

Gratitude and Forgiveness in Relationships

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Abstract

Gratitude and forgiveness have been examined in two separate but parallel literatures. We analyze each literature, documenting similarities and differences across conceptual, prototype, theoretical, and empirical domains, to better identify the commonalities between them and to explicate potential points of connection. Our analysis suggests substantial potential for cross-fertilization and synergy between these areas of research, with likely benefits including enhanced understanding of each area as well as potential advances in applications. In particular, we note the potential for gratitude and forgiveness to influence each other and work synergistically in the context of preventive or remedial interventions. The emerging, joint exploration of forgiveness and gratitude leads to a number of important basic research opportunities that promise to advance understanding of these important processes, particularly their role in interpersonal relationships and the development and maintenance of close relationships over time.

Key Words: gratitude, forgiveness, close relationships, theoretical perspectives, evolutionary perspectives, moral affect theory, social-cognitive perspective, gratitude research, forgiveness research

Parallels between gratitude and forgiveness in scholarly writings are striking. First, numerous authors have bemoaned the lack of attention given to gratitude (e.g., Solomon, 2004) and forgiveness (e.g., Fincham, 2000) by philosophers and social scientists. Second, thriving empirical literatures have emerged in the past 15 years on gratitude and on forgiveness. Third, each is acknowledged to have a rich history extending back to the ancient Greeks, though attempts to draw systematically from this intellectual history are rare. Fourth, both constructs describe processes that are ascribed a central role in social life. Fifth, gratitude and forgiveness orient the person away from their own, selfish interests to the interests of others. A sixth parallel emerging from the last observation is that both gratitude and forgiveness are considered to be virtues. Seventh,

each has been linked to personal well-being (for gratitude, see review by Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010; for forgiveness, see review by Fehr, Gelfand & Nag, 2010). Eighth, the presumed value of each construct for promoting mental health has given rise to numerous interventions designed to increase their occurrence (see Nelson, 2009; special issue, *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, January, 2010; Wade, Johnson, & Meyer, 2008). Ninth, scholars have failed to reach consensus in conceptualizing the precise nature of the constructs of gratitude and forgiveness.

In light of the above parallels, it is perhaps surprising to find that research on gratitude and forgiveness has given rise to two largely separate literatures. This outcome is all the more remarkable given that the emergence of interest in gratitude and forgiveness

can be traced to the rise of the positive psychology movement (see Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This common heritage points to another feature of research on the two topics: their focus on the individual. The relative lack of attention given to gratitude and forgiveness in close relationships follows naturally from the three pillars of positive psychology (i.e., positive experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions), as captured in the definition of the field: “Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits, and the institutions that facilitate their development” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630). Yet it is in the context of close relationships that gratitude and forgiveness may be most important, an observation that has led to the call for establishing close relationships as the fourth pillar of positive psychology (Fincham & Beach, 2010), a sentiment well-received by the field as evidenced by Seligman’s endorsement of this view at the first World Congress on Positive Psychology.

It is within this context that the present chapter sets out to offer an analysis of gratitude and forgiveness in close relationships. Consistent with our opening paragraph we focus on points of convergence, possible integration, and cross-fertilization where appropriate. We begin by considering how gratitude and forgiveness have been conceptualized and argue that the defining feature of close relationships, temporal interdependence, requires their reconsideration in this context. Next, we summarize current progress in research on these two constructs, reviewing both foundational theoretical frameworks and major findings. This review sets the stage for outlining a future research agenda that highlights potential avenues of basic and applied research on connections and mutual influence between gratitude and forgiveness. The chapter concludes by summarizing its main points and reiterating the most urgent needs for future research.

Conceptual Hygiene

Gratitude and forgiveness play a key role in major world religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Indeed, forgiveness is so central to some religions (e.g., Christianity) that holiness is achieved through forgiveness (Jones, 1995). Perhaps less obvious is the association between gratitude and religion. However, gratitude is viewed as a prototypical feature of the “spiritual” person (Walker & Pitts, 1998) and is the second most frequently mentioned characteristic associated with prayer (Lambert, Graham, &

Fincham, 2011). Indeed, Reiser (1932) even argued that gratitude toward the sun for its benefits formed the basis for “primitive” religion, and Allport (1950) suggested that mature religious intentions come from feelings of profound gratitude. Their identification with religion is viewed as a major reason for the relative neglect of gratitude and forgiveness in the scientific literature (e.g., Fitzgibbons, 1986). It is therefore ironic that increased scholarly interest in religion and spirituality among social scientists (Hill & Pargament, 2003) has contributed to a zeitgeist propitious to the study of gratitude and forgiveness.

It is possible, however, to provide a purely secular analysis of these constructs, and doing so has allowed the emergence of two thriving empirical literatures. Although we continue in this vein, it is worth acknowledging that the vast majority of the world’s population professes a religious faith (68.08 to 88.74 percent, or 4.54 to 5.92 billion people; List of Religious Populations, 2010). Thus, the picture of gratitude and forgiveness that emerges in the scientific literature may turn out to be incomplete absent greater attention to the religious context within which these constructs are often embedded. In particular, the role of religious communities and religious traditions in shaping orientation toward forgiveness and gratitude may be substantial, and may also moderate the impact of self-reported tendencies toward forgiveness and gratitude on personal and interpersonal outcomes. At a minimum, differential priming of these constructs within religious contexts may result in a different frequency of application across a range of contexts. Notwithstanding this possibility, it would be premature to address the connection to religion in detail at the present time given the focus in the literature on secular analysis. We therefore turn to juxtapose conceptualizations, lay constructs, theories, and recent findings, for gratitude and forgiveness to better identify potential opportunities for cross-fertilization and integration in future research.

Gratitude: Conceptualization

Researchers have variously conceptualized gratitude as a moral virtue, an attitude, an emotion, a habit, a personality trait, and a coping response (Emmons, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). Nevertheless, most scholars might agree that gratitude comprises the recognition that one is the beneficiary of another’s kind act. That is, gratitude is the emotion that occurs when another does something for the self that is perceived as valuable, costly, and

altruistic (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). Thus, Emmons (2004) simply defined gratitude as “the recognition and appreciation of an altruistic gift” (p. 9).

In contrast to the above basic or narrow view of gratitude (cf. Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, 2009) that focuses on gratitude “to” someone, it is also possible to conceptualize gratitude more broadly to include appreciating what is valuable and meaningful to oneself. This view can be characterized as being “grateful *for* something or someone.” Thus, Steindl-Rast (2004) conceptualizes gratitude as a state of thankfulness and identifies two important aspects of gratitude. *Personal gratitude* is similar to the narrow view of gratitude in which a benefactor provides a benefit to a beneficiary who perceives the benefactor and benefit positively. In contrast, *transpersonal gratitude* is the sense of appreciation one might experience in the solitude of a mountain top and is described as a thrill of being, or a “celebration of undeserved kindness” (p. 284). In this case, the object of celebration may be a thing, a person, an activity, an event, a situation, or a state. Notably absent is any reference to a general sense of being grateful for relationships with people in one’s life. Adler and Fagley (2005) also discuss gratitude in a broad sense but call it appreciation. They define appreciation as “acknowledging the value and meaning of something—an event, a person, a behavior, an object—and feeling a positive emotional connection to it” (p. 81). At an even broader level is the view of gratitude as a “life orientation toward noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891), an orientation that is distinguished from optimism, hope, and trust.

In light of these diverse conceptualizations, it behooves scholars to specify clearly the referent for their use of the term gratitude and its synonyms. At a bare minimum, narrow and broad views of the construct need to be distinguished, along with whether the referent is a momentary emotional state or an enduring characteristic that may manifest itself over time. Regardless of these distinctions, gratitude is a response to positive conditions or events, and this creates a sharp boundary with forgiveness, to which we now turn.

Forgiveness: Conceptualization

The question of forgiveness arises only when a person has been wronged by another. To forgive logically requires the victim to be conscious of being injured or wronged. Without injury there is

nothing to forgive. However, it is also necessary for the victim to believe that the injury was intentionally or, at a minimum, negligently inflicted. Thus, forgiveness occurs in full knowledge that the transgressor is responsible for the injury, that he or she thereby forfeits any right to the victim’s sympathy, affection, or trust, and that the victim has a right to feel resentful. Thus, providing a mirror image of gratitude, forgiveness is a possible response to intentional, undeserved harm.

In the face of such injury, victims commonly respond with fear (of being hurt again) and/or anger (Worthington, 2003; Berry, Worthington, Wade, Witvliet, Kiefer, 2005). Motivation to avoid the source of the harm, or even a desire to retaliate or seek revenge, is also typical. Indeed, some have argued that retaliation in such circumstances “is deeply ingrained in the biological, psychological, and cultural levels of human nature” (McCullough & vanOyen Witvliet, 2002, p. 446), a position consistent with Aristotle’s view of anger as “a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight” (Aristotle, 1939, p. 173). In sum, the victim of a transgression experiences an immediate negative affective state characterized by fear and/or anger.

People are motivated to overcome this unpleasant state (Berry, Worthington, Wade, Witvliet & Keifer, 2005), and it is widely thought that one constructive way of doing so is through forgiveness. Scholars agree that the defining feature of forgiveness is the forswearing of resentment, a view that is consistent with laypersons’ understanding of forgiveness as “letting go of negative feelings” and “letting go of grudges,” which have been found to be the most frequent definitions of forgiveness offered by research subjects (Younger, Piferi, Jobe & Lawler, 2004, p. 847). Although there is as yet no consensus in the scientific literature on the exact nature of forgiveness, central to various approaches is the idea of a freely chosen motivational transformation in which the desire to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is overcome. Forgiveness, like gratitude, is therefore inherently interpersonal, and this is captured well by North’s (1998, p. 19) statement that it is “outward-looking and other-directed.” Note, however, that forgiveness annuls “not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one’s relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others” (North, 1987, p. 500). Some describe forgiveness in terms of canceling a debt (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). But the analogy to relieving a debt is not

altogether accurate as relinquishing a debtor from a debt makes it the case that there is no longer a debt. In contrast, forgiving does not make it the case that there is no longer a wrong done. Viewing forgiveness as an altruistic gift (North, 1998) is less problematic and likely reflects the fact that it is intentional, unconditioned, and supererogatory (Fincham, 2000).

