate “the goodness of the giver” [10]. They will be more likely to interpret the motivations of their givers in a benevolent way — that the benefits are given simply because their giver wants to enhance their wellbeing. Indeed, research supports this characterization of the interpretation style of grateful people [24, 25]. Third, grateful people should be biased toward recollecting benefits from their past, and research supports this cognitive bias of gratitude [8, 26].

In sum, we have seen that noticing the good, interpreting benefits as being valuable and given by altruistic motives, and reflecting on one’s past in a positive manner are facets that lead a person to be more grateful. It would seem to follow that interventions designed to enhance dispositional gratitude would focus on these facets. But this begs the question: Can a person become more grateful? Although many studies have shown that gratitude exercises enhance happiness, research investigating interventions to improve one’s disposition for gratitude is sparse. In an important seminal study, Froh and colleagues designed an intervention to enhance trait gratitude in youth [27]. This intervention focused on classroom instruction regarding gratitude-relevant appraisals. Compared to the control condition, children in this intervention did exhibit improved grateful thinking and became more grateful, and this improved their emotional well-being.

A few subsequent studies have developed successful interventions to enhance trait gratitude [28, 29]. Thus, we can conclude that people can become more grateful, but much more work in this area is needed. Notably, Baumsteiger et al. [29] focused on developing specific treatments for specific mechanisms of gratitude, and we believe that this will prove to be the best way forward in developing interventions to enhance dispositional gratitude. Following our analysis above, we propose that treatments should focus on three aspects of gratitude: attention (training individuals to notice the good), interpretation (training a grateful appraisal style), and memory (training a positive memory bias). First, we believe that a one or two week daily grateful

recounting exercise is likely to improve attention to benefits [8], but research needs to test this theory. In the cognitive bias modification paradigm research has also focused on modifying attention bias [30]. If one could train individuals to attend to positive information, this should provide the needed positive attention bias for trait gratitude. Most of the interventions described above have focused on encouraging grateful appraisals. This has been successful, but the appraisals are taught in an instructional setting, so more than likely this is training a more deliberative appraisal style. Emotions, however, are more likely to result from automatic than from deliberative appraisals. Thus, although explicit instruction has been shown to be important to dispositional gratitude interventions, we would argue for adding training modules that enhance a more automatic grateful interpretation style, and it is here where CBM-I may add a valuable component to treatment packages designed to enhance dispositional gratitude. Extant research supports the idea that CBM-I can change habitual interpretation biases that are crucial to gratitude.

In sum, what causes trait gratitude? What makes a person more grateful? Enhancing a positive attention bias, a more grateful interpretation style, and a tendency to reflect more positively on one's past should lower one's threshold for gratitude. To date, very few studies have focused on interventions designed to enhance dispositional gratitude. Long-term happiness is not likely to result from a few isolated experiences of gratitude. Rather, it is the disposition of gratitude that is vital to long-term emotional well-being. Thus, we believe that more research should focus on how to enhance the trait of gratitude.

4. The consequences of gratitude: how does gratitude enhance happiness?

We have seen that gratitude—particularly the grateful disposition—is a critical component of the good life. People flourish when they have a grateful orientation to life, which we have defined as seeing all of life as a gift [3, 10]. Given that gratitude supports SWB, researchers have now turned to an important question: How does gratitude enhance happiness? Understanding the mechanisms of the gratitude/happiness relationship is important in several ways. First, understanding why gratitude enhances happiness helps further our understanding of both gratitude and happiness. Through understanding the mechanisms of the gratitude and happiness relationship we will better understand gratitude by seeing its beneficial consequences, and we will better understand happiness because we will see more clearly the specific causes of happiness. Secondly, increasing our understanding of how gratitude increases happiness should help us improve gratitude interventions. If, for example, gratitude enhances happiness because it causes people to value what is good in their life, gratitude interventions could be improved by more specifically instructing participants on how they might psychologically value/appreciate those blessings they might be recounting (e.g., [31]). Thus, we submit that identifying *how* gratitude enhances happiness is vital for the science of gratitude.

