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Jill Iroz Webb  
jwiroz@gmail.com

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# The Function of Gratitude in Marriage: Building Ties That Bind

Jill I. Webb

Brigham Young University

*Recent literature on the function of gratitude extends the known benefits of this practice beyond facilitating exchanges in social life and explains how it plays a significant role in close relationships, such as marriage. This article examines how the emotion of gratitude helps individuals develop, maintain, and increase bonds with a high-quality partner in a close relationship in a variety of ways. For instance, gratitude is key in promoting relationship maintenance behaviors, such as responsiveness and commitment, and signaling feelings of appreciation between partners that can provide a sense of security and help partners to recognize the value of a mutually desirable relationship. However, research reveals that people with an ungrateful disposition can act as a weak link in couples' gratitude processes, and without increasing their gratitude through effort, can demonstrate decreased marital satisfaction. Perceptions of insincere gratitude can be related to a decline in marital satisfaction as well. Couples who often express sincere gratitude tend to be more responsive to partners' needs, which is positively related to greater relationship satisfaction. Thus, gratitude is a mechanism that can remind couples of their love for one another and bind them closer together, functioning as a communal process that can result in positive outcomes for the well-being of the marital relationship.*

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In most cultures and throughout history, gratitude has been hailed as a normative virtue in social life and has a highly esteemed place in Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Hindu beliefs and traditions (McCullough et al., 2001). Many consider gratitude to be a positive emotional response experienced by the receiver after another person has intentionally given something of worth (McCullough et al., 2001). Specifically, gratitude can arise from others' good deeds, encouraging positive feelings toward their benefactor (Algoe et al., 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011). From a psychological perspective, gratitude is a moral affect that is economical in nature—focusing on cost, value, and repayment in social exchanges (McCullough et al., 2001). While the historical interest of gratitude has focused on its role in social exchange with strangers and new acquaintances, recent scholarship has shifted to seeking a greater understanding of the interpersonal role of gratitude in building and maintaining ongoing relationships (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012; Leong et al., 2020). Efforts in understanding

gratitude as a communal and relational exchange rather than as solely as an economical concept opens the door to exploring how gratitude operates between romantic partners and its benefits for the relationship as a whole.

Experiencing gratitude increases prosocial behavior toward others and has been known to increase the likelihood of the formation of interpersonal relationships (Gordon et al., 2011). Regardless of gender or even of the length of a relationship, several benefits of gratitude in close relationships have been identified (Kubacka et al., 2011). For example, the emotions that come with expressions of gratitude enables positive change by motivating individuals to broaden their thought processes and actions toward more uplifting directions that lead to healthier functioning and emotional well-being (Gordon et al., 2011). Meanwhile, the perception of insincere gratitude relates to a decline in marital satisfaction (Leong et al., 2020). Individuals who are grateful toward their partner are more satisfied, connected, and committed in their relationship (Gordon et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012) and are more likely to sacrifice for their partner. Sacrifice is an essential ingredient in gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001) with motives playing a role. For example, individuals are most likely to feel grateful for their partner's sacrifices not so much because of what they do but why they do things to improve the relationship—putting emphasis on the motives behind the sacrifice (Visserman et al., 2018).

When authentic and repeated expressions of gratitude arise from a grateful disposition, they can contribute to the personal well-being of others and to the relationship (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Leong et al., 2020). In addition, research links an individual's high level of gratitude to their partner's report of positive well-being and happiness (Gordon et al., 2011; Kindt et al., 2017; McNulty & Dugas, 2019). In sum, gratitude benefits relationships in the short term, can assist couples to maintain lasting relationships, and promotes the relational well-being of married couples, thus predicting overall relationship satisfaction and marital happiness (Gordon et al., 2011).

