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The Expression of Gratitude as a Contributor to Marital Strength

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## Abstract

Gratitude is an important positive emotion for personal and social growth; its expression enhances interpersonal connections by fulfilling innate human needs to receive security, support, and merit from others (Carnegie, 1936/1981; Johnson, 2008; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). In light of more recent research on the expression of gratitude in dyadic relationships, gratitude is considered to be a paramount emotion for communicating “responsiveness” and for marriage survival (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016). When spouses express appreciation, sincerity is necessary for gratitude to strengthen a marriage (Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011; Leong, 2012). Furthermore, insincere gratitude, or a belief that gratitude is not genuine, can be detrimental to already suffering relationships (Leong, 2012). As truly appreciative feelings and expressions increase in a marriage, the relationship will be improved because grateful feelings often influence partners to invest more time and energy in favor of the relationship (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). These studies on gratitude and marriage demonstrate that feeling and expressing gratitude can be an important aspect of positive marital development and connection.

### The Expression of Gratitude as a Contributor to Marital Strength

Susanna placed the last plate on the dish rack, dried her hands, and crossed into the living room to sit on the couch next to Carter. It was his birthday and she had been working hard to make it special. As she rested a moment, she realized how much it would mean to know that he appreciated her efforts, yet she was unsure how to ask for the recognition she needed. A little while later, Carter approached her saying, “Thank you for making my birthday special. I want to tell you that I appreciate you and what you’ve done for me.” She perked up at his words and immediately felt grateful toward him for letting her know that her hard work had not gone unnoticed. These feelings prompted her to wonder how a simple, sincere expression of thanks from her husband could lead her to feel more than willing to sacrifice for him. She said, “Thank you for telling me that,” and thought to herself: *For him, I would gladly do it again.*

Researchers have studied gratitude for many years, but only more recently have they begun to examine the unique and important influence it may have on marriage relationships. Empirical studies promote the idea that the expression of gratitude in marriages instigates behaviors that notably improve relationships and sustain long-term connections (Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016; Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & Desteno, 2012). Some view gratitude as an adhesive that assists a couple in strengthening their relationship because it motivates both partners to participate in and perform uplifting behaviors (Algoe & Way, 2014; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016). Though it may seem intuitive to give thanks, the explanations for why it improves a relationship are deeper than cultural norms and expectations.

Human beings feel the need to be appreciated by one another. Several authors have stated that the desire to be esteemed and valued is as common as the need to breathe (Carnegie, 1936/1981; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Lambert and Fincham (2011) explained, “Given all the

documented benefits of receiving appreciation, it is not surprising that psychologist William James...stated that ‘the deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated’” (p. 53). Furthermore, giving gratitude and praise is as important as receiving them. Higher levels of happiness in relationships are associated with higher levels of gratitude expression (Lambert & Fincham, 2011.) Refraining from expressing or receiving appreciation lowers self-esteem and satisfaction in many types of relationships (Kleinman, Kuenne, Kuhr, & Thyne, 2007). Consequently, an attitude of gratitude is not merely a catchphrase for the optimistic, but rather a valuable part of self- and relational development.

In fact, gratitude is a necessary emotion. It assists in the evolutionary process of finding a stable partner and consistently reminding oneself of the value of that partner (Algoe & Way, 2014; Barlett et al., 2012). However, the positive benefits of expressing gratitude are often dependent on the sincerity of one’s perceived responsiveness, which is a critical characteristic of all relationship-strengthening practices (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016). A partner who is responsive shows care, concern, and awareness for the other person’s needs, which helps the receiver to understand the intent behind the giver’s actions (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016). In other words, spouses must feel and express gratitude genuinely, like with other positive behaviors, for it to have the full positive effect that helps to heal and reinforce bonding.

Gratitude powerfully connects couples, so it may be important to consider what leads one to experience gratitude and then express it. Positive changes come from looking for things to be grateful for, not necessarily having things to be grateful for (Barker, 2015). In relationships, experiencing a little gratitude goes a long way to affect one’s own perspective, yet it can be difficult to remember to sincerely express it and inform the other person of one’s thankfulness. Although the expression of sincere gratitude is a commonly neglected relational practice, the

cultivation of such feelings enhances positive interactions that are vital for maintaining successful marital relationships because couples who acquire and express gratitude experience greater conflict resolution, foster enhanced appreciation for one another, and develop a heightened sense that personal efforts are valued. These functions of gratitude in marriage help to fulfill the human need to be valued, the desire to be connected to loved ones, and the motivation to maintain one's relationship.