Before exploring theories that speak to how gratitude enhances SWB, we discuss some interesting treatment outcome results that we believe provide important hints about the mechanisms of the gratitude/happiness relationship. Although many studies investigating gratitude exercises have been randomized controlled trials (RCTs), only a few have used clear placebo control treatments that have shown placebo effects (i.e., they resulted in increased happiness over the treatment period). Studies that use placebos are important because they allow us to separate the effects of gratitude from

the nonspecific effects of treatment (hope, expectation, etc.). Two of these studies used grateful recounting where participants listed three recent blessings and wrote about them in some way [7, 8]. Participants were instructed to engage in this grateful recounting every day for a week. What was notable about the outcome of both studies is that although the increase in happiness across the 1-week treatment period was similar to the placebo condition, the happiness of those in the placebo condition went back to baseline after the treatment phase (as would be expected), but the SWB of those in the grateful recounting treatment kept increasing well past the treatment phase. Indeed, in both studies, the trajectory of happiness was still increasing at the last follow-up assessment. In the case of the Seligman et al. study [7], this was fully 6 months after the treatment phase. This pattern of results is not uncommon in positive psychology interventions (e.g., [32]) but is generally unheard of in clinical psychology outcome studies, where the typical pattern is improved well-being across the treatment phase, with emotional well-being progressively decreasing after treatment.

Why did happiness continue to increase after the one-week gratitude treatment? It did not appear to be due to participants continuing to count their blessings on their own, because participants in the Watkins et al. study [8] reported that they stopped the grateful recounting exercise immediately at the close of the one-week treatment phase. Thus, daily counting blessings for 1 week must have changed some psychological processes that continued to enhance SWB well after treatment. One more aspect of the Watkins et al. study should be highlighted [8]. They compared the grateful recounting intervention with two comparison groups: placebo and pride 3-blessings treatment. The pride 3-blessings treatment was exactly like the gratitude 3-blessings treatment in that participants recalled 3 “good things” that had happened to them in the last 48 hours, whereas in the gratitude 3-blessing treatment they wrote about how each thing made them feel more grateful, in the pride 3-blessings treatment they wrote about how each “good thing” made them “feel better than others or better than average.” The authors included this condition to isolate grateful processing. In previous counting blessings studies, it was not possible to determine if the effect of counting blessings on SWB was because it was activating grateful processing, or it was merely that recalling good things in one’s life improved one’s happiness. Watkins and associates found that the gratitude 3-blessings treatment outperformed both the placebo and the pride 3-blessings treatment in improving happiness. Thus, it appears that grateful processing is a critical mechanism for improving one’s happiness. In short, these findings suggest that a one-week daily practice of grateful recounting changes people in a way that results in increasing happiness. What changed? Clearly, it was a change related to grateful processing, and we believe that it trained individuals to notice and appreciate the good in their life [33]. We now turn to theories that have attempted to explain how gratitude enhances emotional well-being.

Three theories attempt to explain how gratitude might improve SWB: Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory [34], Algoe’s find, remind, and bind theory [35], and our amplification theory of gratitude [10, 36]. We find these theories complimentary rather than competitive, and together, should help us understand the gratitude and SWB relationship.

Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory of positive emotion provides a good explanation of how gratitude supports SWB. Her theory was an attempt to explain why we experience positive emotions, and how they help us adapt [34]. According to Fredrickson, positive emotions broaden one’s momentary thought/action repertoire and build personal resources for future well-being. Whereas negative emotions are focused, positive emotions broaden one’s scope of attention, cognition, and action.

For example, whereas indebtedness (a negative emotion) might motivate us to a sort of tit-for-tat response to a benefit (e.g., “I will have you over for dinner because you had me for dinner”), gratitude for a benefit would lead one to creatively consider many ways of responding to one’s benefactor [37]. Indeed, research supports her theory as it applies to gratitude: whereas gratitude is correlated with more thought/action tendencies, indebtedness is not [38]. Being more creative when one is returning a favor is likely to result in a more enjoyable experience with one’s benefactor, and hence should improve one’s SWB.