Individuals can better understand gratitude's role in strengthening a relationship with a high-quality partner from a theoretical perspective referred to as the find,

remind, and bind theory (Algoe, 2012). This relational theory focuses on gratitude as a helpful solution to some central problems of survival—finding and maintaining a high-quality partnership (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016). From this perspective, gratitude as a social virtue is a mechanism that can help people find good relationship partners or remind them of existing good partners, and then, bind the couple closer together (Algoe, 2012). The find, remind, and bind theory proposes that gratitude functions to promote close relationships by helping people identify responsive partners and nurture responsive exchanges with those partners over time (Algoe, 2012).

When benefits appropriately align with the current state of the relationship, responsive behaviors occur between partners, which can bring grateful feelings to help the couple become emotionally closer than before (Algoe, 2012). A key insight from this theoretical model is that gratitude potentially functions as a communal interaction process that can bring rewarding outcomes in close relationships (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Leong et al., 2020; Vollmann et al., 2019). These findings suggest the importance of considering the function of gratitude as an interpersonal process that promotes relationship maintenance through the mutually responsive behaviors that occur between recipient and benefactor and where one person's gratitude positively impacts the other person's outcomes (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011).

Appreciative feelings and gratitude are interchangeable terms in the research of social exchange, and the presence of these feelings and expressions generally motivate people to want to stay committed to their partner (Joel et al., 2013) and behave in ways that will serve to maintain their relationship (Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). There appears to be something special about feeling appreciated and being appreciative that motivates partners to simultaneously respond to one another's needs (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020), provides them with a sense of security, and helps them recognize they have a valuable relationship worth maintaining (Gordon et al., 2012). Responsiveness and commitment thus mediate the link between one partner's appreciative feelings and the reports of partners feeling appreciated (Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). Although many accept the emotion of gratitude as a moral value and an instrument in social exchange, couples who sincerely express gratitude to one another can appreciably strengthen their relationship because grateful behavior both generates and reminds spouses of positive feelings for one another and promotes relationship maintenance behaviors that further bind the couple. This literature review will first discuss how gratitude

reminds partners of mutual, positive emotions and will then discuss how gratitude promotes responsiveness in ways that help to maintain relational connections.

### **Gratitude Reminds Partners of Positive Emotions**

Making the connection between gratitude and relationship growth has led scholars to gravitate toward better understanding the functions of gratitude for developing, maintaining, and increasing close bonds (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020; Visserman et al., 2018). Herein lies the need for a theoretical approach that is relationship based and extends beyond prior research to investigate how gratitude functions as a mechanism for forming and sustaining close relationships (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Leong et al., 2020; Vollmann et al., 2019). According to the find, remind, and bind theory, the response to gratitude serves to improve the relationship by updating the partner's view of the benefactor. Or, in other words, gratitude's response helps a partner in finding a high-quality partner or reminding them of their current high-quality partner—binding the couple closer together (Algoe, 2012).

Since many consider gratitude as an emotional mechanism for social exchange, it can function as a reminder of positive emotions. In this function, the repeated exchange of benefits is thought to establish trust between recipient and benefactor (McCullough et al., 2001) and to facilitate prosocial behavior (Kubacka et al., 2011), which can increase the likelihood of strong interpersonal relationships (Algoe, 2012; Gordon et al., 2011). Additionally, this find, remind, and bind theory identifies an overlooked aspect of situations that can trigger gratitude; when the emotion of gratitude is experienced in the response to a benefit, most often the recipient noticed a responsive gesture from the benefactor that tells the recipient that they are cared for (Algoe, 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). A responsive gesture that signals understanding, approval, and caring for their partner is considered to be a social contact that stands out from all the rest (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011).

These positive interpersonal experiences can help to remind couples of why they love each other and can motivate relational growth (Algoe, 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011), especially since gratitude can be understood as an emotion that results from recognizing that a positive outcome occurred due to another person's thoughtful or responsive behavior (Algoe, 2012; McCullough et al., 2001). In this light, gratitude experienced by both partners often motivates pro-relationship maintenance behavior which is likely to have a positive effect on relationship

satisfaction in ongoing relationships (Kubacka et al., 2011). Furthermore, gratitude may increase desires to gratify needs between partners, which can motivate reciprocated benevolence towards one another, suggesting that gratitude is an interpersonal process that brings positive outcomes (Gordon et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011; McNulty & Dugas, 2019).