To forgive entails a struggle to overcome the negative feelings that result from being wrongfully harmed. This conceptualization immediately distinguishes forgiveness from related constructs such as forgetting (to forgive is more than not thinking about the offense), the spontaneous dissipation of resentment and ill will over time (to forgive is more than the passive removal of the offense from consciousness), condoning (no longer viewing the act as a wrong and removing the need for forgiveness), and pardon (granted only by a representative of society such as a judge). Thus, the common phrase, “forgive and forget” is misleading because forgiveness is only possible in the face of a remembered wrong.

It is this latter observation that helps undermine the argument that forgiveness is a sign of weakness (Nietzsche, 1887). As noted, forgiveness requires the victim to acknowledge adverse treatment that entitles him or her to justifiably feel negatively toward the transgressor and thus requires the strength to assert a right, the right to better treatment than that shown by the transgressor. Absent such assertion, conciliatory actions can reflect factors such as condoning of the transgressor’s behavior, a strategic ploy, a desire to appease the transgressor, an effort to deny that anything is wrong, and so on. Accordingly, it is incorrect to label such behaviors as “forgiveness.” In addition to asserting one’s claim to a position of moral authority vis-à-vis the transgressor, forgiveness requires the strength to relinquish this position of moral authority and release the transgressor from the “debt” they incurred by the transgression. As anyone who has attempted to forgive knows, forgiving is not an easy option but instead may prove to be extraordinarily difficult because it involves working through, not avoiding, emotional pain. It is little surprise, then, that Mahatma Gandhi asserted, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong” (2000, p. 301).

As can be seen from juxtaposing conceptualizations that have been offered for gratitude and forgiveness, there are strong similarities between the two constructs. In particular, both can be conceptualized at either broader or more specific, focused levels. This has important implications for potential

points of connection between them. In addition, there is the potential in each case to characterize the construct in emotional terms or interpersonal terms. This highlights the potential for conceptualizations to change in each case when the focus is on close relationships. Finally, both have deep connections to life meaning and the nature or quality of relationships with others. However, efforts to conceptualize forgiveness as a process that unfolds over time and that influences motivation are more advanced and nuanced than the corresponding efforts for gratitude, suggesting the potential for cross-fertilization at the level of conceptual development. In addition, structural similarities between gratitude and forgiveness suggest that they may tap similar processes, albeit in response to hedonically opposite circumstances.

Prototype Analyses of Gratitude and Forgiveness

In light of diversity in the conceptualization and measurement of gratitude and forgiveness, it is not surprising that a few researchers have conducted research on their definition using clinicians or other expert judges (e.g., Denton & Martin, 1998). McCullough and colleagues (1998) used two subscales (revenge and avoidance) that emerged from one of these efforts (Wade, 1989) to construct the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) inventory, one of the most widely used self-report measures of forgiveness today. Apart from this, however, they have had little impact.

A different approach is to examine lay understandings of what it means to be grateful or to forgive. This is an important task because there are a number of ways in which lay conceptions are likely to inform not only theory and research but also the use of gratitude and forgiveness in an applied setting as a therapeutic tool. Understanding lay conceptions also may have important implications for measurement. For example, many studies (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991) measure forgiveness with one item, usually some form of the question, “Have you forgiven?” and a widely accepted, psychometrically sophisticated measure of forgiveness asks a single question about extent of forgiveness following different scenarios (Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness; see Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O’Connor, & Wade, 2001). The scale thus relies on a respondent’s understanding of the construct of forgiveness. If we do not understand what people mean when they say they “forgive” or “do not

forgive,” it makes it very difficult to understand what these measures mean. For instance, if an individual believes that to forgive an offender they must resume a relationship with that person, they may be reluctant to forgive. In contrast, an individual who does not believe that reconciliation is a necessary component of forgiveness may have an easier time forgiving. Finally, an assumption in most measures of gratitude and forgiveness is that what the investigator is measuring corresponds with the idea of the construct in the mind of the participant. But the extent to which lay conceptions of forgiveness and gratitude correspond with experts’ constructions is an empirical question.

In attempting to better understand gratitude and forgiveness, Fincham and colleagues (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Lambert, et al., 2009) turned to prototype theory, a perspective that has given us insights into many concepts that are central to close relationships. For example, Fehr (1988) demonstrated that both love and commitment have a prototypic structure. Two conditions must be met for a concept to display a prototype structure (Rosch, 1975). First, people must be able to identify features of the concept and be able to rate their centrality to the concept reliably. Second, the centrality of a given feature should have implications for how one thinks about the relevant concept.

When viewed from a prototype perspective, the inability to reach consensus in conceptualizing gratitude and forgiveness makes sense. Like many natural language concepts, they do not lend themselves to definition in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient features. This classical view of defining concepts assumes that category membership is an all or none phenomenon. Thus, all members of a category are equally representative of that category. In contrast, prototypically organized concepts contain features that vary in how strongly they are associated with the concept. This means that not all instances of a concept are expected to share all of the features of the prototype or to be equally representative of the concept. Consequently, it is easy for scholars to focus on different sets of features in conceptualizing gratitude and forgiveness.

In documenting that gratitude is indeed prototypically organized, Lambert et al. (2009) found that close relationships (family, friends) not only are associated with gratitude but also are seen as central to gratitude (e.g., “family” received the fifth highest centrality rating). This study also showed that laypersons distinguish *benefit-triggered gratitude*, or being “grateful to” someone for a benefit conferred

from *generalized gratitude* that involved being grateful for all sorts of gifts in life, including the presence of cherished others in one’s life (rather than for particular benefits conferred by those others). Interestingly, indebtedness, a feature of gratitude that has gained scholars attention ever since Aristotle (1962) disqualified gratitude as a virtue because indebtedness is incompatible with magnanimity, was not relevant to lay conceptions of gratitude.

Kearns and Fincham’s (2004) demonstration that forgiveness is also prototypically organized draws attention to aspects of the concept that have received limited attention in scholarly writings. Specifically, laypersons tend to view positive features as more representative of forgiveness than a decrease in negativity or unforgiveness, the focus of most research on “forgiveness.” In this regard, they appear to be closer to the view of philosophers who have noted that forgiveness is “an attitude of real goodwill toward the offender as a person” (Holmgren, 1993, p. 34) or “the attitude of respect which should always characterize interpersonal behavior” (Downie, 1971, p. 149). There is a lack of agreement among researchers on whether forgiveness requires a benevolent or positive response (e.g., compassion, empathy) to the offender or whether the absence of negative responses (e.g., resentment, anger, avoidance) is sufficient (Exline et al., 2003; Fincham, 2000, 2009).

Before turning to consider the context of close relationships, it is important to note that a prototype view does not imply that the concept cannot be defined or that lay conceptions must map onto experts’ conceptions. Moreover, we are not suggesting that the scientific study of gratitude and forgiveness must rely on lay conceptions to truly understand the concepts. However, as we hope to have demonstrated, a prototype approach does enrich our understanding of lay conceptions and has the potential to help advance scientific research on gratitude and forgiveness. In particular, comparison of lay prototypes for gratitude and forgiveness suggests additional similarities and points of convergence, and makes salient the relevance of the close relationship context for each.

The Close Relationship Context

As implied earlier, the interdependent nature of close relationships mitigates against easily generalizing results from basic research on gratitude and forgiveness to the relationship context. Most obviously, the ongoing nature of close relationships suggests that reduced resentment following a transgression

(lack of unforgiveness) is unlikely to realize fully the relationship restorative potential ascribed to forgiveness. To realize that potential requires the restoration of real good will and positive affect toward the partner. Thus, it has been suggested that forgiveness may be unidimensional in noncontinuing relationships but have both positive (benevolence) and negative elements (unforgiveness) in continuing close relationships (Worthington, 2005). It is also worth noting that the sharp distinction drawn between forgiveness (an intrapersonal process, albeit with an interpersonal focus) and reconciliation (a dyadic process) may not be as clear-cut in close relationships. The close relationship context also influences how we need to think about gratitude. Specifically, because partners in close relationships will simultaneously, or alternatively, be benefactor and beneficiary vis-à-vis the other, a partner could feel underbenefited or overbenefited, making it necessary to include perceptions of long-term equity in the study of gratitude in close relationships.

Perhaps most critically, there is likely interplay between gratitude and forgiveness in close relationships because both benefits and hurts are certainties in such relationships. Certainly, the positive affectivity associated with gratitude is incompatible with the resentment instigated by a transgression, and this raises the question of whether it is possible to understand gratitude without considering forgiveness, and vice versa, when it comes to close relationships. This is not a question that has even been raised in the relationship literature to date and is one to which we will return in outlining directions for future research. First, we assess current progress in theory and research on gratitude and forgiveness in close relationships.

Current Progress

Theoretical Perspectives on Gratitude

EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES

A common view of gratitude is that it facilitates reciprocity of positive behavior, a view captured by Simmel's (1950) description of gratitude as "the moral memory of mankind" (p. 388). It is therefore not surprising that evolutionary accounts of gratitude have been offered that receive general support from the fact that gratitude is cross-culturally universal (McCullough et al., 2001). Although Darwin himself suggested that nonhuman primates exhibit gratitude, Trivers (1971) appears to have offered the first evolutionary account of gratitude. In proposing a reciprocal theory of altruism, Trivers argued that gratitude was selected to regulate responses

to altruistic acts. Consistent with this viewpoint is the finding that people anticipate greater gratitude to nonkin than genetic relatives (i.e., siblings, offspring) who supply the same benefit (Bar-Tal, Bar-Zophar, Greenberg & Hermon, 1977). This is consistent because genetic self-interest means reciprocity concerns are redundant to the selection of kin altruism, whereas special adaptations, such as gratitude, are likely needed for reciprocal altruism with nonkin. The implication is that gratitude should be more intense toward nonkin than kin. The finding that gratitude increases trust only when there is not a high degree of familiarity between benefactor and beneficiary (see McCullough et al. 2008) is consistent with the view that gratitude evolved to transform interactions with strangers and acquaintances into relationships in which reciprocal altruism occurs. In effect, gratitude transforms motivations toward nonkin to make responses to them more like responses to biological relatives.

