

**Appreciating Social Science Research on Gratitude: An Integrative Review for  
Organizational Scholarship on Gratitude in the Workplace**

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**Abstract**

Though gratitude research in organizational behavior (OB) is nascent, this emotion has a rich history in the social sciences. Research has shown gratitude to promote prosocial behaviors, encourage personal well-being, and foster interpersonal relationships. However, gratitude research has been siloed among these three outcomes of gratitude (moral, wellness, and relational). Similarly, past reviews of gratitude have focused on only one group of outcomes, one of its forms (trait, state, or expressed), or empirical findings without emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings. In contrast, this review recognizes that each type of gratitude, its functions, and outcomes are part of a single process model of gratitude. As such, in the current review we provide a comprehensive assessment of gratitude in the social sciences by distilling and organizing the literature per our process model of episodic gratitude. Then, we translate the insights for management scholars, highlighting possible differences and synergies between extant research and workplace gratitude thereby helping advance “gratitude science” in the workplace. In all, this review (a) examines definitions and operationalizations of gratitude and provides recommendations for organizational research; (b) proposes a process model of episodic workplace gratitude as a conceptual map to guide future OB research on gratitude; (c) reviews empirical gratitude research through the lens of our process model; and (d) discusses the current state of the literature, important differences for workplace gratitude, and future directions for organizational scholars.

*Keywords:* gratitude, appreciation, literature review, moral, relational, well-being

## **Appreciating Social Science Research on Gratitude: An Integrative Review for Organizational Scholarship on Gratitude in the Workplace**

Gratitude has been a source of interest in both social science research and the popular press, owing to its notable contributions to literature on prosociality, interpersonal relationships, and wellness<sup>1</sup> (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Yet surprisingly, gratitude is not commonly expressed in the workplace, compared to other domains of life, and individuals report feeling under-appreciated by their bosses and coworkers (e.g., Kaplan, 2012). Given the potential benefits of gratitude to employees and organizations (Fehr et al., 2017), organizational scholars are increasingly interested in this topic. Indeed, over half of the organizational behavior (OB) papers on gratitude (55%) were published within the last five years.

Despite the rapid growth in the number of publications, we see three problems in the nascent literature on gratitude that, if left unaddressed, can preclude a more in-depth understanding of gratitude in the workplace. First, the literature on gratitude is fragmented. Different literatures in psychology tend to favor specific outcomes of gratitude in their research—moral, relational, or wellness—which contributes to the siloed nature of extant work. This fragmentation is problematic because, though scholars treat each of their literatures as separate, these relations are part of a larger process model of gratitude. Unfortunately, past reviews of gratitude have only reinforced these siloes by reviewing one outcome type (moral, relational, or wellness) or one form of gratitude (trait, state, or expressed). For instance, McCullough et al. (2001) provided a review only on the moral outcomes of different forms of

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term wellness to capture the broadest definition of well-being, as research on gratitude has explored its effects on the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being or health of individuals.

gratitude. Davis et al. (2016) meta-analyzed the efficacy of gratitude interventions for cultivating individuals' psychological well-being. Ma, Tunney, and Ferguson (2017) meta-analyzed the links that trait gratitude and state gratitude have with prosociality (morality). Greenbaum et al.'s (2020) review on moral emotions discussed the moral outcomes of gratitude in the workplace. Finally, there is no review on the relational outcomes of gratitude, though gratitude is particularly important to interdependent relationships in organizational settings (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Notably, these reviews were not integrative and did not clarify the important connections among the three forms of gratitude. As such, it is imperative to integrate the connections among the three forms of gratitude to understand gratitude as a process in organizations.

Second, because of the fractured state of the gratitude literature, construct definitions and the corresponding operationalizations have proliferated. Scholars have tended to uniquely define and operationalize the three forms of gratitude (trait, state, and expressed). Gratitude can manifest as a grateful disposition toward responding to the positive experiences in life (i.e., trait gratitude; McCullough et al., 2002), as a feeling of thankfulness and appreciation (i.e., state gratitude; Emmons & McCullough, 2003), or as an expression in response to receiving a kindness or feeling grateful (i.e., expressed gratitude; Gordon et al., 2011). The proliferation of definitions and operationalizations of these three forms of gratitude has led to even less integration and cross-pollination. For example, operational issues have emerged with some scholars using a trait gratitude measure (e.g., GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002) to assess state gratitude (e.g., Booker & Dunsmore, 2017). In all, an organizing framework of definitions, operationalizations, and processes of gratitude would allow integration across literatures and provide clarity for future research, particularly in organization settings.

Finally, in contrast to the vast literature on gratitude in psychology, comparatively little work on gratitude in organizations exists. This might be the case because organizational scholars tend to assume that relations between gratitude and outcomes from psychology are isomorphic inside the workplace. This assumption is problematic because without testing whether gratitude functions in the workplace as it does in other life domains (e.g., personal relationships) we cannot know if these relations truly are applicable to the workplace. Indeed, the workplace may pose unique challenges and affordances to cultivating gratitude.

Given the limitations of the gratitude literature, the purpose of this review is four-fold and so is our contribution. First, we draw upon social science research and clarify the definitions and corresponding operationalizations of gratitude for organizational scholars. Such clarity is essential for the accumulation of knowledge (Kelley, 1927) regarding gratitude in the workplace. Second, drawing on theories of gratitude, we propose a process model of episodic gratitude using the conceptualizations from the literature. This process model acknowledges that, although gratitude scholars in different literatures have tended to focus only on specific parts of the process model of gratitude, these relationships are part of a single process. Third, we review extant gratitude research using this process model of gratitude as a lens through which we interpret and organize existing work. By reviewing this large and yet fragmented body of knowledge, we delineate the nomological networks of each form of gratitude and integrate these insights into a single, parsimonious model. Fourth, based on our review, we propose a process model of episodic workplace gratitude and use it as an actionable guide for future OB research on gratitude in the workplace. The roadmap is expected to create a coherent “mental model” for OB scholars who are interested in developing theories or conducting empirical studies on gratitude. In doing so, we discuss promising research opportunities for organizational scholars to

theorize and test under-explored mechanisms, antecedents, and outcomes. Our discussion seeks to energize scholarship on gratitude in the workplace and “fan the flames” of this growing body of work.

### **History and Evolution of Gratitude Research**

Despite recent attention on gratitude in OB research, gratitude has a rich history outside of OB. Were one to trace a history of scholarly work on gratitude to modern day, it would begin with philosophers (e.g., Seneca, Adam Smith, Thomas Aquinas, David Hume), followed by sociologists (e.g., Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) and social psychologists (e.g., Algoe, 2012; Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Fredrickson, 2004; McCullough et al., 2001; Wood et al., 2010), who variously noted the importance of gratitude to moral behaviors, social relationships, and personal wellness. Investigations of gratitude’s role in social reinforcement, helping, and attributions were published throughout the late 20th century. A notable spike in positive psychology research occurred in the early 21st century, as evidenced by the uptick in psychological research on gratitude. Gratitude research quickly influenced management, helping shape positive OB (Luthans, 2002) and positive organizational scholarship (POS; Wright, 2003).

As mentioned previously, research on gratitude in the social sciences has focused on its three outcome types (i.e., moral, relational, and personal wellness), but this work has been siloed. Sparked by McCullough et al.’s (2001) review of the moral functions of gratitude and a landmark social-psychological study on the prosocial behavior of grateful beneficiaries (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), psychologists have focused heavily on the relationship between gratitude and reciprocity. This work has influenced much research in OB on the influence of gratitude on prosocial attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, clinical psychologists began by examining gratitude as a treatment in clinical populations (see Wood et al. 2010 for a review). This line of

research has identified gratitude as a disposition and a practice that can robustly promote individuals' well-being and reduce mental illness symptoms. Over time, the influence of gratitude on well-being has been replicated in non-clinical populations, and has expanded to include the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social health (i.e., personal wellness) of individuals (Portocarrero et al., 2020). Finally, research on personal relationships has acknowledged that gratitude can promote relationships above and beyond simple tit-for-tat exchanges. Algoe (2012) proposed a find-remind-bind theory, identifying gratitude as a factor that helps create new relational bonds, remind individuals of high-quality partners, and strengthen existing relationships. This stream of research has influenced present-day examinations of gratitude in romantic (Gordon et al., 2011), platonic (Algoe et al., 2008), and workplace relationships (Sun et al., 2019). Yet there has been little cross-pollination and integration among these bodies of work. In the current review, we seek to integrate nearly 400 empirical studies on gratitude from these research streams for a more holistic view of gratitude science and a guide to scholarship on gratitude in the workplace.