Not only do positive emotions broaden in the moment, but according to Fredrickson they also build personal resources for the future. Fredrickson proposes that positive emotions like gratitude build personal resources in at least three ways: they build physical, intellectual, and social resources. It is easy to see how gratitude might build one’s social resources. People like grateful people [2] and expressions of gratitude result in many social benefits. Perceived social support is one of the most robust correlates of happiness [39], thus, as gratitude builds social resources, so it should build one’s happiness.

Building on the foundation of broaden and build theory, Algoe developed her find, remind, and bind theory of gratitude [35]. She argues that gratitude enhances well-being through building one’s social resources. Gratitude helps one *find* new relationships that support SWB, it *reminds* one of those relationships that are important to flourishing, and it helps *bind* relationships to support long-term happiness. We see this as a very effective theory for explaining how gratitude enhances happiness. Algoe’s research has garnered considerable support for her model [40–42], and it has added the approach of relationship science to the study of gratitude. As gratitude is essentially an “other-focused” emotion, we see this as a necessary perspective.

We have attempted to integrate these theories by proposing that gratitude enhances SWB because it psychologically amplifies the good in one’s life [10, 36]. Psychologically, gratitude serves to amplify the signal strength of blessings. Just as an amplifier augments the sound going into a microphone, so too gratitude amplifies the good in one’s life. Just as a magnifying glass enlarges the text it is focused on, so too gratitude magnifies blessing. The amplification theory of gratitude proposes that gratitude enhances the signal strength of who and what is beneficial in one’s life. When one is keenly aware of what is beneficial for them, they will spend more of their personal resources seeking these things, which should enhance SWB. This is important for one’s happiness because psychologically speaking, “Bad is stronger than good” [43]. Research has shown that bad emotions, bad feedback, bad memories, and bad interactions tend to take precedence over the good. Thus, even though most people experience far more pleasant than unpleasant events in their life, it is easy to let the bad drown out the good. Gratitude, however, helps overcome this psychological bias by amplifying the good.

How does gratitude amplify the good in life? Gratitude amplifies blessings in that people enjoy benefits more when they experience them with gratitude [44]. Second, gratitude amplifies the good in one’s past. Several studies have shown that grateful people recall more blessings from their past, and when these memories do come to mind, they enjoy them more than less grateful people [8, 26]. Moreover, one experiment showed that gratitude can even amplify the good one sees in unpleasant memories [32]. Third, research supports the idea that gratitude amplifies the good in one’s relationships. Indeed, Algoe’s research provides robust support for this aspect of amplification theory [35]. Moreover, research by DeSteno and Bartlett has shown that inducing gratitude produces significant prosocial behavior, both toward the

benefactor and strangers [45–47]. Indeed, gratitude encourages prosocial behavior even when it costs the beneficiary to provide the help. Thus, gratitude appears to amplify one's desire to do good to others. Clearly, this should improve one's relationships, which is one of the most important causes of SWB [39]. In sum, we propose that gratitude enhances happiness because it amplifies the good in one's life. Gratitude amplifies the good from one's past, it amplifies the good in how one experiences blessings in the present, and it amplifies the good in one's future by increasing hope [6]. Finally, gratitude amplifies the good in life by amplifying our desire to do good to others, thus enhancing our relationships and subsequently our SWB.