A more recent evolutionary hypothesis is that gratitude enhances the fitness of a population in which direct reciprocity already exists by facilitating "upstream reciprocity" or passing on benefits to third parties (Nowak & Roch, 2006). This is adaptive because upstream reciprocators will themselves sometimes benefit from the actions of others who pass on gratitude in this way. Because of natural selection, cost-benefit ratios will stabilize, leading to higher levels of, and more efficient, altruism. Based on these analyses, McCullough et al. (2008) argue that gratitude may play a more important role in establishing relationships than in maintaining them.

AN ATTRIBUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

It has been argued that appraisal processes determine what emotion is experienced and how one responds to receiving a benefit. For example, Heider (1958) argued that gratitude only occurs when the beneficiary perceives the benefactor as intending to benefit them. In a more elaborate attributional analysis, Weiner (1985) distinguished between outcome-dependent and attribution-dependent emotions. Outcomes give rise to a general state of happiness when they are positive and unhappiness when they are negative. Gratitude, however, is attribution dependent and occurs only when the benefit results from an action perceived to be a freely enacted, intentional behavior, one for which the benefactor is fully responsible. In this regard, gratitude is much like forgiveness in that processes that influence responsibility are hypothesized to influence each construct.

THE MORAL AFFECT THEORY OF GRATITUDE

McCullough and colleagues (2001) build on the work of Adam Smith, who viewed gratitude as serving a prosocial function, to offer a theory of gratitude as a moral affect. In their influential analysis, they argue that gratitude is a moral emotion that (1) increases awareness that one is the beneficiary of another person's moral actions (i.e., serves as a moral barometer), (2) prompts one to behave in a prosocial manner toward the benefactor and other people (i.e., serves as a moral motive), and (3) prompts behavior by the beneficiary that increases the probability of additional moral behavior from the benefactor (i.e., serves as a moral reinforcer). Although evidence to support the moral motive function was weak at the time of their analysis, it has since been shown that gratitude does lead to prosocial behavior toward others even when doing so is costly to the self (e.g., Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Bartlett & Desteno, 2006). Gratitude may motivate prosocial behavior because it is an "empathic emotion" (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994) that increases sensitivity and concern toward others, a viewpoint supported by work showing that gratitude relates to higher levels of empathic concern for others (McCullough et al., 2002, 2004). Importantly, local morality is distinguished from absolute morality, allowing people to be grateful for a benefit even when it derives from a benefactor's behavior that is immoral by absolute standards. In sum, there is strong support for the moral affect theory of gratitude.

A SOCIAL-FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Frederickson (2004) has argued that gratitude builds cognitive flexibility and social resources by encouraging thought of creative ways to reciprocate to reflect gratitude. In this regard, gratitude takes its place, along with other positive emotions, in her broaden and build theory that helps an individual build up resources by fostering an "upward spiral toward optimal functioning and emotional well-being." (Frederickson, 2004, p. 153). Frederickson notes, however, that to the extent that a benefit engenders indebtedness (assumed to be aversive), it leads to narrower tit-for-tat responses.

Algoe and colleagues (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008), in developing this perspective, argue that, "considering the relational implications of gratitude is essential for understanding its role in social life" (Algoe et al., 2008, p. 425). They suggest that what is critical about a benefit is its perceived

responsiveness to the self because this is associated with feeling understood, valued, and cared for. As such, gratitude has enormous implications for relationships; it may initiate the building of a relationship as well as affect established relationships. For example, in established relationships gratitude serves to remind a person that he or she is valued by the partner, likely increases cognitive accessibility of the partner's positive qualities, and promotes relationship enhancing motivations and actions (Algoe et al., 2008). Thus, gratitude may theoretically strengthen relationships in several ways by increasing felt intimacy, support, and relationship satisfaction. In contrast to the evolutionary account of gratitude that diminishes its importance in close relationships because they already exhibit high levels of trust and benefit provision (McCullough et al., 2008), Algoe et al. (2010) highlight the role of gratitude in such relationships as a signal of a "communal relationship orientation" that powerfully facilitates romantic relationships (p. 220). The tension between these perspectives may be more apparent than real in the case of romantic partners who are typically genetically unrelated even though they may share a common genetic destiny through offspring. In this case, the support provided by gratitude may be essential even though the target is a family member. Well-developed theorizing about the impact of gratitude on interpersonal processes suggests the potential for useful cross-fertilization with theorizing about forgiveness in which the focus has been weighted toward intrapersonal processes.

Theoretical Perspectives on Forgiveness

Numerous theoretical accounts of forgiveness have been developed in the service of designing interventions to increase forgiveness. Indeed, McCullough, Rachal et al. (1997, p. 5) noted that the literature on forgiveness has historically been "a literature of theories without data." We first outline one of these theories before turning attention to theoretical perspectives emerging from the substantial basic research literature on forgiveness that has emerged in the past 15 years.

THE PYRAMID MODEL OF FORGIVENESS

Worthington (1998, 2003) developed a pyramid model of forgiveness in which empathy, humility, and commitment to forgive play central roles. Empathy regarding the transgressor's situation places the hurt into the broader context of all the factors influencing the transgressor's behavior, whereas humility reminds the victim of his or

At this point, note that the reference for the citation "Frederickson, 2004" has not been given in the references list.

her own shortcomings and the times he or she has needed forgiveness. Accordingly, forgiveness is seen as “the natural response to empathy and humility” (Worthington, 1998, p. 64). But forgiveness is not easy—and thus the need to commit to forgiveness. The pyramid model appears to take its name from an intervention to which it gives rise and is described by the acronym REACH, whereby each letter corresponds to succeeding layers of a pyramid.

At the base of the pyramid is *recalling the hurt* (R). The next layer is *empathy* (E) or seeing things from the other’s perspective, followed by the *altruistic gift of forgiveness* (A). The next layer concerns *committing publicly to forgive* (C), and finally, at the apex, is *hold on to forgiveness* (H). Each element of REACH is described in detail with guidance as to its implementation. In essence this, like most therapy-related theories, is a process model that is primarily descriptive rather than explanatory. A substantial empirical literature on forgiveness interventions has since emerged (for a meta-analysis, see Wade, Worthington & Meyer, 2005), but the focus of this literature is on intervention efficacy rather than careful evaluation of theory. We therefore turn to theoretical perspectives evident in nonintervention research.

THE EMPATHY–ALTRUISM ANALYSIS OF FORGIVENESS

In an initial theoretical analysis, McCullough (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachel, 1997) drew on Batson’s empathy-altruism hypothesis arguing that the relations among empathy, forgiveness, and subsequent behavior toward an offender are “genotypically similar to the sequence of events by which empathy leads to the motivation to care for other (i.e., altruism)” (p. 322). Specifically, he argued that empathy-elicited caring may be directed at (1) guilt or distress that the offending partner is feeling about damage inflicted on the victim partner and the relationship, or (2) the feelings of isolation or loneliness experienced by the offending partner that resulted from the transgression-produced rupture in the relationship. Third, empathy for the transgressing partner may lead directly to a desire to restore positive contact with the offender. As a consequence, McCullough hypothesized that variables known to increase forgiveness (e.g., apology) do so by increasing empathy. Also, because forgiving is mediated by empathy, forgiving is causally more proximal to relationship-constructive behaviors (e.g., conciliatory gestures) reflective of forgiveness.

A SOCIAL-COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE

In elaborating on the above model, McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, et al. (1998) hypothesize that social-cognitive (or affective) variables related to the way the offended partner thinks and feels about the offender and the offense (e.g., attributions, ruminative thoughts, empathic emotions) are proximal determinants of forgiving. Compared with social-cognitive variables, features of the transgression, such as the perceived severity of the offense and the extent to which the offender apologizes and seeks forgiveness for the offense, are viewed as less proximal determinants of forgiveness and shape forgiveness, at least indirectly, via social-cognitive variables. Distal determinants of forgiving include qualities of the relationship (e.g., degree of closeness, commitment) in which the offense takes place. So, for example, forgiving is thought to be more likely in more committed relationships. Finally, personality characteristics (e.g., dispositional forgiveness) are seen as the most causally distal determinants of forgiving; they are posited to influence forgiving by disposing people to experience certain cognitions (e.g., attributions) or affects (e.g., empathy) regarding the offense.

Notwithstanding the expansion of determinants of forgiving to include social-cognitive, offense-level, relationship-level, and personality-level variables that might facilitate forgiving, empathy remains as the primary mechanism through which forgiving occurs. The influence of all other variables on forgiving is hypothesized “to be relatively small after controlling the indirect effects that they have on forgiving by means of their effects on empathy for the offender” (McCullough et al., 1998, p. 1589).

A MALLEABILITY MODEL OF FORGIVENESS

Starting from the observation that the level of forgiveness shown by a person can fluctuate over time (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), Karremans and Van Lange (2008) argue that “the processes underlying forgiveness cannot be fully understood without taking into account the unconscious and implicit processes that may be at play in influencing forgiveness” (p. 205). They therefore challenge the common view that forgiveness always results from a conscious decision and focus instead on situational triggers outside of conscious awareness that influence forgiveness. They draw on an impressive program of research involving priming to support their view of forgiveness as malleable. For example, in one set of studies, they simply asked participants how likely they were to forgive

each of numerous behaviors; participants who were subliminally primed with the name of a close other just before each behavior were more likely to forgive the behavior than those who received a non-close prime or no prime at all (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Subtle manipulation of subjectively experienced time since offense (marking its occurrence on a time line) also influences forgiveness (Wohl & McGrath, 2007), further supporting their view that situational factors can affect forgiveness outside of awareness.