### **Gratitude: Definition and Conceptual Clarity**

Like other emotions, gratitude has trait, state, and expressed forms (Rosenburg, 1998). As mentioned previously, however, due to definitional and operational opacity, scholars seem to lack a full understanding of each of the three manifestations of this emotion. Adding to its issues of conceptual clarity, gratitude is closely related to other positive emotions (e.g., Fehr et al., 2017; Greenbaum et al., 2020) and has at times been equated with other discrete emotions or diffuse moods (e.g., Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019; Komter, 2004). Although gratitude has trait, state, and expressed forms, it is often used interchangeably with the related but distinct construct of appreciation (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Gordon et al., 2012). However, research has shown that

gratitude and appreciation are theoretically and empirically distinct (Fagley, 2012; Fagley, 2016) and have different nomological networks (Fagley, 2012). For example, trait appreciation has been shown to explain variance in several outcomes above and beyond gratitude and Big-5 personality (Adler & Fagley, 2005; 2012).

Moreover, gratitude has been distinguished from related emotions like indebtedness (Watkins et al., 2006). Indebtedness is defined as *a state of obligation to repay another*, and is often accompanied by negative emotions such as discomfort and uneasiness, and has been associated with avoidance behaviors (Greenberg, 1980). Theoretically, gratitude and indebtedness have been proposed to motivate different behaviors with gratitude eliciting prosocial (McCullough et al., 2001) and relationship-building behaviors (Algoe, 2012; 2016), and indebtedness motivating tit-for-tat reciprocity (Watkins et al., 2006). Empirical work has demonstrated that gratitude and indebtedness arise from different situations, have different outcomes, and are empirically distinct (Tsang, 2006; Watkins et al., 2006).

Finally, gratitude differs from other discrete positive emotions (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Siegel et al., 2014; Watkins et al., 2018). Indeed, Wood et al. (2010) differentiate dispositional gratitude from separable traits of optimism, hope, and trust. Similarly, Fehr et al. (2017) note that the emotion of gratitude is also distinguishable from happiness, compassion, pride, and elevation.

With these issues in mind, we define and delineate each of the three manifestations of gratitude—trait, state, and expressed gratitude—below to provide clarity in definitions and distinctions (see Table 1).

### **Trait Gratitude**

Emotional traits are defined as stable individual differences in certain types of emotional responses (Rosenberg, 1998). Three conceptualizations of gratitude as a stable, between-person



trait have emerged in social psychology, clinical psychology, and OB. In social psychology, Emmons and McCullough (2004) noted that individuals are not equally predisposed to experience gratitude when others go out of their way to help them. This individual predisposition is trait gratitude and is also known as the grateful disposition (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; McCullough et al., 2002). McCullough et al. (2002) defined the grateful disposition as the *generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains* (p. 112).<sup>2</sup> Clinical psychologists have defined trait gratitude as part of a broader world view toward appreciating the positive aspects of the world (Wood et al., 2010), defining trait gratitude as *a life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life* (Wood et al., 2010, p. 892).

The most recent conceptualization of gratitude as a stable tendency comes from Fehr and colleagues (2017) in OB research. They argue that gratitude emerges at the individual level in the form of persistent gratitude, which is defined as *a stable tendency to feel grateful within a particular context*. This definition of gratitude categorized gratitude not as a trait, but as an emotion schema broader than a trait. Specifically, Fehr and colleagues (2017, p. 363) suggest that “schemas are mental structures that function as heuristics, directing attention and regulating action.” Such schemas arise from the frequent, repeated experience of state gratitude in a particular context (e.g., an organization). Once formed, persistent gratitude operates by focusing

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<sup>2</sup> Trait gratitude has four facets: intensity, frequency, span, and density (McCullough et al., 2002). The intensity of trait gratitude refers to the strength with which one feels grateful. The frequency of trait gratitude refers to the amount and regularity with which one feels grateful. The span of trait gratitude refers to the number of life domains and circumstances for which one feels grateful. Finally, the density of trait gratitude refers to the number of individuals to whom one feels grateful for a single positive event. Therefore, the more intensely and frequently one feels gratitude, the larger the span of situations in which it is experienced, and the higher the density of one's gratitude, the more inclined toward gratitude the individual is.

individuals' attention on gratitude-inducing stimuli in the organization, allows individuals to recall past gratitude experiences, and increases the likelihood that ambiguous events will be interpreted through the lens of gratitude-inducing appraisals.

In our view, the definition proposed by McCullough et al. (2002) most clearly differentiates the disposition of gratitude from its emotional state and behavioral expression. Given the distinct outcomes associated with each manifestation as outlined in our ensuing review, we believe that scholars should embrace McCullough et al.'s definition of trait gratitude.

### **State Gratitude**

When experienced episodically, emotions are acute, intense, and typically short-lived (Brief & Weiss, 2002). To capture this episodic experience, gratitude has been labeled in various terms such as state gratitude (e.g., Wood et al., 2008b), episodic gratitude (e.g., Fehr et al., 2017), and felt gratitude (e.g., Gordon et al., 2011). Despite the term utilized, studies at the event or individual level draw on similar definitions of gratitude in which the focal individual recognizes that they have obtained a positive outcome and feels grateful towards the source of that outcome (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Specifically, state gratitude is defined as *a feeling of appreciation in response to an experience that is beneficial to, but not attributable to, the self* (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Fehr et al., 2017, p. 363).

### **Expressed Gratitude**

At the interpersonal level, emotions are displayed and communicated in dyadic encounters, coordinating relationships (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Emotional expressions are the proximal manifestation of the experience of emotions (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Displays and communication of gratitude are called "gratitude expression" (also "expressed gratitude"). Empirical research has largely examined the effects of gratitude

expression on perceiver responses. This focus is consistent with Keltner and Haidt's (1999) view on social functions of expressed emotions, which suggests that expressed emotions allow perceivers to learn "others' emotions, beliefs, and intentions" (p. 511).

Gratitude is characterized as other-praising (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; Greenbaum et al., 2020). In the workplace, gratitude expression can manifest as (but is not limited to) thanking a coworker, writing an appreciative note to a supervisor, and acknowledging subordinates with a token of appreciation (i.e., a gift). Drawing from global definitions of emotional expression (Elfenbein, 2007, p. 20), we define gratitude expressions as *physical, facial, nonverbal, and verbal cues and behaviors intended as a (authentic or inauthentic) signal of internal states of gratitude.*

### **A Process Model of Episodic Gratitude**

The gratitude literature is siloed, with scholars exploring distinct antecedents (e.g., trait gratitude, benefaction events, gratitude expressions) and consequences of various forms of gratitude. However, each of these disparate literatures fit neatly into a larger process model of gratitude—what we refer to as a process model of episodic gratitude. To create our model, we drew upon theories of gratitude (e.g., moral affect theory, McCullough et al., 2001; find-remind-and-bind theory, Algoe, 2012) and episodic theories of emotion (e.g., affective events theory, Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). We treat gratitude as an affective event, while acknowledging that several individual and situational factors can influence this episodic process. Our model includes eliciting events, appraisals of those events, felt and expressed emotion because of those events, outcomes of the felt and expressed emotion, and moderators of these processes. Further, this model acknowledges that gratitude is a relational construct, having both a benefactor and a beneficiary (Krasikova & Lebreton, 2012), and thus includes the benefactor, the beneficiary, and

their relationship. We first present the process model of episodic gratitude—see Figure 1—and then we review extant research through the lens of this framework.