### **Innate Desire to Be Valued**

The short film titled "Validation" emphasizes the depth with which most people desire to feel important (Kleinman et al., 2007). In the film, a man unexpectedly offers uplifting comments to anyone who approaches him, and the number of people who flock to hear his compliments exponentially increases as they experience the satisfaction of being appreciated and valued (Kleinman et al., 2007). All individuals want to receive love and appreciation in some way, and this is most significant in marital relationships (Carnegie, 1936/1981; Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Leong, 2012). Thus, experiencing gratitude is beneficial to the self and others, specifically one's marriage partner (Chang, Li, Teng, Berki, & Chen, 2013, p. 1433). When two people commit to fulfilling one another's needs in marriage, it becomes even more important for them to satisfy their partner's need to be valued. In one study on marriage and divorce, many divorced participants indicated that feeling undervalued and unloved was the central cause of their divorce (Gordon et al., 2012). A person will lose the desire to promote the relationship if it does not meet their inborn human needs (Gordon et al., 2012). As humans, each person needs to be esteemed and appreciated, especially in close relationships.

Sharing one's gratitude is a principal means of refining these feelings of esteem and appreciation within a relationship. Gratitude instigates positive feelings and interactions that help partners to feel loved. Making the effort to express gratitude to one's partner demonstrates to them that they are valued for their contributions and for who they are as an individual (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). As one longitudinal study showed, gratitude benefits relationships by helping couples to feel appreciated, adjusted, and confident in their relationships (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). When one partner is required to sacrifice for the relationship, appreciation (or gratitude) acts as a mediator. This helps the person feel that their partner is contributing with equal effort. In fact, researchers found that receiving acknowledgement for contributions to the relationship positively correlated with satisfaction in the relationship (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Experiencing and expressing gratitude is a critical element in marital relationships because it allows for relationship stability that comes when both partners feel appreciated.

### **Gratitude as an Evolutionary Emotion**

From an evolutionary perspective, gratitude plays a unique role in relationship success. Many researchers have studied the influence of emotions on human survival and have found that emotions influence important survival decisions (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013). Feeling and expressing gratitude evolved as an emotional cue that helps in selecting a prime potential partner. As an emotion, gratitude draws attention to another person who is helpful and kind, which assists in the process of choosing a fit mate. It also increases feelings of contentment with one's partner after they are chosen. Experimental studies demonstrate that these phenomena lengthen the survival of the couple and their offspring (Algoe et al., 2016; Bartlett et al., 2012). Feeling gratitude allows a person to appreciate helpful behaviors in a specific circumstance and to appreciate their partner for their cumulative good (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Gratitude has

helped humans to form stronger relationships for centuries, and it is an important element to any successful marriage.

### **Emotional Connection**

In like manner, the positive emotions that accompany grateful feelings affect both partners in a marriage, and one spouse's feelings of gratitude positively correlate with the other spouse's feelings of gratitude (Gordon et al., 2012). Gordon et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study and determined that gratitude between marriage partners can be viewed as one element. The researchers found that within a dyadic bond, an individual feels valued and appreciated if their partner feels grateful (Gordon et al., 2012). Similarly, knowing that one's partner feels grateful in the relationship increases one's happiness in it, even more than does one's own gratitude (Gordon, Arnette, & Smith, 2011; Leong, 2012). When a partner is grateful, this feeling will influence both individuals in the relationship to have increased happiness and confidence (Gordon et al., 2011; Leong, 2012). Additionally, romantic partners tend to feel more grateful after receiving expressions of gratitude from the other person (Gordon et al., 2011), which can potentially ignite a cycle of positive feelings within the relationship. By feeling and expressing gratitude, marriage partners act on feelings of acknowledgment that strengthen important emotional ties.

### **Attachment**

The emotional human needs discussed previously, which involve being valued, loved, and cared for, are closely related to certain theories about child development and interpersonal progression. Attachment needs, the fulfillment of which are considered critical to child development (Solom, Watkins, McCurrach, & Scheibe, 2017), continue into adulthood, affecting a person's romantic or marital connections (Johnson, 2008). These inherent needs make



emotional closeness invaluable for spouses, and each spouse needs to be assured that their partner supports and esteems them (Johnson, 2008). Spouse's solidify this reassurance when one partner's behavior demonstrates concern for the other (Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Johnson, 2008). In the literature on gratitude and relationships, "perceived partner responsiveness" is an essential ingredient for relationship improvement and satisfaction and it accompanies behaviors that communicate awareness and affection for the other person's experiences (Algoe et al., 2013, p. 606; Algoe et al., 2016, p. 659; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016, p. 401). Expressions of gratitude can be one means of effectively communicating appreciation and mindfulness within couples. Although individuals deal with their deep emotional needs in a variety of ways, these needs are central to marital relationships. By expressing gratitude in words and actions, married couples can achieve greater connection because they trust that their spouse will continue to meet their important needs.