Karremans and Van Lange (2008), however, acknowledge that both automatic, nonconscious and deliberative, conscious processes are associated with forgiveness and consider how these two processes combine to produce forgiveness. They do not provide a model, but rather suggest two possibilities. One is that the two processes act in a parallel, simultaneous manner. Thus, people may make an attribution for an offense that then influences their forgiveness, and at the same time forgiveness might be influenced by the goal of maintaining the relationship even though this goal is implicit and not experienced consciously. Second, automatic and deliberative processes may occur sequentially. Here, they make a strong case that either order is possible: deliberative processes may occur first and determine a level of forgiveness, with automatic processes accounting for changes in this level, or level of forgiveness may be determined by automatic processes that then influence and guide the deliberative processes. From the latter perspective, deliberative judgments people offer may simply reflect motivated cognition and may be attempts to rationalize their current level of forgiveness. Although intriguing, the malleability model is largely derived from data on how participants respond to a single question that typically asks about “forgiveness” (or its use in the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgivingness [TNTF]; Berry et al., 2001). It remains to be seen if forgiveness is quite as malleable, and reflects more than the temporary fluctuations in level of forgiveness documented in McCullough and colleagues’ (2003) longitudinal study.

Although it would appear that implicit forgiveness contradicts much of what has been said earlier about forgiveness being an effortful, deliberate process, the contradiction is, again, perhaps more apparent than real. Specifically, automatic processes may apply most fully to the emotional element of forgiveness; this serves to remind us that this element of forgiveness, like emotional responses more

generally, is not always under volitional control. The rich theoretical literature on intrapersonal processes linked to forgiveness suggests potential areas of contact and cross-fertilization with theorizing about gratitude. Both sets of theories are, of course, ultimately constrained by the broader empirical literature, a topic to which we now turn.

Review of Major Findings

Examination of the PsychInfo database shows that over the past 5 years (2006 to 2010) an annual average of sixty-one scholarly papers have been generated with the word “grateful” or “gratitude” in their title, and during the same period 249 per year have appeared with the word “forgiveness” or “forgive” in the title. One striking feature of these literatures is the considerable amount of attention given to applied research in which attempts are made to increase gratitude and forgiveness on the assumption that this is a beneficial thing to do, an assumption that gains support from studies showing (1) that gratitude and forgiveness are related to greater life satisfaction and psychological well-being, and (2) that the latter are increased by gratitude and forgiveness interventions. It might be argued that this work is relevant to close relationships because of the well-documented association between psychological distress and relationship dysfunction (see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Whisman, 2007). However, with rare exceptions (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996), this intervention research is conducted with self-selected individuals who show little psychological distress, and whether findings apply to clinical populations is therefore open to question. Clearly, however, there is strong interest in the benefits of gratitude and forgiveness and in ways to increase their occurrence.

In light of the large literatures mentioned above, our review of major findings is necessarily selective and will focus on research that has examined close relationships directly or has strong implications for such relationships.

GRATITUDE RESEARCH

In reviewing research on gratitude it is reasonable to ask whether any effects attributed to gratitude might not simply reflect positive emotion because gratitude has been shown to feel good. Yes, gratitude does feel good, but it is not simply another form of happiness because prior work shows consistently that gratitude is not reducible to general positive affect (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; McCullough et al., 2001, 2002).

Turning to relationships, Algoe et al. (2008), recently noted that, “the empirical literature is silent on the role of gratitude in interpersonal relationships” (p. 425). In the short period since their observation several studies have been published on the topic. Before reviewing these studies it is worth noting that there is some research relevant to understanding gratitude in close relationships even though this was not the focus of the research. For example, appreciation was listed as one of the most important factors contributing to a satisfying marriage according to long-term married (25 to 40 years) couples (Sharlin, 1996).

Similarly, research on domestic labor has produced relevant findings. Specifically, expressing gratitude (along with other forms of effective communication about domestic labor, such as listening) was the most powerful statistical predictor and discriminator of perceived fairness for wives in dual-earner couples (Hawkins, Marshall, & Allen, 1998). Similarly, the gratitude a wife received from her husband was related to her perception that the division of labor was fair (Hawkins, Marshall, & Meiners, 1995). Also, Klumb, Hoppmann, and Staats (2006) found that reduction in relationship satisfaction resulting from unequal division of labor disappeared after accounting for perceived gratitude for individual contributions. Finally, Berger and Janoff-Bulman (2006) demonstrated that when costs (such as sacrifices made for a partner) were perceived as appreciated by a partner, greater relationship costs were related to greater relationship satisfaction; however, when costs were not appreciated, they were related to lower relationship satisfaction.

Turning to work specifically focused on the role of gratitude in relationships, Algoe’s (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Algoe et al., 2008, 2010) studies were among the first to investigate this topic. An initial study (Algoe et al., 2008) examined the implications of gratitude for relationship formation by investigating naturally occurring gratitude during a week of gift giving in sororities when old members gave new members gifts. Gratitude during the week predicted relationship quality between old and new members a month later and tended to predict amount of time they spent together. Interestingly, both liking for the gift and its cost predicted gratitude, but this effect was mediated by the extent to which the gift was perceived to be responsive to the self. In their second article, Algoe and colleagues examined recall of incidents involving “other-praising” emotions (gratitude, admiration, elevation) and found that

participants recalling gratitude were significantly more likely to say they felt closer to the other person or wanted to build the relationship with the person. This was apparent from statistical analyses as well as participant comments: “My closeness and love for my friend were renewed and refreshed,” and “We grew closer; I thought she was sweeter and hung out with her more” (Algoe & Haidt, 2009, p. 123). In a second study, Algoe and Haidt (Study 3) showed that this pro-relationship motivation extended beyond the benefactor because participants who wrote a letter to a close other regarding a time the other had benefited them were, in the absence of the benefactor, more likely to seek to give back to others. They concluded that “gratitude motivates people to get closer, to strengthen ties and, in the process, perhaps, to move beyond ‘exchange’ relationships and into ‘communal’ relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979).” These studies underline the importance of gratitude in the initial stages of relationship formation.

But what happens in romantic relationships in which benefit giving is already established? Algoe et al. (2010) investigated this question by having cohabiting couples record daily for 3 weeks whether they benefited their partner, their partner benefited them, the extent to which they felt grateful, and extent to which they felt indebted. They also assessed daily satisfaction with the relationship and sense of connectedness with the partner. Gratitude, but not indebtedness, on a given day predicted changes in satisfaction and connectedness the next day in both benefactor and beneficiary. Importantly, satisfaction did not predict later gratitude. These findings suggest that gratitude may facilitate relationship growth perhaps by serving as a reminder of the quality of the relationship and further binding partners to each other through greater felt connectedness. This finding is consistent with Schramm, Marshall, Harris and Lee’s’ (2005) finding that gratitude for the partner was related to higher marital satisfaction among newlyweds. Further support for the relationship-facilitating role of gratitude comes from a study on felt gratitude and expressed gratitude in stably married couples (mean marriage length was 20.7 years). Using a diary method in which daily reports of felt and expressed gratitude and daily satisfaction were obtained, Gordon, Arnette, and Smith (2011) showed that both felt and expressed gratitude predicted own satisfaction, but only felt gratitude predicted partner satisfaction.

The failure of expressed gratitude to predict partner satisfaction surprised the authors, who

suggested that gratitude expression may become routinized in long-term relationships and therefore not be noticed. However, this finding may be better understood in the light of a set of four studies that focused on the impact of expressing gratitude in close relationships. Using longitudinal and experimental methods, Lambert and Fincham (2011) showed that expressing gratitude increased comfort in voicing relationship concerns to the partner (relationship maintenance behavior). Simply experiencing gratitude or having positive interactions with the partner did not have this effect. Because expressing gratitude is likely accompanied by greater expression of relationship concerns, it is perhaps not surprising that partner satisfaction is not increased. However, it should be noted that the gratitude-voicing concern association was mediated by positive perceptions of the partner and that voicing concerns is likely to occur in a constructive manner and not lead to decreased partner satisfaction.

A final set of studies show that expressing gratitude to a close other enhances one's perception of the relationship's communal strength. Lambert, Clark, Durtzchi, Fincham, and Graham (2010) showed that expressing gratitude predicted increases in the expresser's perceptions of the communal strength of the relationship across a 6-week period. Importantly, one study randomly assigned participants to an experimental condition, in which they expressed gratitude to the partner, or to one of three control conditions, in which they thought grateful thoughts about the partner, thought about daily activities, or had positive interactions with the partner. Participants performed their assigned activities daily for a 3-week period. At the end of the study, perceived communal strength was higher among participants in the expression-of-gratitude condition than among those in all three control conditions. Because gratitude expression was experimentally manipulated in the two sets of studies last reported, they allow greater confidence in the inference that gratitude is not limited to the initiation of relationships, but rather also promotes close relationships. In sum, available data support the social-functional model of gratitude.

FORGIVENESS RESEARCH

Supporting our earlier argument that the relationship context matters is the finding that relationship closeness is positively related to forgiveness; across twelve studies involving 1,814 participants, the weighted mean correlation is .28 (Fehr et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, forgiveness, like gratitude, is viewed as critical to marriage in that highly

satisfied married couples married for 20 or more years reported that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction (Fennel, 1993). Indeed, the well-known journalist/humorist, Robert Quillen (the Garrison Keillor of his day), wrote that "a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers" (Moore, 2008, p. 255). Finally, the specific relationship matters because there is evidence that the antecedents and consequences of forgiveness varied significantly across different types of family relationships (Maio et al., 2008).

Numerous studies have shown that forgiveness is robustly and positively related to core relationship constructs. Given the centrality of relationship satisfaction in relationship research, it is not surprising that substantial attention has been given to the association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness. There is a robust positive association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness; across twenty-one studies, the weighted mean correlation was .32 (Fehr et al., 2010). This relationship appears to be bidirectional in that marital quality predicts later forgiveness (e.g., Paleari et al., 2005), and forgiveness predicts later marital satisfaction (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2007). Although the association between satisfaction and forgiveness is well documented, the mechanism underlying this link remains unclear. McCullough, Rachal, et al. (1998) proposed several possible mechanisms, including a greater likelihood of confession and apology in satisfied intimate relationships, leading to more forgiveness. Another possibility is that commitment facilitates forgiveness.

Commitment and forgiveness are positively related, with a mean weighted average correlation of .23 across seventeen studies (Fehr et al., 2010). Highly committed individuals may be more motivated to forgive simply because they intend to remain in their current relationship. In fact, some experimental data show that greater commitment inhibits destructive responses to a betrayal but does not increase constructive responses (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). On the other hand, it is also plausible that following a relational transgression, forgiveness has to occur for damaged closeness and commitment to be restored: It is difficult for the hurt individual to feel close to his or her offending partner if he or she still harbors a grudge about the transgression. Consistent with this viewpoint, Tsang, McCullough, and Fincham

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(2006) offered longitudinal evidence that forgiveness promotes increases in commitment, although they found limited evidence that effects also ran in the opposite direction.