For couples who may already experience challenges such as high marital conflict, avoidant attachment, or self-focused behaviors by one or both of the partners, gratitude appears to mediate some of the negative effects (Gordon et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2013; Manalel et al., 2019; Vollmann et al., 2019). For example, higher levels of attachment avoidance were related to decreased feelings of gratitude toward partner, which in turn was associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Vollmann et al., 2019). People high in attachment avoidance may perceive their partners as unappreciative of their relationship, which may influence an inhibition of gratitude toward the partner (Gordon et al., 2012). On the same note, individuals who have challenges with power and who are self-focused appear to have less gratitude for their romantic partner whereas other-focused individuals appear to be more grateful and have the ability to view their relationship as a partnership (Gordon et al., 2013). Indeed, couples' relational tension can threaten the relationship's well-being and can be especially damaging when both partners experience the tension simultaneously (Manalel et al., 2019). Findings indicate that partners may influence each other's conflict behavior as well as increase relational tension, negativity, and resentment, resulting in lower relational well-being (Manalel et al., 2019). Herein lies the importance of avoiding tension and other negative influences as ways to improve relationship satisfaction by incorporating more positive interpersonal emotions such as gratefulness as a protective factor in order to strengthen the relationship.

Research has demonstrated a significant relationship between one's grateful disposition and improved relationship quality (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016), indicating that individuals with grateful dispositions have a greater likelihood of perceiving their partner's grateful mood, which becomes a positive predictor of their own marital satisfaction (Leong et al., 2020). However, research has shown that when one or both of the partners show dispositional gratitude, these tendencies can have both benefits and costs that impact various interpersonal aspects of relational satisfaction (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Those with gratitude are more likely to be helpful, empathic, positive, and more content with life (Leong et al., 2020). In addition, individuals with a grateful disposition generally have a lower intensity of negative emotions and have a tendency to identify and respond with grateful emotion

to those from whom one benefits (Leong et al., 2020). Gratitude appears to have especially important benefits when both partners are high in dispositional gratitude, which maintains higher relationship satisfaction over time; however, when both partners are low in gratitude, partners report lower marital satisfaction (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). If one partner has an ungrateful disposition, it acts as a weak link that is enough to disturb relationship satisfaction for both partners (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Thus, romantic relationships can be especially fulfilling when both partners manifest gratitude compared to relationships where neither partner manifests gratitude (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Thus, gratitude can often motivate individuals to engage in efforts to maintain their relationships, even though the efforts to do so may take intentional effort (Kubacka et al., 2011).

Perceiving one's partner as grateful is also important to sustaining one's willingness to engage in more helping behaviors as well as prevent obligatory attitudes in the future (Kindt et al., 2017; Kubacka et al., 2011). For example, findings reveal that individuals with partners who suffer with chronic pain were more motivated to help after perceiving daily gratitude from their partner (Kindt et al., 2017). When the helping partner perceived more gratitude from their partner, they felt more appreciated for their efforts on previous days and are more willing to help moving forward. Considering the benefits and costs of gratitude in a romantic relationship, research shows that having a partnership high in gratitude is more beneficial to relationship satisfaction than partnerships low in gratitude (McNulty & Dugas, 2019), confirming the importance of taking the time to cultivate a sense of gratefulness in oneself as well as in relationships with others (Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Gordon et al., 2012; Leong et al., 2020).

Research shows that dispositional gratitude is an enduring force that is positively related to a grateful mood, which in turn positively predicts marital satisfaction (Leong et al., 2020). These findings suggest that gratitude is likely to originate from an inherent disposition, yet whether a dispositional gratitude naturally exists or not, the couples who make efforts to be more mindful of the things they appreciate in their partner can also develop this beneficial sense of gratitude (Gordon et al., 2011). Once gratitude is felt, then it is easier to express, which in turn is perceived as sincere (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020). Collectively, gratitude may benefit relationships beyond the initial, reciprocal stages of development in ways, like promoting prosocial behavior, making positive relational changes, creating a sense of benevolence, and having a grateful disposition. Gratitude functions as a reminder of positive emotions between partners, especially when

partners sincerely express gratefulness, leading to an increased desire to maintain the relationship.