First, consistent with the definition of gratitude and affective events theory, we suggest that benefaction events are the proximal cause of the emotion of gratitude. Benefaction events are kindnesses bestowed upon a beneficiary by a benefactor. McCullough et al. (2001, p. 252) define a benefaction event as “the provision of a benefit by another moral agent that enhances one’s well-being.” When a benefaction event occurs, the beneficiary appraises the kindness or benefit received. According to the moral affect theory of gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001), beneficiaries appraise the extent to which (a) they have received a benefit of value, (b) the benefactor expended effort or suffered a cost to benefit them, (c) whether the effort was intentional, and (d) whether the kindness was gratuitous, as opposed to being determined by the existence of a role-based relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary. Following this appraisal, to the extent that the benefit received was valuable to the beneficiary, costly to the benefactor, intentional, and done through free-will, the beneficiary will feel grateful (i.e., state gratitude) and express their gratitude to the benefactor. Though feelings of gratitude should lead to the expression of gratitude, feeling grateful is not necessary for a beneficiary’s expression of gratitude to a benefactor. Indeed, norms for politeness may promote inauthentic expressions of gratitude even when a beneficiary does not feel grateful (e.g., Baumeister & Ilko, 1995).

Second, trait gratitude should modulate the extent to which beneficiaries feel and express gratitude as a result of a benefaction event. Trait gratitude increases the frequency and intensity of felt and expressed gratitude in individuals (McCullough et al., 2002). Therefore, our process model acknowledges that trait gratitude can directly promote both state and expressed gratitude. Moreover, trait gratitude also leads individuals to interpret situations through a positive lens.

Indeed, scholars have suggested individuals high in trait gratitude have a positive attributional tendency (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2008b). As such, trait gratitude should directly shape the appraisals that beneficiaries make regarding a benefaction event and should influence the reactions to such events and appraisals. Therefore, trait gratitude directly predicts beneficiary appraisals and moderates the relationship between appraisal and feelings of gratitude.

Third, theories of gratitude suggest that trait, state, and expressed gratitude have important implications for beneficiaries, benefactors, their relationships, and third parties. Resource perspectives like conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) have been used to explain the relationships between gratitude and individual wellness. Specifically, trait, state, and expressed gratitude have all been shown to promote individual well-being, because gratitude replenishes personal resources. Beyond individual outcomes, the moral affect theory of gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001) suggests that gratitude promotes prosocial behaviors for both beneficiaries and benefactors. This theory also suggests that gratitude affects third parties as it motivates beneficiaries to “pay it forward” and bestow kindnesses upon individuals outside of the benefactor-beneficiary dyad. Gratitude also influences beneficiary-benefactor relationships. Consistent with find-remind-and-bind theory (Algoe, 2012), gratitude promotes new relationship formation, reminds beneficiaries of existing high-quality relationships and strengthens relationships between beneficiaries and benefactors. The witnessing effect of gratitude (Algoe et al., 2019) similarly demonstrates that witnessing gratitude expression between a beneficiary and a benefactor promotes relationship building among the expresser, receiver, and the third-party witness. Therefore, the process model of gratitude acknowledges that trait, state, and expressed gratitude have consequences for individuals and relationships.

Fourth, our model of gratitude also considers that several variables might influence any single gratitude episode. For instance, benefactor personality might influence the extent to which they feel or express gratitude. Moreover, situational factors, such as how the beneficiary feels about being dependent (or needy), or group norms of emotion could affect how beneficiaries appraise an act of kindness. Therefore, our process model explicitly considers moderators of gratitude episodes at various levels of analysis.

### **Method of Literature Search**

To identify the relevant literature for our integrative review, we conducted a search using best practices suggested by the American Psychological Association (2008). We searched three databases—Web of Science, PsychInfo, and Business Source Complete—with the search terms (“gratitude” or “grateful” or “appreciat\*”) through May 2020.<sup>3</sup> This search returned a sample of 2,644 articles of which 278 were duplicates. After removing duplicates, we reviewed the title and abstract of 2,366 articles. Based on our inclusion criteria, we screened out another 1,813 articles (1,096 did not include gratitude or appreciation as focal constructs; 330 had non-adult or clinical samples; 291 were neither quantitative nor empirical; 45 were not in English; 29 references were errata; and 22 were duplicates). A PRISMA diagram (Page et al., 2021) of our review process can be found in Appendix A. A final sample of 553 articles met our inclusion criteria based on the title and abstract review, so we proceeded to full-text examination. Another 157 articles were screened out (48 were not in English; 35 included clinical or non-adult samples; 33 were not empirical or quantitative; 28 did not include gratitude as a focal variable; 7 were not primary studies; and 6 were duplicates). In all, we coded a final sample of 396 articles, comprising 614

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<sup>3</sup> Though our review is focused on gratitude, we also searched for appreciation because many articles use the term appreciation interchangeably with gratitude or measure appreciation as gratitude.

samples that represented 350,717 data points. A list of all the references included in our literature review are available in the online supplement, along with a detailed coding table for each article.

### **Review of the Literature through the Process Model of Episodic Gratitude**

In the literature review that follows, we use our process model of episodic gratitude as a framework to distill and organize the gratitude literature. In doing so, we demonstrate the antecedents and moral, relational, and wellness outcomes present in extant research, highlight the links in our process model that have been considered only in certain literatures, and identify the relationships that have been understudied. We begin with the antecedents of the gratitude process and move through each link in our process model of episodic gratitude, explaining how each manifestation of gratitude influences outcomes for benefactors, beneficiaries, their relationships, and third parties. We also briefly review the mechanisms through which gratitude influences each of these moral, relational, and wellness outcomes, but discuss this matter further in the section of future research directions.

### **Antecedents of Gratitude Processes**

Our model begins with a benefaction event, which is an incident experienced by an individual (i.e., a beneficiary) in which another person (i.e., a benefactor) sought to “enhance one’s well-being” (McCullough et al., 2001, p. 252). Cognitive appraisal theories of emotions (e.g., Lazarus, 1991) suggest that discrete emotions stem from a two-stage appraisal of events. The first stage, or primary appraisal, concerns whether an event is likely to promote or hinder individual well-being. The second-stage, or secondary appraisal, concerns the meaning or interpretation of the event to the individual (Lazarus, 1991; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Thus, the secondary appraisal takes into consideration more factors than the primary appraisal, including consequences stemming from the event, self-and-other attributions, environmental

cues, coping resources needed to deal with the event, and so forth, which influence discrete emotional responses. Thus, a benefaction event can be considered one kind of “affective event” (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) wherein the beneficiary, having recognized that the event was an act of kindness toward them and thus formed a primary appraisal (help, not harm), is motivated to analyze and interpret the meaning of this helpful event (secondary appraisal). The discrete emotional response to a secondary appraisal of an act of kindness by a benefactor is likely to manifest as beneficiary state gratitude and/or gratitude expression when certain conditions are met. Thus, understanding the factors that influence and form the secondary appraisal has been a focus in the literature and is where we begin our review. First, we discuss the path from appraisal to state gratitude, and then review the complimentary path from appraisal to gratitude expression.