One reason that commitment is related to forgiveness may involve attributions because committed individuals are likely to interpret their partners' betrayals in a more benevolent manner, which may thereby promote forgiveness. There is substantial evidence that attributions or explanations for the offending behavior predict forgiveness among intimates (e.g., Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005). Fincham, Paleari, and Regalia (2002), for example, found that benign attributions predicted forgiveness both directly and indirectly through lessening negative emotional reactions to the transgression and increasing empathy toward the transgressing spouse. Similarly, adolescents' attributions for negative parent behavior were directly related to forgiving and indirectly related through affective reactions to the behavior (Paleari et al., 2003). It is noteworthy that attributions moderate the well-established impact of transgression severity on forgiveness. Among dating partners, perceived transgression severity was strongly related to forgiveness only when conflict-promoting attributions (e.g., inferring greater intent, selfish motivation, blameworthiness) were made for partner behavior. When benign attributions were made, severity was not significantly related to forgiveness (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005).

Forgiveness is also relevant for understanding relationship behaviors. For example, forgiveness mediates the association between attributions and behavior toward one's spouse (Fincham, 2000) or romantic partner (Eaton & Struthers, 2006). It can also be argued that transgressions that are not forgiven may spill over into future conflicts and, in turn, impede their resolution, thereby putting the couple at risk of developing the negative cycle of interaction that characterizes distressed relationships. Supporting this line of reasoning, retaliation and avoidance among husbands and a lack of benevolence among wives were linked to ineffective conflict resolution (Fincham et al., 2004). Moreover, for wives the positive dimension of forgiveness (benevolence) predicted husbands' reports of better conflict resolution 12 months later, controlling for initial levels of conflict resolution and degree of hurt (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). Finally, among adolescents, forgiving is associated with a decreased likelihood of subsequent parent–adolescent conflict (Paleari et al., 2003).

As noted earlier, empathy is theoretically related to forgiveness. Data supporting this viewpoint are both correlational and experimental. For example, McCullough et al. (1997) found support for an apology-empathy-forgiveness model and went on to show that an intervention for promoting empathy increased forgiveness and that the increase was mediated by empathy. There is also some evidence that empathy is a better predictor of forgiveness for husbands than wives, potentially because empathic behavior tends to be less common for men in relationships and therefore more influential (Fincham et al., 2002). The importance of empathy is further emphasized by the broader forgiveness literature in which empathy is strongly related to forgiveness ($r = .51$ across thirty-two studies, Fehr et al., 2010) and by research on promoting forgiveness in relationships in which increasing empathy plays a central role.

Emerging Issues

DISAGGREGATION

The emergence of sophisticated methods to examine nonindependent data (e.g., see chapter 33) is allowing a more nuanced view of relationship constructs to emerge. For example, forgiveness may reflect something about the forgiver, about the partner's forgivability, or something about their relationship. When these effects were disaggregated using the social relations model, reactions to spouse transgressions were determined largely by relationship-specific factors rather than by individual tendencies toward forgivingness or the offending partner's forgivability (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005). Moreover, greater attention to the specific relationship in which forgiveness takes place suggests that it is intrinsically different across relationships (Maio, et al., 2008). Analogous use of such methods in research on gratitude is no doubt imminent.

MECHANISM

Greater attention is turning to mechanisms that give rise to the effects associated with gratitude and forgiveness. Although the research on gratitude has not yet been conducted in the context of intimate relationships, it has direct implications for such relationships. For example, in showing that gratitude leads to lower levels of aggression, DeWall, Lambert, Pond, Kashdan, and Fincham (in press) found that empathy mediated this relation both concurrently and over time. In a similar vein, Lambert, Fincham and Stillman (2012) showed that the effects of gratitude were mediated

by positive emotion to which it gives rise and by the positive reframing of events.

As regards forgiveness, Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2011) showed that ineffective arguing partially mediated the link between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction within spouses. This mediation effect also occurred across spouses but only for avoidant-aggressive responses (unforgiveness). Recognizing possible differences in mediation for positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness, Braithwaite, [Sly](#), and Fincham ([in press](#)) focused on one that involves the relative absence of negative behavior (negative conflict tactics) and one that involves the presence of positive behavior (behavioral regulation). These two mechanisms parallel the motivational change that is said to underlie forgiveness in intimate relationships, namely, decreased negative motivation and increased positive motivation toward the transgressor. Using both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, support was found for both mechanisms, with each operating in the presence of the other and independently of commitment.

PARTNERS CAN BE BOTH BENEFACITOR AND BENEFICIARY, VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR

In close relationships partners tend to be, simultaneously or alternatively, benefactors and beneficiaries. What does this mean for understanding gratitude in relationships? Although not yet empirically investigated in regard to gratitude, this issue has received attention in forgiveness research, possibly because of differences between victim and perpetrator perspectives (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Specifically, it has been shown that victims tend to overlook details that facilitate forgiving and embellish their memories with details that make forgiving more difficult. In contrast, transgressors tend to embellish details, such as extenuating circumstances, that facilitate forgiving. In addition to replicating this finding, Kearns and Fincham (2005) showed that individuals in highly satisfying relationships are less likely to exhibit these self-serving biases than individuals in less satisfying relationships; specifically, victims did not magnify the transgression. Instead, their data are consistent with a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality leads to more benign interpretations of a transgression, which in turn promote forgiveness. Relationship satisfaction may therefore help meet the challenge forgiveness poses because the victimized partner has to “cancel a debt” that is

often perceived as bigger than the debt acknowledged by the transgressor.

But what happens in a relationship when there is an imbalance between granting and receiving forgiveness? Indeed, there is only weak evidence of reciprocity in forgiveness in family relationships (Hoyt, et al., 2005), suggesting that perceiving imbalance in forgiveness may be a more common experience than perceiving equity. Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2011) found that among married couples, spouses agreed that husbands tended to be underbenefited and wives overbenefited in regard to marital forgiveness. For wives, inequity in marital forgiveness predicted a decrease in personal and relational well-being over a 6-month period, a relationship that remained even after controlling for underbenefited versus overbenefited status. They also found that the perceived discrepancy between forgiveness given and forgiveness received was a stronger predictor of women’s marital satisfaction than total levels of forgiveness given and of forgiveness received.

A MORE BALANCED VIEW

Although gratitude and forgiveness are viewed as virtues that are beneficial for relationships, emerging data challenge this unidimensional view. McNulty (2010) recently found that less forgiving spouses experienced declines in the frequency with which their partners perpetrated psychological and physical aggression over the first 5 years of marriage, whereas more forgiving spouses actually experienced stable or growing levels of psychological and physical aggression over those years.

Whether forgiveness is beneficial or harmful in relationships appears to depend on the characteristics of the relationship in which it occurs. Using a newlywed sample, McNulty (2008) showed that forgiveness helped maintain marital satisfaction among spouses married to partners who rarely engaged in negative behaviors, but was associated with steep declines in satisfaction over 4 years among spouses married to partners who more frequently engaged in negative behaviors. Moreover, Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2010) demonstrated that more forgiving spouses experienced increases in self-respect over time when they were married to partners who were high in agreeableness, but experienced decreases in self-respect over time when they were married to partners who were low in agreeableness.

The above evidence, together with analogous findings for other virtues (e.g., loyalty responses;

see Overall, Sibley & Travaglia, 2010), challenges a fundamental assumption of positive psychology. Just as positive psychologists argued that we cannot understand healthy functioning by studying dysfunction, so it is now being argued that we cannot make inferences in the opposite direction and that the impact of virtues such as gratitude and forgiveness is context specific (see McNulty & Fincham, 2012).

INTEGRATION

Although gratitude, forgiveness, and well-being all emerged as research foci in positive psychology, “relatively little research has been conducted with the central focus of examining the connection between forgiveness, gratitude, and well-being” (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009, p. 638). As noted, however, forgiveness and gratitude have each been related to well-being, and research is now emerging on their relationship to each other as well as their joint relationship to well-being.

Neto (2007) showed that gratitude predicted forgiveness (both positive and negative dimensions) over and beyond demographic variables, religiosity, and the Big Five personality dimensions. In a similar vein, Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, and Fincham (2010) found that even though the two constructs shared common variance, each related to personality (conscientiousness, agreeableness), positive psychological processes (acceptance, self-compassion), emotional vulnerability, and general well-being when controlling for the other. Finally, Toussaint and Friedman (2009) showed that the links between forgiveness and gratitude to well-being are mediated by self-evaluative beliefs and by experienced affect.

Although encouraging, such integrative research is in its infancy and fails to quell an emerging concern, namely, that in the haste to improve the lives of those we study, researchers have touted the value of gratitude and forgiveness without systematically documenting it empirically. In light of this observation, we pay particular attention to features the two constructs share and how they may operate in common as we turn to consider fruitful avenues for future research.

Future Research Agenda

One implication of the theories and research reviewed above is that gratitude and forgiveness may have several components or processes in common. These common processes may account for associations between forgiveness and gratitude or may serve to highlight potential avenues of mutual

influence between them. This suggests several avenues of basic and applied research with the potential to enhance understanding of development in close relationships and remediation of difficulties in close relationships.

Basic Research: Mapping Connections

Gratitude and forgiveness appear to share the following general features (1) broader versus more specific forms, (2) the potential to be characterized in interpersonal versus emotional terms, (3) their ability to occur in degrees rather than all or none, (4) their organization conceptually as prototypes, and (5) their potential to be represented as two-dimensional rather than unidimensional constructs. These similarities suggest that they are likely to have a shared impact on other relationship processes and outcomes and that they need to be considered specifically in the relationship context. Likewise, both can be conceptualized within a framework of emergent goals and have links to general well-being. Finally, as highlighted in recent theoretical developments in the area of positive psychology more generally (McNulty & Fincham, 2012), it should also be noted that both are likely to have potential negative implications in some contexts. We therefore turn to basic research suggested by the potential intersection of gratitude and forgiveness, and outline a few of the many possible directions for future research.