### **Gratitude Promotes Responsiveness That Can Bind Couples**

Sincere expressions of gratitude are positive behaviors that can promote responsiveness to partners' needs, which benefits close relationships (Algoe, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). Being responsive is a relationship maintenance behavior that communicates a sense of gratefulness between partners (Gordon et al., 2012). When one perceives a partner to have their best interest in mind—specifically in being responsive to their needs—this often triggers a grateful response (Algoe, 2012). The experience and expression of gratitude toward romantic partners is thus positively related to greater relationship satisfaction along with feelings of commitment and connectedness (Gordon et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013). This grateful expression is considered to be a “unique” emotion that fuels relational growth for both partners (Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011). Having these thoughts as well as expressions of gratitude tends to boost grateful moods in relationships (Leong et al., 2020). Research shows that those who take notice of, reflect upon, and record thoughts of gratitude experience have been shown to experience an enhancement of their grateful moods and perceived grateful moods of their partner (Leong et al., 2020). In fact, perceived gratitude seems to be the greater predictor of relational satisfaction—more so than feelings of gratitude toward partners when feeling that their partner has acknowledged their efforts and has confirmed their value in the relationship (Leong et al., 2020).

People who are more responsive to their partner's needs typically engage in more relationship maintenance behaviors (Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Zhaoyang et al., 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011). Gratitude can fuel relationship maintenance and serve a dual function by detecting responsiveness and thereby motivating maintenance behaviors (Kubacka et al., 2011). Oftentimes, gratitude arises when individuals perceive that their partner engages in costly maintenance behaviors that fit to their needs (Kubacka et al., 2011), and individuals are more likely to experience gratitude when a partner makes a sacrifice (Visserman et al., 2018). However, the perceived motives behind a partner's sacrifice can influence the receiving process as well. Partners are more likely to feel increased gratitude when they perceive that the sacrifice is intended just for them rather than as self-serving for the partner or even an attempt to increase the quality of the relationship itself (Visserman et al., 2018).

When the recipient perceives a responsive benefit from the benefactor, this responsive benefit communicates to the recipient that the benefactor cares for and values their relationship, which in turn motivates the recipient to engage in more efforts to maintain the relationship (Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). For example, a wife may notice that her husband takes the time to prepare a nice meal after her particularly busy or stressful day and feels especially cared for—appreciating his responsiveness to her needs. Since the wife feels grateful, she is motivated to engage in similar efforts to help her spouse and her desire to sustain her valued relationship with her husband is strengthened. Thus, the positive interpersonal and reciprocated feelings of gratefulness not only help cultivate responsive behaviors that reveal understanding, acceptance, and caring (Algoe & Zhaoyang et al., 2016; Kubacka et al., 2011), but they also provide feelings of security in romantic relationships and therefore motivate people to want to remain committed in their relationship (Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011).

Interestingly, some spouses in long-term marriages received inward experiences of gratitude better than outward expressions of gratitude (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020). For example, a difference between inward (felt) and outward (expressed) expressions of gratitude could be a wife showing her appreciation by being attentive and warm during an evening out with her husband as compared to the significance of a wife simply saying “thank you” to her husband for taking her out to dinner. Inward feelings of gratitude can be positively manifested in daily interactions and felt by the spouse while outward grateful expressions may go ignored if interpreted as mundane, manipulative, or insincere (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020). Thus, interpretations of sincerity of gratitude impact perceptions. For instance, long-term married couples' *felt* gratitude predicted their spouse's marital quality more than their *expressed* gratitude did (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020).