### **Beneficiary Appraisal of a Benefaction Event and State Gratitude**

Tesser et al. (1968) were among the first to examine a set of appraisals: cost to provide the benefit, value of the benefit to the beneficiary, and the benefactor’s intention to provide the benefit in predicting beneficiaries’ state gratitude. Each appraisal jointly predicted state gratitude. As such, beneficiaries’ appraisals of cost, value, and intentions have received substantial attention in the literature. However, as the gratitude literature has grown, other appraisals that influence the beneficiary’s state gratitude have been identified. Indeed, research has examined how benefits received as an individual or group at work affect state gratitude. Several factors such as personality traits, social comparisons, norms, and willingness to adopt gratitude interventions have been shown to moderate beneficiaries’ appraisals of the benefaction event. Of the moderators explored in the literature, the role of trait gratitude in positively skewing the beneficiary’s benefit appraisals has received the most examination and empirical support. However, we reserve discussion of this moderating role of trait gratitude to our broader



overview of the myriad effects of trait gratitude. Therefore, in this section we review the empirical research for each of the beneficiary appraisals before reviewing moderators that influence the gratitude episode.

**Cost of the Benefit.** Cost to the benefactor has been both experimentally manipulated and measured as a beneficiary perception. The construct of cost to the benefactor is typically operationalized as a financial burden, effortful expenditure of time or money, or risks undertaken to help the beneficiary. For example, Tesser et al. (1968) manipulated cost using three hypothetical helping scenarios and found that cost independently, and jointly with perceived value and altruistic intentions, positively predicted the beneficiary's state gratitude (Tesser et al., 1968). A drawback of Tesser et al.'s study was the confounding of indebtedness with the measurement of state gratitude, leaving it unclear how the appraisal of cost was driving state gratitude versus state indebtedness and how the influence of the cost appraisal on state gratitude may have differed across the scenarios. Later work separated state gratitude from state indebtedness when examining the cost appraisal but the results have been mixed, with some indicating a positive effect of cost on state gratitude (e.g., Goei & Boster, 2005, Study 2) and others revealing no support despite multiple operationalizations of cost (Peng et al., 2018).

Adding to the complexity, Wood et al. (2008b) proposed that cost, along with value and helpfulness, was a joint indicator of benefit appraisals. Across three studies of mixed design, they found that cost was a significant indicator of benefit appraisals which positively predicted state gratitude. Further, Wood et al. found that perceptions of cost directly predicted state gratitude (Study 2). Algoe et al. (2008) also found that perceived cost of the benefit predicted state gratitude, but this effect was fully mediated by perceptions of benefactor thoughtfulness.

Although the evidence appears mixed regarding the role of cost appraisals on beneficiary state gratitude, two variations across studies make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. First, studies have varied the relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary: between strangers (Goei & Boster, 2005; Wood et al., 2008b, Study 1), acquaintances (i.e., classmates, neighbors, new coworkers) (Peng et al., 2018, Study 2; Tesser et al., 1968), friends (Algoe et al., 2008), and family members (Tesser et al., 1968; Wood et al., 2008b, Study 3). In one study, the relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary was unclear (Peng et al., 2018, Study 1). Across studies, those involving family members, friends, and strangers yielded positive effects of higher cost appraisals on state gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008; Goei & Boster, 2005; Tesser et al., 1968; Wood et al., 2008b, Study 3). In studies where the benefactor was an acquaintance, the findings were mixed (Peng et al., 2018, Study 2; Tesser et al., 1968).

Second, there is inconsistency in how cost has been measured, with some studies exploring financial burdens, expenditures of time, effort, or a composite mixture of these factors. Close examination of these differences revealed that in studies where cost was operationalized as time, money, or a financial burden, higher cost predicted state gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008; Tesser et al., 1968; Wood et al., 2008b, Study 1). When cost was operationalized as effort, high effort from friends (Algoe et al., 2008) or strangers (Goei & Boster, 2005) predicted state gratitude, but high effort from acquaintances did not (Peng et al., 2018, Study 2; Tesser et al., 1968). Finally, because Peng et al. (2018, Study 1) measured cost as a composite and did not clarify the benefactor-beneficiary relationship, it is unclear what aspect of cost and what relationship type might impact the non-significant findings in that study.

In sum, each of the manifestations of cost originally examined by Tesser et al. (1968) (i.e., time, money/financial burden, effort) have demonstrated some positive effects on state

gratitude. However, these attributes have not been systematically examined across the different types of benefactor-beneficiary relationships commonly examined in the literature; nor has it been settled as to whether these manifestations should be measured independently or as a composite. Therefore, conclusions about the relationship between cost appraisals and state gratitude are preliminary.

**Value of the Benefit.** Benefit value has been operationalized both subjectively (perceived by a beneficiary) and objectively (valued economically). Most work indicates that higher subjective value is associated with beneficiary state gratitude (Algoe et al., 2008; Tesser et al., 1968; Wood et al., 2008b). In contrast, Peng et al. (2018, Study 1) found that participants' subjective perception of the value of a benefit rated in an autobiographical recall task did not significantly predict state gratitude. One study examined the influence of objective value on state gratitude. Tsang (2007) manipulated the objective value of raffle tickets in an experimental lab study. Participants who believed they received raffle tickets as an intentional favor either worth \$10 or \$100, objectively, showed no significant difference in self-reported state gratitude.

As with the studies examining cost appraisals, the studies examining appraisals of benefit value have also varied with regards to the benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Nevertheless, across studies where the benefactor's relationship with the beneficiary was clear (vs. undisclosed, i.e., Peng et al., 2018, Study 1), subjective value of the benefit was associated with higher state gratitude. While further examination on the role of objective value could be fruitful, Tsang's (2007) speculation about the null finding of objective value in her study indicated that the objective value of a favor may be less impactful than the fact that another person sought to provide a favor in the first place. That is, regardless of the objective value of the benefit,

comparing low objective value to high objective value in Tsang's study may have obscured the fact that both conditions reflected higher (relative to the control condition) subjective value.

**Benefactor Intentions.** Research shows that benefactors who appear volitional, unselfish, and unambiguously positive in their intentions to help the beneficiary elicit beneficiary state gratitude (Bartlett & Desteno, 2006; Halali et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2018, Li et al., 2019; Ouyang et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2018; Tesser et al., 1968; Tsang, 2006, 2007, 2021; Tsang & Martin, 2019; Wood et al., 2008b). While some research experimentally manipulated intentionality along different dimensions, such as benevolent vs. utilitarian (e.g., Li et al., 2019) and favor (intentional) vs. chance (unintentional) (e.g., Tsang, 2006, 2007, Tsang & Martin, 2019), each examination supported a positive relationship between an intentional act of kindness and the beneficiary's state gratitude.

A study of relational outcomes of gratitude suggests why appraisals of intentions elicit beneficiary gratitude. MacKenzie et al. (2014) found that individuals who more strongly believed that the benefactor had voluntarily acted to provide the benefit (i.e., free will for favor giving) were more inclined to feel grateful toward the benefactor, due to their perception of the benefactor's motivational sincerity. In all, the literature provides strong support that positive appraisals of benefactor intentions increase state gratitude.

**A Relationship with the Beneficiary.** Few studies directly test whether a benefactor's relationship with a beneficiary (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, friends, coworkers, family members, etc.) has an impact on the beneficiary's state gratitude. McCullough et al. (2001) pointed to the importance of a benefactor's role-based obligation in determining a beneficiary's gratitude, thus noting the significance of the relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary. They argued that the beneficiary would be most grateful to the benefactor who acted

to benefit him/her despite any role-based obligation to do so. Although the data are sparse, some findings lend support to McCullough and colleagues' theorizing. For example, participants indicated they would be most grateful to the stranger, acquaintance, and close friend, and less grateful toward the sibling(s) and least toward parents who helped them, indicating that the benefactors with the lowest obligation to help are the most appreciated (Bar-Tal et al., 1977). In contrast, within the context of romantic relationships, Luo et al. (2019) found that intimacy and relationship dependence, factors that should increase obligation to care for beneficiary well-being, could positively predict gift recipients' felt appreciation.