### **Insincere Gratitude**

Even though it may be easy to conclude that increasing expressions of gratitude is always beneficial, gratitude is best expressed with sincerity. In a longitudinal study on grateful exchanges between spouses, Leong (2012) learned that greater amounts of grateful expressions did not consistently lead to increased marital satisfaction. The findings indicate that sensing that one's partner is truly grateful benefits a marriage; however, if an individual feels that the gratitude expressed is not genuine, it will harm the connection between two people more than help it (Leong, 2012). Especially when existing problems are weakening a relationship, increasing the number of gratitude expressions does not help and may be somewhat destructive, if insincere (Leong, 2012). Applying gratitude to a relationship is simple, yet it requires

meaningful intent and awareness of the other person's feelings in order for it to benefit the relationship.

There are times when a sudden increase in expressions of gratitude may not be the ideal approach to improving a relationship. Another study on spousal gratitude expression indicated that increased expressions of gratitude did not influence relationships as the researchers expected it would (Gordon et al., 2011). During this research, participants of the study achieved higher levels of contentment in their marriage when they felt gratitude but did not express it (Gordon et al., 2011). The researchers determined possible explanations for these results and proposed that gratitude felt is more influential than gratitude expressed when spouses imagine their partner to have alternative motives for the expression, when the expression goes unnoticed for its simplicity, or when the relationship is in need of more healing than an expression of gratitude can satisfy (Gordon et al., 2011). Therefore, being able to apply gratitude in a helpful manner may require sensitivity to the needs of one's relationship and a genuine and meaningful approach. As O'Connell, O'Shea, and Gallagher (2016) found, sincere gratitude expressed over a period of time has the potential of significantly improving a person's attitude toward a relationship (p.157). Accordingly, as one uses genuine gratitude to acknowledge their partner, happiness in the relationship increases.

### **Motivation to Perpetuate the Relationship**

In a society of give-and-take, anyone may interpret a person's expression of gratitude as a request for reciprocity and appreciation. Researchers on gratitude do not entirely disagree with this idea, particularly because feeling grateful encourages a person to respond with another kind deed (Bartlett et al., 2012), and feeling appreciated is necessary for relationships to last (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013). Feeling grateful motivates individuals to

continue promoting whatever it is that gave them something to be grateful for; couples will sacrifice more for a relationship when they feel grateful for it (Joel et al., 2013). Therefore, a small feeling or expression of gratitude can facilitate great acts of selflessness (Bartlett et al., 2012) and reinforced commitment in marriage (Joel et al., 2013). An experiment conducted by Bartlett et al. (2012) exemplified that in long-term relationships, high levels of commitment did not necessarily relate to increased gratitude, but more gratitude in the relationship positively correlated to greater commitment. Because the influence of gratitude extends to the strengthening of a close, mutual relationship, it is more than a momentary act of payment and repayment (Joel et al., 2013). Receiving and experiencing gratitude initiates behaviors beyond simple reciprocity such as continual acknowledgment of the other person's efforts and sacrifices, resolution of relationship issues, and motivation to meet the needs of the relationship.

### **Continual Acknowledgement of Effort**

One of the valuable consequences of expressing gratitude in relationships is that it encourages partners to develop a perspective of recognition for the other person's sacrifices. Many researchers state that feeling and expressing gratitude in relationships is a critical factor in sustaining a healthy relationship (Bartlett et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Increased gratitude leads to a greater capacity to recognize the good in one's partner and feel gratitude toward them as well (Gordon et al., 2011). As marriage partners give gratitude and improve in acknowledgment of one another's contributions to the relationship, both partners also increase in gratitude.

To continue, learning to recognize another's efforts is essential to fostering gratitude within a marriage; a person will more frequently feel grateful toward their spouse if the person learns to see the good that their spouse does. After one invests in the relationship, receiving

gratitude is vital for commitment to continue (Gordon et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013). Joel et al. (2013) performed a study in which participants reflected daily on contributions their romantic partners had made in the relationship; they found that gratitude and trust increased after doing so, much more than in the control group (pp. 1335-1337). In a later part of the study, participants who voiced their gratitude felt a stronger sense of stewardship or care for their partners (Joel et al., 2013, p. 1334). In other words, expressing gratitude to a marriage companion strengthens the other person's tendency to feel grateful as well as one's own level of concern for the other.