BROADER VERSUS MORE SPECIFIC FORMS

Both broader (transpersonal) and more specific (interpersonal) forms of gratitude and forgiveness suggest a series of interesting and potentially important questions for basic research. For gratitude, the transpersonal often takes the form of “gratitude for,” often directed toward a divine or universal source, whereas the more focused interpersonal takes the form of “gratitude to,” typically directed toward a given individual’s behavior. For forgiveness, the transpersonal typically takes the form of receiving forgiveness from a divine or universal source, whereas the more focused individual interpersonal takes the form of receiving or providing forgiveness to a particular other for a particular event. At a minimum, this conceptual overlap suggests potential for the transpersonal aspects of both processes to be responsive to broader religious or spiritual activities, and points to a potentially fruitful line of research on the intersection of these processes with broader religious and spiritual factors. The similarity also raises the intriguing possibility of a

shift from a focus on significant others to a focus on universal or divine sources as experiences are aggregated and integrated across many instances. In this way, the experience of the divine becomes a form of generalizing from emotional experience in close relationships. This may also suggest potential for activities involving the divine to influence ongoing interactions with significant others, a possibility with potentially important conceptual implications.

The similarity in structure between gratitude and forgiveness also suggests the potential for an impact of interventions at the transpersonal level to produce change at the interpersonal level both within construct, and perhaps more interestingly, across constructs. For example, one might examine whether interventions designed to facilitate gratitude toward the divine or universal have effects on feelings of forgiveness by the divine or universal. Similarly, one might examine whether any impact of gratitude on felt forgiveness by the divine would have effects as well on the tendency to forgive a close other, or a specific transgression by a close other. Conversely, one might also anticipate effects going from forgiveness to gratitude. For example, an intervention designed to facilitate the experience of forgiveness by the divine or universal might also increase feelings of gratitude toward the divine and, in turn, facilitate felt gratitude for close others or for a close relationship as well as gratitude for specific benefits provided by a close others.

INTERPERSONAL VERSUS EMOTIONAL CHARACTERIZATION

There are clear interpersonal dimensions as well as emotional aspects to both gratitude and forgiveness. Mapping the similarities in both interpersonal and emotional domains has the potential to suggest additional avenues of mutual influence, as well as joint influence on other aspects of relationship evaluation and relationship processes. For example, interpersonal evaluations and emotional experience more generally appear to have a two-dimensional structure. The two-dimensional structure of forgiveness has received some attention (see Fincham et al., 2004), but this has been less true for the examination of gratitude. It is possible that clarifying the overlap in positive and negative dimensions of each construct will help identify important states that have been under-researched (i.e., conflicted or ambivalent states related to forgiveness or gratitude), as well as ways in which gains in one area may serve to set the foundation for gains in the other.

We consider an example of this approach next in the specific context of feelings of fear and safety.

Forgiveness requires overcoming negative feelings that stem from being harmed, and involves working through rather than avoiding the emotional pain associated with the transgression. Conversely, gratitude involves experiencing and celebrating benefits received, with an expectation of continued security and safety in terms of the source of the beneficence. This suggests that, in many cases, forgiveness may require overcoming fear and avoidance, whereas gratitude contains a core expectation of continued safety and security. At a minimum, there may be opposing processes at work that can be explored and potentially harnessed. For example, working through avoidance and fear to lay the foundation for forgiveness may also provide greater access to the experience of gratitude and so enhance the experience of meaning and connection with others both within the relationship or more broadly.

A related mechanism that increased gratitude and forgiveness may hold in common, and that may influence relationship outcomes, is changed motivational processes in terms of another person. Specifically, forgiveness and gratitude may both involve changed attributions about the other, as well as choice of goals in the relationship, thereby changing future intentions and willingness to engage in pro-relationship behaviors. For example, both forgiveness and gratitude may increase empathy, helping couples to think of others and their needs, and giving those needs greater consideration (i.e., leading to increased beneficence in the relationship).

DEGREES OF FORGIVENESS AND GRATITUDE

In the forgiveness literature it has been noted explicitly that forgiveness may be partial or incomplete. This may occur either because forgiveness is inherently a process that unfolds over time, because the process is blocked at some point, or because only one dimension of forgiveness has been pursued (e.g., revenge reduction) without attention to other dimensions (i.e. increased beneficence). Although there is some recognition of the potential for different degrees of gratitude, it has received less attention, suggesting potential for conceptual clarification. Particularly in light of the potential for some ambivalence with regard to partner benefits, gratitude may be better conceptualized as a process than as a simple immediate response, and may be better viewed as having at least two distinct dimensions. That is, gratitude may vary not only in the magnitude of the initial emotional response

but also in its time course and potential to last over time: The time course for a positive dimension of gratitude (celebration of benefits provided by the partner) may be different than the time course for change in the negative dimension of gratitude (reduction in felt constraint, obligation, or other negative reactions to partner provided benefits). To the extent that there is a different, perhaps quicker time course for positive than negative dimensions in each case, it may be that there is greater potential for change in positive dimensions to demonstrate an impact on negative dimensions both within constructs and across constructs (e.g., when gratitude facilitates forgiveness).

In marital forgiveness research, the usual focus has been on specific offenses. However, it is also possible to examine forgiveness at the dyadic level, which represents a person's general tendency to forgive offenses that occur within a particular relationship (McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000). It seems likely that a similar distinction could be made between gratitude for specific spouse behaviors and gratitude that is focused on a more general tendency to feel grateful for one's relationship or one's spouse. Although this level of forgiveness or gratitude is likely characterized by different predictors and correlates than offense-specific forgiveness or incident-specific gratitude, it will be important to assess the strength of the association between dyadic-level processes and specific event-level processes in each case as well as across constructs. Similarly, when exploring event-level processes, it will be necessary to compare single occurrences with repeated events. For example, a husband trying to forgive his wife for her one-time infidelity likely experiences a much different forgiveness process than a partner faced with his wife's fourth affair. Likewise, a spouse feeling grateful for partner support in response to a particular stressor may experience the event differently than one who has experienced sustained support over months or years.

A focus on sequences of events and the unfolding of processes over time also raises broader questions about how history of other relationship processes may influence both forgiveness and gratitude as well as the relationship between them. For example, do past transgressions only influence the forgiveness of subsequent offenses, or do they also influence the experience of gratitude as well? Are there boundary conditions that include or go beyond general positive and negative relationship affect that magnify or minimize the impact of specific events on the experience of gratitude or forgiveness in relationships?

At a minimum, it may be important to consider the potential impact of history of relationship problems in moderating responses to partner-provided benefits and partner transgressions. However, it may also be useful to broaden the canvas to include consideration of the impact of earlier experiences, such as those in the family of origin, or contextual experiences such as influences from ongoing work, community, or other stressors.

TWO-DIMENSIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR FORGIVENESS AND GRATITUDE

As prior reviews have suggested, there appears to be a two-dimensional structure to overall relationship satisfaction. Mattson, Paldino, and Johnson (2007) used the two-dimensional measure developed by Fincham and Linfield (1997) to demonstrate its viability as a measure of relationship quality for engaged couples and its ability to account for unique variance in observed behavior and attributions. Similarly, Rogge, Funk, Lee, and Saavedra (2009) showed that use of the two-dimensional measure yielded meaningful treatment outcome results that were not evident on a unidimensional measure of satisfaction, the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT). Accordingly, there is a good foundation for examining the two-dimensional structure of both forgiveness and gratitude and for an examination of their connection to each other both within and across positive and negative dimensions.

Of particular interest in the context of two-dimensional approaches to measurement of forgiveness and gratitude is the potential to capture "ambivalence." It has been noted that spouses may experience ambivalence toward forgiving their partner or toward the partner more generally (see Fincham & Rogge, 2010). It seems likely that a similar dynamic may occur for gratitude. That is, spouses may feel benefited by the partner in an important way and yet also experience negative reactions because they view the benefit as unfairly controlling or as incurring unwanted obligation and debt. This could lead to ambivalence, a state that is different from merely feeling negative or positive toward the partner. For both forgiveness and gratitude, ambivalence could be assessed directly by asking the spouse explicitly about feelings of ambivalence. Conversely, it could be assessed implicitly through combining positive and negative patterns of evaluation. To the extent that spouses think more about specific events, one would anticipate a greater impact of ambivalence in that domain (e.g., Kachadourian, Fincham & Davila, 2005). However, it is also

possible for effects across domains to emerge, with greater thought about gratitude inducing partner behaviors leading to greater forgiveness as well as greater gratitude toward the partner, but only for those with little ambivalence about receiving the benefits the partner is providing.

SHARED IMPACT OF FORGIVENESS AND GRATITUDE ON OTHER RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

Gratitude and forgiveness both involve shifts in motivation with long-term implications for motivation toward the partner. Fincham and Beach (1999) argue that motivational processes of the sort that may be affected by gratitude and forgiveness influence relationship conflict and enhance recovery from negative interactions that have already occurred. Specifically, they hypothesize that when couples perceive a conflict of interest, they may switch from the cooperative goals they typically profess to a set of emergent goals that are highly adversarial in nature. Spouses locked in conflict may find themselves focused on “getting their own way,” or “not losing an argument.” In this motivational state, knowing how to reach cooperative solutions may not produce a positive outcome. That is, while they are focused on getting their own way, partners may engage in negative behaviors toward each other even when they “know better.”

The above formulation suggests the value of examining the joint impact of gratitude and forgiveness on arguments and recovery from negative interactions in close relationships. In particular, a focus on shifts in underlying motivations suggests potential impact on two distinct processes in close relationships (see also chapter 3). First, practices that highlight or prime gratitude or forgiveness should have an impact on conscious, deliberative decisions, leading to changes in explicit intentions to behave in particular ways and to practice relationship-building behaviors across a range of contexts. At the same time, practices that encourage greater gratitude and forgiveness should also increase less conscious processes, leading to decreases in the felt attraction of various negative reactions such as revenge and increases in the attractiveness of activities that benefit the partner. This could lead to substantial links between gratitude or forgiveness and greater prosocial behavior and social bonds (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; McCullough & Tsang, 2004), as well as lower levels of psychopathology (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder; Masingale et al., 2001). Accordingly, examining shifts in motivations that

occur as a result of a focus on gratitude or forgiveness may help identify their broader joint impact on a range of relationship behaviors as well as personal well-being and health outcomes.