Given that some prior work indicates that strangers, who have a lower role-based obligation to help a beneficiary, elicit more gratitude than benefactors who have a stronger obligation to the beneficiary, scholars have examined how identifiability of unknown benefactors influences beneficiary gratitude. Across three studies, Halali et al. (2017) manipulated identifiability of the benefactor by disclosing/not disclosing the benefactor's name to participants. Although neither benefactor (named vs. unknown) could be characterized as having different role-based obligations to the beneficiary (i.e., both were strangers to the beneficiary) (Halali et al., 2017), state gratitude was higher when the benefactor was identified. Based on past research, the authors argued that identifiability creates the opportunity for a direct target of emotions (e.g., state gratitude). In all, the influence of the role-based obligation on beneficiary state gratitude appears more complex than past theory on gratitude has suggested (e.g., McCullough et al., 2001).

**Benefactor Benevolence.** Evidence that the benefactor is a benevolent person and his/her actions are benevolent are facilitative to state gratitude. In terms of the perception, a beneficiary who appraises a benefactor as warm (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2019), responsive (Kubacka et

al., 2011; Simão & Seibt, 2015), thoughtful (Algoe et al., 2008), and helpful (Chow & Lowery, 2010) report a higher level of state gratitude. For example, Kubacka and colleagues (2011) studied Dutch couples for approximately four years following their marriage and found that partners who rated their spouse as more responsive (i.e., accepting of them, understanding of them, and caring for them) at an earlier time point reported higher levels of state gratitude towards their partner at a later point.

In terms of the benefactor's actions, research has identified a range of benevolent or self-transcendent behaviors that can promote state gratitude. These behaviors include but are not limited to relational investment (Joel et al., 2013), social acceptance (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2019), thoughtful behaviors (Algoe et al., 2010), forgiving (Mooney et al., 2016), friendly touch (Simão & Seibt, 2015), favor giving (Goei & Boster, 2005; Hendrickson & Goei, 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2014), gift giving (Cavanaugh et al., 2015; Luo et al., 2019), helping or other-benefiting behaviors (Converse & Fishbach, 2012; Forster et al., 2017), and sacrifice (Righetti et al., 2020; Visserman et al., 2018; Zoppolat et al., 2020). For example, Algoe et al. (2010) found that partner thoughtful behaviors perceived by participants and reported by their partner independently predicted participants' state gratitude. Simão and Seibt (2015) found that, regardless of a communal (vs. neutral) mindset, friendly touch could promote state gratitude.

The research on the perceptions of benefactor sacrifice deserves further mention. Across two studies, Visserman et al. (2018) found that people felt grateful only when perceiving their partner's sacrifice as being motivated to serve them but not when perceiving their partner's sacrifice as being motivated to serve the relationship or their partner. Zoppolat et al. (2020), using a daily experience procedure among romantic partners, extended the finding regarding the effect of partner sacrifice on state gratitude; specifically, their findings suggest that this effect

would be significant only when individuals' expectations of their partner's sacrifice were low, but not when such expectations were high.

In sum, appraisals of benefactor benevolence seem to help the beneficiary detect whether the benefactor prioritizes beneficiary needs by being warm, responsive, thoughtful, and self-sacrificing. In turn, these appraisals increase beneficiary state gratitude.

**Gratitude Interventions.** By design, gratitude interventions trigger an appraisal of past or present events that may elicit state gratitude. Indeed, in their instructions, most gratitude interventions tell participants to think about, savor, or reappraise events of the past or present. For example, in their landmark gratitude intervention, Emmons & McCullough (2003) instruct participants to “think back over the past week and write down... things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for” (p. 379). Several scholars have utilized interventions<sup>4</sup>, demonstrating a significant increase in state gratitude after an intervention (Cain et al., 2018; Kaplan et al., 2014; Neumeier et al., 2017; Stegen & Wankier, 2018; Winslow et al., 2017). One study was unique in that it used video stimuli for cultivating state gratitude. Janicke-Bowles and colleagues conducted a series of studies in which inspiring or meaningful videos increased viewers' state gratitude (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019; Janicke et al., 2018). Consistent with our process model of gratitude, gratitude interventions—by allowing individuals to reflect on, reappraise, and savor kindnesses received—reflect one way that benefaction events trigger state gratitude.

**Group vs. Individual Benefits.** In one of the few studies of gratitude that included an organizational context, Tsang (2021) examined whether being the target (recipient) of an individual (vs. a group) benefit induced more gratitude. That is, she explored whether receiving a

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<sup>4</sup> Research has demonstrated that state gratitude is elicited through three types of interventions: gratitude lists/grateful contemplation (Manthey et al., 2016; Neumeier et al., 2017; O'Leary & Dockray, 2015), behaviorally expressed gratitude (Berger et al., 2019)—in which participants imagine expressing, or actually express, gratitude to a benefactor—and educational gratitude groups (e.g., Froh et al., 2014; Owens & Patterson, 2013; Perez, 2006).

gift individually was more strongly related to state gratitude than being one of many people who would receive the same gift (i.e., a group/team benefit). Across two experimental studies, the findings were mixed. When participants read scenarios with only benefit target (group vs. individual) manipulated, state gratitude was stronger for individual targets (Study 1). However, in Study 2, when the benefactor's intention and benefit target were manipulated, there was no main effect for benefit target on state gratitude. Instead, the benefactor's benevolent (vs. selfish) intention evoked the beneficiary's state gratitude. Tsang explained these findings by drawing on the relational "binding" function of gratitude (Algoe, 2012). She suggested that absent an explicit understanding of the benefactor's intention (i.e., Study 1), being the target of individual (vs. group) benefits conveyed a stronger relational intention on the part of the benefactor. Yet when an intention was explicit (i.e., Study 2), benefit target added little additional value to the relational information conveyed. Future research is needed to help better understand how benefit target influences state gratitude.

### **Beneficiary Appraisal of an Event and Gratitude Expression**

The next link in our model highlights the complimentary path from appraisal to expressed gratitude. As with state gratitude, research has focused on benefit (e.g., cost) appraisals, benefactor benevolence and gratitude interventions. However, research on gratitude expression has also identified personal factors a beneficiary considers when appraising a benefaction event that have not been examined in relation to state gratitude.

**Cost and Intentions.** Using politeness theory as a frame (Brown & Levinson, 1978), Okamoto and Robinson (1997) found that people were most likely to react with expressed gratitude (and more earnest in their expression) when the imposition or demand on the benefactor for a given act of help or kindness was the greatest and the benefactor made eye



contact with the beneficiary. Thus, higher cost (i.e., inconvenience) and an explicit intention to help the beneficiary were more likely to elicit gratitude expression. Moreover, research suggests that gratitude expression in a close personal relationship can be a reciprocal response to the beneficiary's appraisal that the benefactor holds a positive relationship intention. That is, individuals express gratitude in response to their partner's gratitude expression in various ways (Amaro, 2017; Chang & Algoe, 2019) and to their partner's relational investment (i.e., sacrifice on their behalf; Joel et al., 2013).

**Gratitude Interventions.** Thanking others creates social bonds and reinforces benevolent or binding behaviors (Algoe, 2012). Gratitude interventions, which focus participants' attention on benefits and blessings, may encourage individuals to express gratitude to others. One study examined expressed gratitude as an outcome of a gratitude intervention within Chinese families. Fung and colleagues (2020) conducted a randomized controlled trial with parents of young children and instructed them to express gratitude to their children, in what they call an appreciation-promotion intervention. This intervention increased parents' expression of gratitude and decreased criticism toward their children. This study suggests that interventions can be used to increase the incidence of expressed gratitude, but more research is warranted in this area.

**Beneficiary Factors.** Theoretical accounts of gratitude have suggested that the self-conscious experience of being a beneficiary—of being seen as needy—is something that some people may find unpleasant, and that may arouse resentment (Algoe et al., 2010; Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). Neediness does not necessarily imply the beneficiary is responsible for his or her situation. However, the emotional experience associated with being or appearing dependent, may

evoke expressed gratitude (Ventimiglia, 1982), despite a lack of grateful emotion (Roberts, 2004).