### **Resolution of Relationship Issues**

An individual's improved care and concern for their companion accompanies a desire to promote a healthy and beneficial relationship. One characteristic of a healthy relationship is the ability of both members to take care of problems as they arise and solve disagreements (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). After conducting a study on gratitude and relationship predicaments, researchers concluded that expressing gratitude initiates an increase in favorable feelings toward one's partner along with a willingness to discuss and resolve issues in the relationship (Lambert & Fincham, 2011, p. 58). Increasing feelings of gratitude and appreciation in both parties of a relationship can enhance a couple's positive perception of and commitment to the unit.

### **Initiative to Meet the Needs of the Relationship**

Gordon et al. (2012) explain how gratitude expression increases commitment in relationships with a simple cycle (see Figure 1; p. 259). When one person feels valued in a dyadic relationship or marriage, they tend to value the other person in return. They act on these feelings with behaviors that sustain the relationship, whether by reaching out when the other is in need or by sacrificing time and energy to strengthen their connection (Gordon et al., 2012, pp. 270-271). Additionally, this research suggests an interesting idea that spouses can express

appreciation through positive behaviors or with uplifting words, although both have the potential to benefit a marriage (Gordon et al., 2012). Other studies support the findings that investing in a relationship often results in the other person sacrificing as well (Bartlett et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013). Therefore, gratitude serves as a type of mediator between positive contributions from each partner; a person usually feels grateful after recognizing a sacrifice another made for them, and this feeling motivates them to appreciate the other person and sacrifice for them too (Bartlett et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013). The elements of this proposed cycle often interconnect as each partner feels valued for various reasons (Gordon et al., 2012). Ultimately, sincere gratitude is a reliable relationship builder when it is cultivated between two partners.

### **Gratitude Applied**

With these things in mind, couples may develop grateful perspectives as one of many possible relationship-strengthening approaches. Married couples will see most effects of gratitude on their relationship when they build a personal ability to experience gratitude, a willingness to share it, and an awareness of when it is given (Gordon et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2011; Joel et al., 2013; Leong, 2012). If the act of searching for a reason to feel grateful increases happiness (Barker, 2015), then it seems possible that this searching for gratitude and expressing it often also increases levels of relationship happiness (O'Connell et al., 2016). Researchers who conducted studies on gratitude recommended that romantic couples strive to develop a deep sense of appreciation for their partner and to learn to recognize the good in them (Gordon et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2011). In particular, one set of researchers proposed that gratitude might have the greatest positive influence if marriage partners seek to consider the good in their spouse and learn to focus on the positive aspects of their marriage, rather than trying to force improvement by expressing more gratitude (Gordon et al., 2011). A person will not express

gratitude unless they have learned to feel it first (Gordon et al., 2011). If accumulating feelings of gratitude is difficult, researchers suggest that partners look for evidence of the investments that their spouses have made in the relationship; doing so will encourage feelings of appreciation for the other person (Joel et al., 2013). Choosing to increase one's own gratitude brings twice as many benefits as expected because increasing one's own gratitude will often influence one's partner to do the same (Gordon et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2011; Leong, 2012). The influence of gratitude is powerful, and the cultivation of this simple emotion in relationships is invaluable.

As an individual increases the amount of gratitude they feel, their relationships build in countless positive ways. Gordon et al. (2012) stated that a person ought to allow greater feelings of gratitude to motivate healthy relationship behaviors, which allows them to improve the relationship and behaviorally express appreciation for their partner. Important relationship practices include forming and strengthening positive attachment habits, which allow for equal levels of trust, commitment, and compassion between both partners (Johnson, 2008). Additionally, while cultivating gratitude and appreciation, couples can feel greater affection for their partner and choose to address relationship problems with a positive attitude that helps them to avoid unnecessary complaints and accusations (Lambert & Fincham, 2011). These positive contributions to the marriage are important in assisting one's partner to experience and then express gratitude consistently (Joel et al., 2013). Continually developing and expressing gratitude may serve as a positive interaction between couples that potentially instigates further positive behaviors, helping a marriage relationship to grow stronger in commitment and appreciation.