A high number of grateful expressions, therefore, may not automatically lead to greater relational satisfaction since a partner's judgment of the sincerity of the statement may be affecting the process. For example, a partner may interpret expressed gratitude in many ways, such as an authentic appreciation, a manipulative gesture to get something, a patronizing comment to point out a weakness, or even a sarcastic offence (Gordon et al., 2011). Husbands who perceived their wife's expressions of gratitude as less sincere experienced a decline in marital satisfaction (Leong et al., 2020). Not only are the inward and outward expressions of gratitude important in improving relationships but also

the sincerity of the expressions of gratitude is important in developing and strengthening close bonds between partners (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020). Perceptions of sincere gratefulness often lead to more responsiveness, which motivates individuals to continue maintaining their relationship (Algoe & Zhaoyang et al., 2016; Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020).

Partners can also communicate appreciation to one another through the process of incorporating relationship maintenance behaviors, such as being more responsive (Algoe, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). In romantic relationships, when a person feels appreciated by their partner, these emotions provide a sense of security that draws awareness to their own appreciative feelings and increases their desire to stay committed in their relationship (Gordon et al., 2011; Joel et al., 2013; Kindt et al., 2017; Kubacka et al., 2011). Appreciative feelings toward partners can help partners shift the focus from selfish needs to the needs of the other in hopes of nurturing their own relationship maintenance (Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). In turn, these appreciative feelings toward their partner confirm that their relationship is valuable and worth maintaining.

Most recent research provides another perspective on relationship maintenance by considering how perceived equity and appreciation influence marital satisfaction (Kayabol & Sümer, 2020). Individuals are likely to be highly satisfied when they perceive higher equity which increases felt and expressed appreciation and marital satisfaction. Perceived equity boosts individuals' positive perceptions and provokes more appreciation of their partners, indicating that higher self-reported and partner use of maintenance behaviors are associated with higher marital satisfaction (Kayabol & Sümer, 2020). Relationship maintenance behaviors are manifestations of feelings of appreciation and function in an interpersonal process, where each partner is equally enriched as both realize the value of cultivating the relationship (Algoe, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). The appreciative process supports the relational function of gratitude—where appreciative feelings and gratitude help people identify and remember their partner's inherent value, and where people nurture responsiveness and commitment—thus binding couples closer together.

## Conclusion

The recent literature on the function of gratitude extends the known benefits of this practice beyond initial social exchanges and illustrates how it plays a significant role in close relationships, such as marriage (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Kabacka et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012; Leong et al., 2020). Research has clearly demonstrated that the emotion of gratitude helps individuals develop, maintain, and increase bonds with a high-quality partner in a close relationship in a variety of ways (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Leong et al., 2020; Visserman et al., 2017). Gratitude is critical in promoting relationship maintenance behaviors, such as responsiveness and commitment, and signaling feelings of appreciation between partners that provides a sense of security and communicates the value of a mutually desirable relationship (Algoe, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). Research also reveals that people with an ungrateful disposition can act as a weak link in couples' gratitude processes, and without being increased with effort, can result in decreased relational satisfaction (McNulty & Dugas, 2019). Perceptions of insincere gratitude can be related to a decline in marital satisfaction as well (Leong et al., 2020). By contrast, couples who often express sincere gratitude tend to be more responsive to partners' needs, which is positively related to greater relationship satisfaction (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Leong et al., 2020) and to feelings of commitment and connectedness (Gordon et al., 2011; Gordon et al., 2012). As couples are more mindful of the effects that ungrateful attitudes and behaviors have on relational satisfaction, they can make a conscious effort to be more grateful and responsive to one another in sincere and felt ways (McNulty & Dugas, 2019; Vollmann et al., 2019). In conclusion, gratitude plays a central role in binding couples closer together and functions as a communal process that can bring positive outcomes for the well-being of a relationship (Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Gordon et al., 2012). Therefore, couples should be encouraged to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors that signal appreciation from one partner to the other, reminding them of their love for one another and binding them closer as a couple.

*Jill I. Webb is an undergraduate Family Studies major at Brigham Young University and an aspiring family life educator. She lives in Kamas, Utah, with her husband, is a mother of four children, and has three stepchildren and ten grandchildren.*

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