For example, contrary to politeness theory, which suggests that if a beneficiary puts a benefactor out, the benefactor who responds with kindness should be appreciated (Brown & Levinson, 1978), the beneficiary's expressed gratitude was reduced when the beneficiary was responsible for the imposition on the benefactor (Okamoto & Robinson, 1997). This finding seems perplexing; yet it is consistent with other work that indicates receiving visible help is not always a positive experience for a beneficiary and does not always result in expressed gratitude (Human et al., 2018). Moreover, in the workplace, a beneficiary is less likely to express gratitude in response to unsolicited help versus requested help (Lee et al., 2019, Study 1). Lee and colleagues (2019, Study 2) revealed that threats to self-esteem were higher when employees received proactive help from coworkers, suggesting that self-perceptions could influence expressed gratitude. Thus, if a benefaction event causes the beneficiary to view himself/herself in an uncomfortable or unpleasant way, they may be less likely to express gratitude as a result.

### **Trait Gratitude and Beneficiary Appraisals**

Trait gratitude has long been thought to directly influence the ways in which individuals view and interpret their world and experiences, and to magnify the experience of felt gratitude resulting from their appraisals. According to McCullough et al. (2002, p. 113), "attributional style may be central to the disposition toward gratitude" because trait gratitude allows individuals to recognize that they have benefited and attribute that benefit to an external source (as opposed to the self). Indeed, individuals high in trait gratitude view the world through rose-colored glasses (Wood et al., 2008a), making more positive attributions for others' behaviors,

interpreting ambiguous stimuli more positively, and viewing life itself as a gift (McCullough et al., 2002).

The theorized link between trait gratitude and positive cognitive styles such as appraisals and attributions has been supported empirically. For example, individuals higher in trait gratitude tend to have a more positive perception of the past and present. Bhullar et al., (2015) found that trait gratitude was correlated with a past-positive temporal frame, which involves a focus on positive memories of the past. Similarly, results from a sample of 591 Polish adults revealed that trait gratitude was most strongly correlated with a past-positive temporal frame, as seen in Bhullar et al. (2015), but also has a positive correlation with positive present temporal frames (Przepiorka & Sobol-Kwapinska, 2020). Moreover, trait gratitude is related to a positive outlook. Trait gratitude is positively related to optimism (McCullough et al., 2002) and hope (McCullough et al., 2002; Witvliet et al., 2019), and negatively related to hopelessness (Kaniuka et al., 2020).

Trait gratitude also allows individuals to attribute positive motives to others and positively perceive the universe at large. For example, trait gratitude is associated with positive attitudes about prior generations' benevolence (Strelan, 2007) and just world beliefs (Jiang et al., 2016). Likewise, grateful people are more likely to have positive attitudes toward future generations (Barnett et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals' attachment styles are reflections of their beliefs about others and of others' motives. Trait gratitude is associated with more positive attachment styles and negatively associated with negative attachment styles (Dwiwardani et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017).

In all, trait gratitude has been theorized and empirically shown to be associated with positive cognitive styles and attributional tendencies. As such, these positive appraisal tendencies

allow individuals to perceive benevolence of others more frequently and intensely than individuals lower in trait gratitude. Therefore, in our process model, trait gratitude is both an antecedent of appraisals and a moderator that magnifies the effects of the appraisals.

### **Trait Gratitude and State Gratitude**

Affective traits lower the threshold for experiencing certain emotional states (Rosenberg, 1998). As such, trait gratitude has been theorized to lead individuals to feel grateful more frequently, intensely, because of more circumstances, and toward a larger number of individuals. Said another way, “one’s capacity for gratitude is positively associated with the morally relevant trait” of trait gratitude (McCullough et al., 2002, p. 253). Indeed, empirical work has supported this theoretical link between trait gratitude and state gratitude. Survey studies have found that individuals higher in trait gratitude experience state gratitude more frequently (DeWall et al., 2012; König & Glück, 2014; McCullough et al., 2004).

### **Trait Gratitude and Gratitude Expression**

Trait gratitude has been called a “moral virtue trait” (Bertocci & Millard, 1963, p. 88) that leads individuals to “express this appreciation and thankfulness” (Emmons & McCullough, 2004, p. 5). Indeed, moral psychologists have suggested that expressions of gratitude and the capacity for those expressions are directly related to trait gratitude (e.g., Komter, 2004). However, little empirical work has examined this claim. As part of an effort to examine gratitude in romantic relationships, Gordon and colleagues (2012) found that a grateful disposition was correlated positively with self-reported gratitude expression (appreciativeness) in their study. Given that the extant evidence is correlational, the relationship between trait gratitude and expressed gratitude warrants future research.

### **Moderators for a Gratitude Episode**

Few studies have examined moderators of a beneficiary's benefit appraisals, as previous research has assumed that state gratitude is a positive linear function of benefit appraisals (Tesser et al., 1968; Wood et al., 2011). However, recent evidence points to several factors associated with a context and a beneficiary that can influence appraisals.

**Past and Present Benefits.** Past research on emotions has shown that over time, people can become accustomed to positive events and those events lose their power to influence emotional reactions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). But most research on gratitude has examined the effect of benefaction events in isolation (e.g., help given to participants in lab experiments, a recalled episode of helping, a daily diary of kindness received), while ignoring how a beneficiary evaluates helping episodes in relation to other helping episodes they have experienced. Research suggests that a beneficiary's state gratitude is sensitive to the comparison between help from one benefactor and help from other benefactors. While more (vs. less) help increases gratitude, the amount of gratitude depended on the relative (higher) rank of help received among the help received from other benefactors (Wood et al., 2011). That is, beneficiaries are sensitive to how the they receive compares with what other benefactors are providing, and the beneficiaries' feelings of gratitude depends on these relative judgments.

**Achievement Contexts.** Another contextual moderator relates to the agency the beneficiary feels in relation to the benefaction event. While most research has studied gratitude within non-achievement contexts, some research has explored the complex attributions the beneficiary makes in achievement contexts where outcomes are highly self-relevant (Chow & Lowery, 2010). Based on the expectation that individuals desire to claim responsibility for their successes in life (Weiner, 1979, 1985), Chow and Lowery (2010) proposed and found that in an achievement context, feeling personally responsible for the help received was a necessary

condition for experiencing state gratitude. In contrast, another study produced mixed findings with regards to personal responsibility (Li et al., 2019). Chinese college students facing financial hardship who felt less personally responsible for receiving aid from a donor felt stronger state gratitude, but only when the intention was benevolent (vs. utilitarian) (Li et al., 2019). Given the mixed findings, more research should examine how achievement contexts affect beneficiary appraisals.

**Emotional Norms.** Emotional norms also influence state gratitude. For example, Delvaux et al. (2015) found that higher perceived norms of gratitude within a group at an earlier time point positively predicted individuals' experience of state gratitude at a later point. Though Delvaux et al. was interested in the moderating role of emotional norms, their findings highlight the importance of considering the emotional context. Moreover, Locklear et al. (2020) found that perceived gratitude norms moderated the extent to which a workplace gratitude intervention increase employee resources. That is, individuals who perceived higher norms of gratitude in their workplace had more replenishing effects after the intervention than those who perceived lower gratitude norms in their workplace. In all, emotional (gratitude) norms should influence the gratitude episode. Researchers should continue to study this topic empirically.

**Beneficiary Characteristics.** Some research points to beneficiary characteristics that facilitate or thwart the experience of state gratitude in response to benefits received. In terms of beneficiary attributes that influence state gratitude directly, research has identified relational humility (Dwiwardani et al., 2018) as a facilitative antecedent of state gratitude, whereas attachment avoidance motivation (Vollmann et al., 2019) was an inhibitive antecedent of state gratitude. Additionally, a small body of research on wellness outcomes suggests that certain individuals are more likely to adopt gratitude interventions, which indirectly facilitate state

gratitude. This stream of research has identified such attributes as individual differences, well-being, and personal beliefs about gratitude interventions that drive intervention adoptions.