### **Conclusion**

In the existing literature on gratitude in relationships, several important observations have been made about the influence that grateful expressions may have on a person. Primarily,

expressing gratitude is a potential means of meeting a partner's desire to feel valued, a feeling that has been considered to be significant in the selection of a long-term companion (Chang et al. 2013; Gordon et al., 2011; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). Experiencing gratitude and hearing it given by one's partner strengthen a relationship by fortifying feelings of security and trust, as long as the expressions are sincere (Gordon et al., 2011; Lambert & Fincham, 2011; Leong 2012). This emotional connection is one of the most prevalent effects of gratitude in marriage or long-term relationships because grateful emotions and expressions are two ways of encouraging healthy attachment styles (Algoe et al., 2013, p. 606; Algoe et al., 2016, p. 659; Algoe & Zhaoyang, 2016; Johnson, 2008). Additionally, the cycle of receiving, experiencing, and expressing gratitude continually perpetuates the relationship by making one aware of another's helpful actions, motivating participation in mutual forgiveness, and initiating actions that fulfill interpersonal needs (Bartlett et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Joel et al., 2013; Lambert & Fincham, 2011). As depicted above, gratitude is a unique way of positively contributing to marriage relationships.

In short, a few of the aforementioned studies indicated that there is room for further research on gratitude and its implications for marital connections. Namely, Gordon et al. (2011) suggested that more studies be conducted on when gratitude expressions are most helpful or most harmful, so individuals can understand how to best to demonstrate their appreciation. Further research focused on expressions of gratitude would help increase understanding about how such expressions might benefit a marriage. Relationship education researchers who are concerned these subjects could consider studying sentiments and expressions of gratitude and their effects on marriage relationships. Because relationships strengthening programs often include an increase in positive couple interaction such as expressing gratitude, it might be possible to take

knowledge gained about gratitude and create practical application programs for couples to apply in their own lives. A system that would help individuals to be more grateful could yield positive results, as seen with other relationship-building practices. Among these benefits would be the improvement of marriages with simple gratitude experiences and expressions, which will allow couples to more deeply value each other and successfully sustain their relationship.



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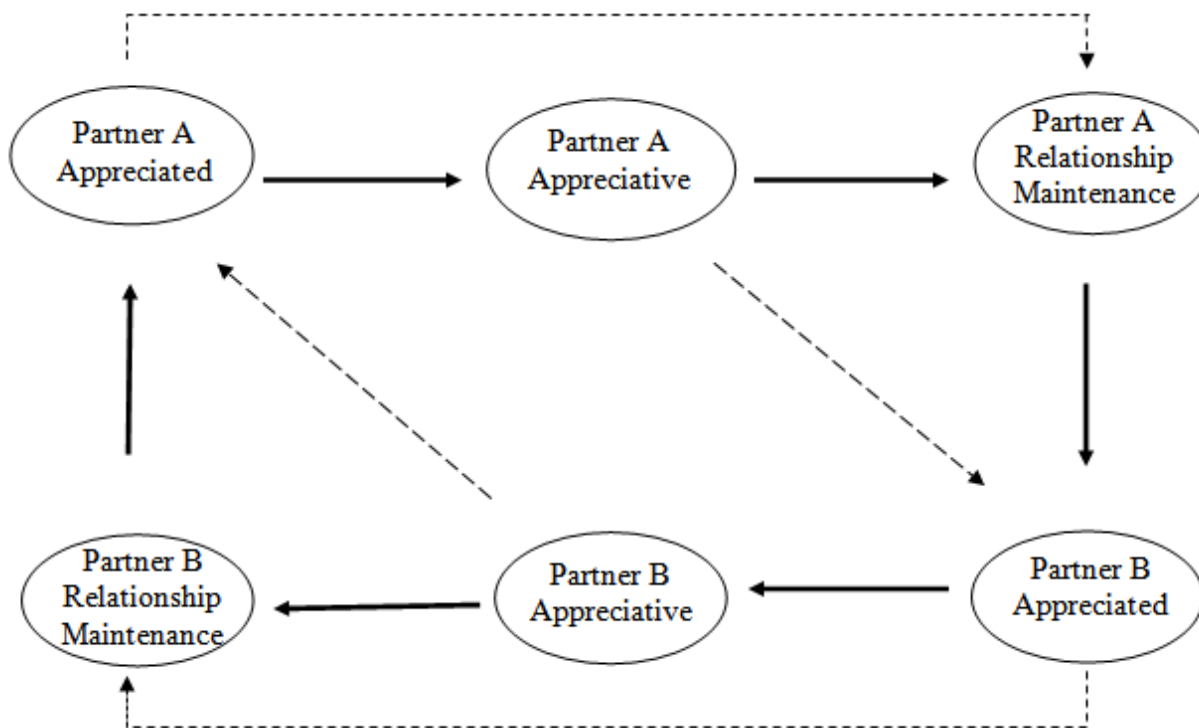
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## Appendix



*Figure 1.* The interaction of gratitude and dyadic relationship improvement as partners receive appreciation, feel appreciative, and participate in behaviors that strengthen the relationship.

Adapted from Gordon et al., 2012, p. 259.