5. Who benefits from gratitude interventions?

We have seen that gratitude is a critical component of human flourishing and that it appears to enhance well-being by amplifying blessings. The most convincing evidence for the importance of gratitude to happiness comes from experimental work that manipulates gratitude exercises. Some of these studies have looked at who benefits most from exercises such as counting your blessings, and here we find some surprising—and informative—results. For example, men appear to benefit more from grateful recounting than women [8]. We found this surprising result because women tend to be higher than men in dispositional gratitude [2, 3], and tend to value gratitude more than men [48]. Indeed, we found that women tend to enjoy gratitude exercises more than men [8]. Surprisingly, we found that reports of how much people enjoyed the daily gratitude 3-blessings exercise were negatively correlated with how much they gained from the practice in terms of SWB at the 5-week follow-up. In other words, those who enjoyed counting their blessings least gained most in terms of their happiness. Finally, several studies have found that trait gratitude moderates the effects of counting blessings on happiness [8, 49]. Again, to our surprise, those who were least grateful tended to gain most from counting their blessings. How can we make sense of these somewhat counterintuitive results? In our view, the critical finding relates to dispositional gratitude: those who were least grateful, benefited most in terms of their happiness. This helps us understand why men benefitted more from the gratitude intervention than women because men tend to be less grateful than women. Furthermore, it makes sense that those who least enjoyed grateful recounting benefitted the most because we would expect that those low in trait gratitude would have more difficulty with the 3-blessings exercise, and thus would have enjoyed it less. How can we make sense of these findings? Very simply, those who benefit most from gratitude have the most to gain from gratitude.

We believe that there is an important lesson for the science of happiness in these findings. Some in the positive psychology movement have claimed that it is important that the various positive psychology exercises fit the individual who is attempting to use them. There is undoubtedly some truth in this claim, although it is sometimes used to argue that “If the exercise doesn't feel good to you then it probably isn't for you.” Based on the findings above, this appears to be wrongheaded advice. What if a medical professional provided the following recommendation to an overweight person: “If exercising doesn't feel good to you, it probably won't be useful to you.” Indeed, to achieve many things in life we must engage in something unpleasant to achieve our goal. And so it is with gratitude. Those who are least grateful have most to gain from gratitude exercises, just as those who are most out of shape have most to gain from physical exercise. But for one who is low in dispositional gratitude, engaging in

gratitude exercises is not likely to be very pleasant, at least initially. In other words, becoming more grateful is not likely to be an easy, completely pleasant process. In the words of St. John of the Cross (cited in [50], p. 17): “To come to the pleasure you have not you must go by a way in which you enjoy not.” In sum, those who benefit most from gratitude have the most to gain from gratitude.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter, we have attempted to describe the causes and consequences of gratitude. After establishing that gratitude enhances happiness, we described some of the known causes of state and trait gratitude. We argued for an appraisal approach to gratitude: people experience the emotion of gratitude when they appraise a situation as indicating that someone has done something important for them. In the investigation of the cognitive antecedents of gratitude, we proposed that the cognitive bias modification paradigm might be particularly helpful. We also discussed other cognitive antecedents that impact gratitude and concluded that more research should be devoted to the nature of the benefactor. In this regard, we find that gratitude to God is a particularly interesting and significant variety of gratitude that should be explored. Although we know less about the causes of trait than state gratitude, we proposed interventions that encourage individuals to look for the good in their life, interpret benefits in a benevolent manner (appraisal training), and reflect in a positive way on their past, should encourage dispositional gratitude.

We then described three theories that help us understand how gratitude enhances SWB: Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory [34, 37], Algoe’s find, remind, and bind theory [35], and our amplification theory of gratitude [10, 36]. Finally, we explored who gains most from gratitude interventions, and concluded that those who most need gratitude gain the most from gratitude interventions.

In sum, we have seen that gratitude is a critical component of the good life. Research overwhelmingly supports the idea that gratitude enhances happiness. We conclude with a quote from W. J. Cameron:

It is literally true, as the thankless say, that they have nothing to be thankful for. He who sits by the fire, thankless for the fire, is just as if he had no fire. Nothing is possessed save in appreciation, of which thankfulness is the indispensable ingredient. But a thankful heart hath a continual feast.

Indeed, without gratitude, it is difficult to see how one could be very happy. As the epigram by Bonhoeffer emphasized, gratitude makes life rich [1]. We conclude that gratitude builds one’s happiness because it amplifies the good in one’s life.

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