In terms of individual predictors, research shows that trait curiosity, female gender, and trait self-control (Kaczmarek et al., 2013; 2014a) increase the intention to use gratitude journals. In addition, the intention to change a lifestyle also increases gratitude journal use (Kaczmarek et al., 2013). Depressive symptoms decrease the initiation and use of gratitude journals (Kaczmarek et al., 2013; 2014b) despite this population's potential for benefitting the most from their use. With regards to beliefs about gratitude interventions, utility beliefs, perceived efficacy, personal benefit of the interventions, ease of use, and perceived social acceptability all increase the adoption of gratitude interventions (Kaczmarek et al., 2014a; 2015). As such, one important way to increase adoption of gratitude interventions in the workplace may be to convince employees of their efficacy, acceptability, and benefit and to make them readily available and easy to use.

Finally, some research has suggested that physical and psychological factors increase gratitude expression. For example, Algoe and Way (2014) found a biological factor (i.e., oxytocin) was associated with expression of gratitude in both a lab-based study and a daily diary field survey study with romantic partners. Other research found that expectations of a positive emotional impact from gratitude expression influenced expressed gratitude (Kumar & Epley, 2018). Specifically, Kumar and Epley (2018) found that individuals were most interested in expressing gratitude to another who would feel positive about receiving their gratitude and were least interested in expressing gratitude to another who would feel awkward. Individuals reported feeling happier than normal after expressing gratitude, but ironically, they indicated that they expressed gratitude less often than they liked.

### **Consequences of State, Trait, and Expressed Gratitude**

We now turn to the consequences of each form of gratitude. To fully understand the gratitude literature, it is critical to distinguish among the state, trait, and behavioral forms of an emotion (McCullough et al., 2001; Wood et al., 2008b). Thus, we review the outcomes of each form separately.

### **Outcomes of State Gratitude**

The beneficiary's state gratitude has implications for four outcome categories (i.e., beneficiary, benefactor, relationship, and third parties) and the behavioral display of state gratitude: gratitude expression. It is in this part of our process model of gratitude where the siloed approaches to studying gratitude are most evident. For example, when examining wellness outcomes, resource theories (Frederickson, 2001; 2004; Hobfoll, 1989) dominate the view of state gratitude. These theories position state gratitude as a resource that contributes to individual well-being. Thus, wellness outcomes of state gratitude relate to its adaptive consequences for beneficiaries. In contrast, in exploring moral outcomes, state gratitude is considered a driver of prosocial behaviors toward the benefactor (i.e., direct reciprocity) and to unrelated others (referred to as upstream, or indirect reciprocity) (McCullough et al., 2001). Thus, the moral consequences of state gratitude cluster around prosocial outcomes relevant to the benefactor and third parties. When exploring relational outcomes, consistent with Algoe and colleagues' (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2008) find-remind-and-bind theory, state gratitude helps individuals identify a high-quality relationship partner and coordinate responses to improve social relationships. Thus, outcomes of state gratitude in this literature pertain mostly to the consequences for the benefactor-beneficiary relationship. A final consequence of state gratitude in our model is the beneficiary's gratitude expression, which, as previously mentioned, is often implied or assumed but rarely empirically examined. Scholars theorize (e.g., McCullough et al., 2001) that



experiencing feelings of gratitude (i.e., state gratitude) will lead individuals to express these feelings, but the beneficiary does not always express gratitude when feeling grateful and sometimes even expresses gratitude when not feeling grateful at all (i.e., inauthentic gratitude). We discuss each outcome of state gratitude below.

**Beneficiary Outcomes for State Gratitude.** Scholars have explored the consequences of state gratitude to the beneficiary using two primary approaches. The first approach includes cross-sectional and daily diary studies that explore the correlations between elevated state gratitude and beneficiary well-being (affective and cognitive). The second approach involves the consequences of gratitude interventions for the beneficiary. The design of these interventions predominantly includes a two-week (i.e., 14 day) gratitude intervention and a psychologically active control group (e.g., Emmons & McCullough, 2003: “journal about your day in general”). Researchers employing these interventions typically compare pre- and post-test measures of outcomes within and between groups to establish the causality.

***Correlational Evidence for the Influence of State Gratitude on Beneficiaries.*** In terms of the first approach, state gratitude is viewed as a personal resource that promotes affective well-being. Most studies have used cross-sectional surveys to examine affective outcomes of state gratitude such as diffuse positive mood (DeWall et al., 2012; Froiland, 2018, Lin, 2015a) and positive affect (Adler & Fagley 2005; Allan et al., 2013), and reduced negative mood (Lin, 2015a) and negative affect (Adler & Fagley 2005; Allan et al., 2013). One study used a 14-day daily diary design and found that on days when participants felt grateful, they experienced higher positive affect and lower negative affect (Nezlek et al., 2017). Additionally, state gratitude is positively associated with discrete positive emotions such as happiness (Toepfer et al., 2012; Senf & Liao, 2013) and hope (Lanham et al., 2012). Moreover, experience sampling studies have

found relations between gratitude and humility (Kruse et al., 2014) and gratitude and (fewer) expressions of anger (DeWall et al., 2012).

State gratitude also promotes indicators of mental well-being and hinders indicators of mental ill-being. Indicators of mental well-being include basic psychological need fulfillment (Lee et al., 2015), satisfaction and meaning in life (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Allan et al., 2013; Lin, 2015b; Nezlek et al., 2017; Rash et al., 2011; Thrash et al., 2010; Toepfer et al., 2012), job satisfaction (Bianchi, 2013; Lanham et al., 2012), subjective mental well-being (Bartlett & Arpin, 2019; Krejtz et al., 2016; Thrash et al., 2010; Watkins et al., 2015), self-esteem (Nezlek et al., 2017; Rash et al., 2011), and positive coping (Lin, 2015b). Indicators of mental ill-being include burnout (Lanham et al., 2012), depressive symptoms (Lambert et al., 2012), and depression (O’Leary & Dockray, 2015; Toepfer et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2015). Taken together, the previous research findings suggest that state gratitude promotes individuals’ affective and cognitive well-being.

***Evidence for Cultivated State Gratitude through Interventions and Beneficiary Outcomes.*** In terms of the second approach, and consistent with the sustainable model of happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), gratitude interventions tend to promote individual wellness including affective, cognitive/mental, and physical well-being. Studies have found that gratitude interventions increase affective well-being, positive discrete emotions, and a positive outlook. Affective outcomes include diffuse positive mood (Harbaugh & Vasey 2014; Hatori et al., 2018; Titova et al., 2017), such as positive affect (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Chan, 2010; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017; Manthey et al., 2016; Witvliet et al., 2019), positive affective well-being (Kaplan et al., 2014), subjective well-being (Lyubomirsky et al.,

2011; Maiolino & Kuiper, 2016; Miller & Duncan, 2015; Neumeier et al., 2017), work-specific well-being (Neumeier et al., 2017), hedonic well-being (Jackowska et al., 2016), and flourishing (Killen & Macaskill, 2015). Gratitude interventions also hinder negative affect (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Chan, 2013; Hatori et al., 2018).

Gratitude interventions are also positively related to discrete positive emotions, such as feelings of appreciation (Ouishi et al., 2019; Tucker, 2007), elevation (Layous et al., 2017a), state gratitude (Chan, 2013; Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017; Kaplan et al., 2014; Koay et al., 2020; Kruse et al., 2014; Layous et al., 2017b; McCullough et al., 2004; Ouishi et al., 2019; Salzman et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2017), happiness (Gander et al., 2013; Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014; Witvliet et al., 2019; Ouishi et al., 2019; Senf & Liau, 2013), and joy (Layous et al., 2017). Finally, gratitude interventions promote a positive outlook. These interventions increase inspiration (Layous et al., 2017), optimism (Jackowska et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2013), hope (Witvliet et al., 2019), and humility (Kruse et al., 2014).