Because gratitude and forgiveness highlight the views and needs of those toward whom the gratitude or forgiveness is focused, they may have the potential to bring behavioral intentions under pressure to reflect the views of those to whom one is grateful or to whom one is extending forgiveness (e.g. Gibbons, Gerrard, & Lane, 2003). If so, there could be downstream effects on behaviors toward one’s partner across a range of settings. For example, practicing activities that support gratitude could decrease behaviors likely to negatively affect the relationship (e.g., infidelity). Similarly, constructive motivations may be enhanced by activities that prime “implemental intentions” (i.e., plans or means of showing gratitude), thereby influencing future behavior (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996), including forgiving behavior. Because there is considerable potential for gratitude and activities that promote gratitude to influence implemental planning, it may increase the likelihood of a range of relationship-enhancing behaviors among those who have greater experience of gratitude, helping to make the internal experience of gratitude into a public, stable relationship reality.

A final factor potentially linking forgiveness and gratitude is the extent to which gratitude and forgiveness promote a positive relational context, reinforcing general pro-marriage attitudes and commitment to marriage, and fostering a sense of “we-ness” as opposed to two separate individuals (e.g., Karremans & van Lange, 2008b). These potential impacts on relationship context also highlight the important issues of reciprocal effects between relationship context and forgiveness and gratitude.

RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT AS A FOCUS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

There is often a temptation among researchers to focus on discrete responses to particular events, namely, specific incidents that set the occasion for forgiveness or the experience of gratitude. This is understandable because specific events are more readily captured and responses can be more readily described. However, as our analysis of forgiveness and gratitude suggests, both may be better represented as a series of behaviors unfolding over time that are linked to, and influenced by, a series of co-occurring internal events. If so, it is difficult to

capture the most important aspects of forgiveness and gratitude if they are viewed only in terms of a reaction to a specific event. In addition, it seems likely that in the context of close relationships, the unfolding of forgiveness or gratitude will be influenced by the relationship history of the partners. Therefore, understanding forgiveness and gratitude against a broader background of ongoing relationship events poses a number of challenges for a more complete understanding of the way couples navigate the broader issues of “transgression” and “benefit” in relationships. To better capture such effects, it will be important to examine naturally occurring interconnections between gratitude and forgiveness over time in the context of other ongoing relationship events.

EXAMINING RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS OVER TIME

An important implication of the potential overlap in underlying processes and mechanisms is that researchers using longitudinal designs should expect to find evidence of mutual influence between forgiveness and gratitude over time, albeit not always in straightforward ways. Sometimes the connections between forgiveness and gratitude over time may be modified by relationship history or other salient relationship events. For example, if transgressions undermine the experience of gratitude in the relationship, this may feed back to create additional barriers for future forgiveness. Teasing apart the longitudinal pathways linking forgiveness and gratitude in relationships, identifying feedback loops over time, and examining the impact across different levels of forgiveness and gratitude may be critical for the understanding of gratitude in response to particular partner relationship behaviors as well as understanding forgiveness in response to partner transgressions.

Consider, for example, the investigation of naturally occurring forgiveness and the variety of ways in which it is communicated (e.g., Kelley, 1998). If a spouse indicates that he or she forgives the partner, the way this is expressed is likely to be dependent on feelings of gratitude as well as other positive sentiments toward the partner. Direct expressions of forgiveness may be particularly likely in the context of significant ongoing feelings of gratitude, whereas indirect expressions may be more likely in the context of a positive relationship history that includes feelings of gratitude, and conditional forgiveness may be most likely in the relative absence of feelings of gratitude. Accordingly, assessment of gratitude

may help better account for between couple communication styles in the way forgiveness is communicated and unfolds over time.

Such research on the connection of gratitude and forgiveness may have applied value as well. Communication of forgiveness can easily go awry. If both partners have a history of feeling gratitude to the other, many of the pitfalls associated with forgiveness are less likely to occur. For example, attempts to forgive are less likely to be interpreted as controlling, a put down, or retaliation in the context of a strong relationship history of gratitude. Thus, a prior history of gratitude may diffuse potential sources of self-perpetuating conflict and help couples more smoothly engage in relationship repair. Likewise, both parties are less likely to see forgiveness as condoning hurtful behavior if the forgiveness occurs in the context of gratitude and a desire by both to return to that prior situation. Third, the expression of forgiveness is also less likely to be abused (e.g., used to convey contempt, engage in one-upmanship) in the context of a history of relationship gratitude. Accordingly, gratitude may have a protective function in the context of relationship repair efforts as well as making such efforts more likely.

CAUSAL RELATIONS

The forgoing discussion suggests the likely value of longitudinal and experimental research on the relationship between forgiveness and gratitude. Without such research, it will be difficult to draw any conclusions about the causal relationships between forgiveness and gratitude or the differences in their patterning over time. For example, even if there is a robust association between forgiveness and gratitude in cross-sectional studies, this does not tell us whether forgiveness enhances gratitude or gratitude enhances forgiveness, or whether these constructs are reciprocally related. Research is needed to identify direction of effects between specific forgiveness dimensions and other relationship variables and to better examine cross-spouse effects over time. This latter issue will be addressed more fully and more adequately as data sets for couples begin to utilize the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) to examine relationships across time. APIM allows analysis of actor and partner effects by examining regression paths between a characteristic of one spouse with another characteristic of the same spouse (an actor effect) or with a characteristic of the partner (a partner effect). The APIM can provide a useful approach to deal

with the interdependency of dyadic data, allowing, for example, an unbiased examination of the effect of forgiveness on gratitude or the effect of gratitude on forgiveness among husbands and wives, and the opportunity to directly examine gender differences for effects in each direction.

SELF-PROCESSES

The role of various self-processes in gratitude has been largely neglected, but the topic of self-forgiveness has begun to receive some attention. Self-forgiveness may be necessary if relationship partners are to move forward after they have transgressed (Dillon, 2001; Holmgren, 1998) and may be critical to the future experience of gratitude following relationship transgressions. Self-forgiveness may therefore be an essential part of a set of motivational changes that allow an individual to fully experience the benefits provided by the partner and so create opportunities to feel and accumulate a sense of gratitude toward the partner. More specifically, to the extent an individual is motivated to avoid stimuli associated with their own transgression, and thereby block the experience of guilt or shame, they may be motivated to avoid experiencing benefits from the partner because it prompts a substantial admixture of guilt or shame. Self-forgiveness may therefore play an interesting role in promoting positive, grateful feelings toward the spouse in the aftermath of an individual's own hurtful behavior. Of course, self-forgiveness may begin with, or be substantially facilitated by, partner forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005), illustrating additional potential links between forgiveness and gratitude. In this respect, the interplay between partner forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and the experience of gratitude in relationships is a potentially fruitful area that has yet to be explored.

Applied Research

The strong potential for gratitude and forgiveness to create mutually supporting feedback loops and to influence both each other and additional relationship processes, relationship outcomes, and personal outcomes suggests that there may be considerable potential for integrated approaches to facilitate both gratitude and forgiveness, and that these approaches may have considerable applied significance.

Below we consider several examples of ways that integrated relationship enhancement approaches might work. First we consider the use of gratitude enhancement as a potential addition to existing forgiveness programs or as a component of programs

that might be developed to increase the future availability of forgiveness as a way to enhance relationship resilience. In doing so, we also consider ways to combine forgiveness and gratitude in formats that would make them more readily available as well as more pertinent to nondistressed couples. We conclude by discussing the boundary conditions potentially separating situations in which gratitude and forgiveness are beneficial to the relationship and the individuals involved from those situations in which there may be substantial costs.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS IN USING GRATITUDE TO IMPROVE INTERVENTIONS FOR FORGIVENESS

As noted, forgiveness interventions abound (e.g., Burchard et al., 2003; Gordon et al., 2000; Ripley & Worthington, 2002), with a majority focused on facilitating forgiveness by increasing empathy for the offender. A weakness of such approaches is that they focus primarily on decreasing retaliatory impulses by making the transgressor more understandable, but they do not provide a mechanism for increasing benevolence motivations. Thus they tend to overlook a dimension that is critical for long-term outcomes with relationship partners.

Some help in this regard may be provided by experimental programs developed to enhance gratitude (e.g. Emmons et al., 2003; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Building on basic research, it appears that enhancing gratitude may influence both positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness (Neto, 2007) and so may confer substantial benefits as an additive component to current forgiveness strategies. It also appears that experiencing the emotions associated with gratitude may be helpful, with substantial "spillover" beyond the benefactor (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), suggesting that a focus on encouraging recollection of kindnesses received in the past, or monitoring one's own ongoing acts of kindness may serve to facilitate forgiveness in some cases. Specifically, it may be possible to combine empathy for the partner, already a common element of forgiveness programs, with interventions to enhance felt gratitude (for a range of past kindnesses received from the partner or from others) as well as expressions of kindness toward the partner or toward others. A limitation of this approach is that it may prove easier to facilitate a pattern of gratitude before the occurrence of a substantial transgression or series of transgressions rather than afterward. This may lead to an advantage for the incorporation of gratitude enhancement in preventative programs.

Nonetheless, a potential role for gratitude in forgiveness interventions seems well worth exploring and we do so below.

The first element of a “gratitude enhancement” component might outline the benefits that accrue from experiencing gratitude, and expressing kindness, even in contexts that do not seem conducive, such as the aftermath of a transgression or the experience of hurt in an intimate relationship. This could be followed by a focus on the benefits of expressing gratitude “for” the experiences of kindness one has received and a disposition to express kindness in one’s everyday life. Finally the program could set the stage for identifying regular activities designed to encourage expression of gratitude to others or one’s partner or to cognitively rehearse incidents that occasion feelings of gratitude toward, or for, the partner or others.

In the context of forgiveness interventions, gratitude interventions may require more substantial introduction because participants might not be ready to engage in exercises related to gratitude when they are still feeling hurt. One approach in such cases might be to make the case for experiencing gratitude and perhaps to shift the initial focus onto individuals other than the partner. Likewise, because gratitude that includes the partner may be substantially easier when revenge motives have decreased, in the context of interventions that focus on recovery from serious relationship transgressions, gratitude expression might reasonably be expected to follow after a focus on reducing revenge motives (i.e., the current focus of most forgiveness programs). In the context of prevention programs for relatively happy couples, talking about response to a transgression may seem artificial compared with discussion of how to express, experience, and celebrate gratitude. Accordingly, in the prevention context, a focus on gratitude enhancement might precede a discussion of the value of forgiveness. Likewise, interventions designed to enhance recollection of kindness received could be introduced early in most programs to provide an initial boost to beneficence motivation.

ORIENTATION PHASE: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR GRATITUDE

The first component of an intervention to enhance gratitude would screen participants who are not appropriate for the intervention either because of the presence of acute psychopathology, current relationship violence, or other factors that suggest a focus on enhancing gratitude toward the partner

would be inappropriate or premature. As boundary conditions for the benefit of gratitude are better articulated, and documented, the list of exclusion criteria could grow or change.

Although not yet well developed, it seems likely that adopting a two-dimensional view of gratitude will prove useful. If so, this suggests that change in gratitude might involve movement along two dimensions: a positive dimension that might be labeled celebration of benefit and reflects the more commonly recognized aspect of gratitude, and a negative dimension that might be labeled “reduction in quid pro quo view of the relationship.” (Clark & Mills, 1979; Lambert, et al., 2010). This latter dimension may be particularly important in amplifying the benefits of gratitude for the reemergence of trust and felt security in the relationship for cases in which reconciliation is a targeted outcome. Accordingly, it is likely that assessment of these dimensions will be important both to document gains in gratitude and to guide and focus the intervention. Because gratitude may be determined in part by attributions for partner behavior as well as degree of perceived benefit to the self, these dimensions seem particularly important to monitor in gratitude enhancement as well.

Initial assessments may help tailor intervention to some degree. Persons who are unable to imagine feeling grateful for anything their partner has done may need to spend more time on general gratitude enhancement focused on kindness received in other areas or from other people before they are able to benefit from a focus on the partner. Likewise, persons who tend to attribute most positive partner behavior to external factors or view partner “kindness” as an attempt to exercise control may require preliminary activities before they are ready to benefit from the proposed intervention. Conversely, to the extent that such assessments predict outcome, they may indicate the value of alternative interventions.

Following initial screening and assessment, potential participants could be asked to write a brief statement of what it is they wish to achieve from participating in the program. This exercise is designed to help clarify for the participant what it is they are looking for and should help set the stage for the two remaining elements of this first component of the program: a guided evaluation of whether the program is likely to be able to meet their needs and basic education about what gratitude to and for another does and does not entail. These evaluation and education elements would be realized through use of the Socratic method. Having written down

what they are seeking, participants would review their statement with the help of a set of guided questions.

For general gratitude “for” enhancement, participants would be asked whether there are specific events or relationships or aspects of their life for which they feel grateful. For enhancement of gratitude “to” others, they would be asked to identify occasions on which someone else invested in them or showed them a great kindness that was not required. Once identified, they would be asked to use standard questions to explore and deepen their recollection of the occasions and their own reactions to the kindness. Likewise, they would be asked whether there are specific events they can identify that have conveyed their partner’s love and investment in them. Is there a series of events that the partner has done for them that have accumulated over time and are still ongoing? If the latter is present, the individual might add components of the program designed to facilitate gratitude “for” the relationship with their partner as well as “gratitude to” their partner.

A final component of the orientation phase of the intervention would provide participants with a model of gratitude that describes gratitude as a willingness to participate in deep communion with others and to show kindness to them as well as to celebrate the presence of kindness received. As such, it is an act of strength and faith in the relationship, but it can also help increase the strength of the relationship. It might also be noted that gratitude need not connote obligation and therefore is not a sign of indebtedness or weakness. Rather, gratitude is an affirmation of one’s view that the relationship is strong enough and secure enough to warrant viewing it as “kinship,” a bond that will not go away and that is not subject to the ups and downs of circumstance. It could be noted that this view of relationships may seem “quaint,” but in fact, it appears to be deeply rooted in human social and perhaps biological evolution.

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE: INCREASING GRATITUDE

If the individual is able to describe benefits received from the partner, the partner-specific component of the program could begin. The first component of the partner-specific program would encourage participants to think about, and write about in detail, the complex set of sensations, thoughts, and feelings they may have had in response to their partners’ loving behavior or

other partner behavior that benefited them. If they can identify a range of warm positive emotions, the exercise would have them focus on those reactions and elaborate them. If they cannot identify events, or cannot describe any positive emotions they had in response, the goal of the exercise would be to identify those aspects of their response that might diminish their ability to experience gratitude. Of particular interest would be any reactions suggesting that gratitude implies an obligation to reciprocate over the short-term or that they have experienced a sense of indebtedness. Thoughts suggestive of a “quid pro quo” orientation could provide a natural segue way for discussion of the importance of communal versus exchange relationships as a foundation for feeling gratitude and for engaging in the acts of kindness most likely to contribute to the experience of gratitude. Likewise, absence of warm or positive reactions might lead to questions about whether they think the partner was “only doing what he/she should have done,” or “what he/she had to do.” Again, this might lead back to a discussion of reducing a quid pro quo view of the relationship.

A second goal would be to have the person acknowledge benefits they have received from the partner, and begin to expand their list of benefits provided by their partner. They would be encouraged to continue to explore and write about the emotional reaction to each event and elaborate these reactions as described above. It is likely to be less helpful if participants write only about thoughts and conclusions rather than including a focus on feelings and emotional responses.

MAINTENANCE PHASE: CREATING A BASIS FOR PERSISTENCE

The final component of an intervention to enhance gratitude is to give it a future orientation that encourages (1) writing about potential challenges to the experience of gratitude, particularly a quid pro quo attitude toward positive partner behavior; (2) direct and indirect expressions of gratitude to the partner, and (3) transitioning from expressions of gratitude to the partner to expressions of gratitude “for” the partner. Thus, participants would write about situations that may draw them into quid pro quo thinking and how they might overcome these. Then they might develop implemental intentions, specifying ways they might display kindness or express gratitude in the future, and develop a plan that would work for them to express gratitude “for” their partner.

Two further written exercises are likely to be helpful in expanding the impact of the intervention. The first requires participants to write about what they have learned through their association with their partner, and how their relationship has provided meaning for them. This builds on prior writing exercises and is designed to help the person develop a coherent narrative about their positive experiences with their partner, something that may serve to amplify their feelings of gratitude “for” their partner. A second, related exercise would be to write about the positive changes they have experienced as a function of their relationship with their partner, a task that is designed to reinforce gratitude and draw attention to a range of benefits that may emerge after reflection.

IDENTIFYING BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

As noted by McNulty and Fincham (2012), there are likely to be boundary conditions for all relationship “virtues.” That is, there are likely to be conditions under which more of the “virtue” is counterproductive rather than beneficial to the individual or to the couple. This idea was implicit in our suggestion that some couples or individuals might be screened out of intervention, but it deserves more explicit mention as well. Potential limits of forgiveness and boundary conditions have been discussed above, but the limits on the use of gratitude enhancement to facilitate forgiveness training or to build greater long-term resilience in couple relationships deserves a second look, with possible boundary conditions in mind.

One circumstance in which more gratitude might be counterproductive is when individuals are insufficiently able to acknowledge their own strengths and the value they bring to the relationship. That is, in the context of substantial felt dependency, it may be more productive to help the individuals gain perspective on their own contributions first, before deepening their sense of gratitude to their partner. Some sense of equity in contribution to the relationship may be essential for maximum benefit from gratitude enhancement. For individuals who do not feel they are making a contribution to the relationship, gratitude enhancement may inadvertently reinforce feelings of personal inadequacy, making it difficult for them to benefit fully from the positive experience of gratitude. A second circumstance that might render gratitude enhancement counterproductive is if the individual is already experiencing high levels of gratitude. That is, there may be asymptotic value for gratitude such that it is particularly

helpful up to a certain level, but does not contribute much to positive individual or couple functioning after that point (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009). Currently, the level at which the benefits of gratitude are maximized is not known, so this remains an area for future investigation.

A third circumstance that might render gratitude enhancement counterproductive is contemplation of separation or divorce. Although one might imagine there could be particularly salient benefits from focusing on gratitude enhancement in such circumstances, it is likely that a focus on the partner would highlight the discrepancy between ongoing, naturally occurring thoughts about the partner and the exercises in the program, inducing reactance and a “rebound” effect. That is, individuals in very distressed relationships who are already contemplating exiting the relationship might find gratitude exercises focused on the partner to be an opportunity for rumination about perceived partner inadequacies rather than an opportunity to identify partner strengths. At the same time, gratitude enhancement in the context of divorce may exacerbate guilt or other self-directed negative emotions, with unknown consequences at present. Finally, gratitude enhancement seems potentially destructive in the context of abusive relationships. In this context, the gratitude exercises might prove to be invalidating of the individual and/or appear to be validating of the oppressive relationship environment. This has the potential to place an intolerable burden on the individuals, even if they entered the program willingly.

Conclusion

The preceding review suggests many potential areas of overlap between the conceptualization of forgiveness and gratitude, and correspondingly many opportunities for integration and cross-fertilization. Both forgiveness and gratitude are complex constructs that will likely continue to attract considerable attention from researchers. At the same time, our analysis suggests that there is currently an opportunity for these two literatures to combine and give rise to potentially exciting new developments in both basic and applied arenas.

At the conceptual level, attempts to consider forgiveness and gratitude jointly in the context of close relationships is likely to give rise to deeper understanding of shared mechanisms as well as connection to fundamental relationships issues of relationship safety, relationship meaning, and relationship commitment. Basic research on the intersection

of these constructs is likely to give rise to a better understanding of how relationships develop and are maintained, as well as new information about the way these different aspects of relationships may influence and support each other over time. Finally, applied research on the intersection of forgiveness and gratitude has the potential to provide improvements in intervention for distressed relationships as well as approaches to enhance relationship resilience and to strengthen relationships for the long term.

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