Gratitude interventions can promote cognitive/mental well-being and reduce cognitive/mental ill-being. In terms of indicators of mental well-being, gratitude interventions promote adjustment to the environment (Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017), body satisfaction (Dunaev et al., 2018), engagement (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012), life satisfaction (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016; Boehm et al., 2011; Booker & Dunsmore, 2017; Chan, 2010, 2011, 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Gruszecka, 2015; Işık & Ergüner-Tekinalp, 2017; Lambert et al., 2009; Manthey et al., 2016; O'Connell et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2013; Proyer et al., 2013; Rash et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2017), meaning in life (Flinchbaugh et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2017), meaningfulness of work (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019), personal accomplishment (Chan, 2011), and self-esteem (Rash et al., 2011).

Indicators of mental distress that gratitude interventions effect include reduced anxiety (Heckendorff et al., 2019), death anxiety (Lau & Cheng, 2011; 2012), depression (Gander et al., 2013; Heckendorff et al., 2019; O’Leary & Dockray, 2015), depressive symptoms (Booker & Dunsmore, 2017; Cheng et al., 2015; Chow & Berenbaum, 2016; Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014; Lambert et al., 2012; Senf & Liao, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Chan, 2011), perceived stress (Cheng et al., 2015; Deichert et al., 2019b; Killen & Macaskill, 2015; O’Leary & Dockray, 2015), body dissatisfaction (Geraghty et al., 2010; Homan et al., 2014), weight bias internalization (Dunaev et al., 2018), psychological distress (Wong et al., 2017), and sleep disturbances such as pre-sleep arousal and pre-sleep worry (Digdon & Koble, 2011). Although gratitude interventions were originally intended for clinical populations (Jackowska et al., 2016, Wood et al., 2010), the robust findings regarding the positive impact of gratitude interventions on cognitive/mental well-being in non-clinical populations suggests the promise of such interventions for employees in organizational settings.

Finally, the small body of research that has examined physical health outcomes has shown promising positive relationships with physical health and healthy behaviors. In terms of health indicators, gratitude interventions reduce systolic (Drażkowski et al., 2017) and diastolic blood pressure (Jackowska et al., 2016), illness symptoms (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), and the respiration rate (Drażkowski et al., 2017), and increase sleep quality (Digdon & Koble, 2011; Jackowska et al., 2016) and total sleep time (Digdon & Koble, 2011). In terms of health behaviors, gratitude interventions increase exercise frequency (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) and total hours of exercises (Emmons & McCullough 2003).

**Benefactor Outcomes of State Gratitude.** Beneficiary state gratitude influences two types of outcomes for the benefactor. The first involves direct reciprocity, where the grateful

beneficiary responds to a benefaction event by helping the benefactor. The second involves positive perceptions the beneficiary forms about the benefactor.

*Evidence for Direct Reciprocity.* The role of state gratitude in promoting the beneficiary's direct reciprocity has been investigated in quite a few laboratory experiments, predominantly with student samples. For example, Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) created an experimental paradigm wherein participants believed they were working on a task with another partner, and after spending time on the task, they suddenly found that they must redo the tedious task. A confederate playing the role of the benefactor stepped in to rescue the participant from having to redo the task. Across three experiments, participants' state gratitude promoted helping toward the benefactor. Using the same experimental paradigm, DeSteno et al. (2010) replicated their previous findings with an alternative measure of helping. They found that participants who felt grateful donated more of their tokens to the benefactor in an economic game. Another study found that state gratitude, rather than felt obligation, predicted compliance with a request for help from a benefactor. Compliance was operationalized as the number of raffle tickets participants agreed to purchase from confederates (Goei & Boster, 2005, Experiment 2). Tsang (2007) found that after receiving a favor from a fictitious benefactor in a lab experiment, participants distributed more resources to their benefactor than those who received the same outcome by chance. This effect was serially mediated by an increase in state gratitude and beneficiary motivation to express appreciation. This same effect was replicated by Tsang and Martin (2019, Studies 1-3): state gratitude and motivation to express appreciation were serial mediators between receipt of help and prosocial behaviors. Moreover, Ouyang et al. (2018) found that European American participants' (but not Indians') estimates of gratitude felt by a hypothetical beneficiary predicted participants' estimates of the benefactor's subsequent helping.

Correlational evidence also supports the direct reciprocity of a grateful beneficiary. Employees' state gratitude toward customers was positively associated with self-reported extra-role customer service (Kim & Qu, 2020). Similarly, in a study of employees' daily experience of state gratitude, higher levels of state gratitude (relative to a beneficiary's usual level) positively predicted daily citizenship behaviors toward supervisors and coworkers (Spence et al., 2014). However, Spence et al.'s measure of gratitude was not specific to the benefactor; thus, it is unclear if citizenship behaviors were a direct response to benevolent acts by supervisors or coworkers. Moreover, these effects are not limited to human benefactors. In a study of Japanese college students who indicated gratitude towards objects in nature (e.g., forest, river, animals), state gratitude correlated with their intentions to support and care for nature (Naito et al., 2010).

In contrast, some studies regarding the effects of state gratitude on reciprocity have produced non-significant results (e.g., Halali et al., 2017; Peng et al., 2020). Peng and colleagues (2020) did not find a significant effect of state gratitude on reciprocal behaviors despite using the same experimental paradigm as Bartlett and DeSteno (2006). Peng et al. noted that in the meta-analysis by Ma et al. (2017), there has been a surprising lack of studies examining the effect of beneficiary gratitude on direct, effortful (not merely intentional) reciprocity to a benefactor. Thus, it is necessary to continue research on both the direct and indirect effects of state gratitude on beneficiary prosocial responses to clarify this relationship.

***Evidence for Positive Perceptions of the Benefactor.*** Beneficiary state gratitude has a positive influence on perceptions of a benefactor. Consistent with the theory (Algoe, 2012) that a grateful beneficiary is alerted to the potential for a benefactor becoming a strong relationship partner and is motivated to get closer to the benefactor, empirical research shows that a beneficiary confers social status to a generous benefactor (Ouyang et al., 2018).

**Relationship Outcomes of State Gratitude.** The influence of state gratitude on the benefactor-beneficiary relationship is threefold. First, state gratitude can maintain and improve high-quality relationships—those characterized by positive connections and perceived relationship quality. For example, Algoe et al. (2010) found among 67 heterosexual co-habiting couples that men's felt gratitude from interactions on a previous day predicted an increase in feelings of relationship connection, and both men's and women's gratitude from interactions on a previous day predicted their perceptions of relationship quality. Ter Kuile et al. (2017) found among 199 newlywed Dutch couples that felt gratitude was positively related to responsiveness, trust, and relationship quality. In a professional setting, Akgün et al. (2016) found that employees' state gratitude facilitated high-quality connections in service firms as well as service innovativeness.

Second, state gratitude has a strong effect on a range of positive relational cognitions and attitudes, which helps explain why gratitude builds high-quality relationships. Many studies reported a positive association between state gratitude and relationship satisfaction in various contexts. For example, among 68 heterosexual couples who had been together for at least 6 months, Kashdan et al. (2018) surveyed participants for seven consecutive days and found that state gratitude was positively related to perceived goal support, relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and psychological need fulfillment. Likewise, many other studies found a positive association between gratitude toward a partner and relationship satisfaction (Algoe et al., 2010; Dwiwardani et al., 2018; Leong et al., 2020; McNulty & Dugas, 2019; Parnell et al., 2019; Puente-Diaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2016; Vollmann et al., 2019; Zoppolat et al., 2020).

The relational cognitions and attitudes triggered by state gratitude also manifest in other forms, including relationship commitment, relationship intimacy, relational concern, and pro-

relationship intent. In terms of relationship commitment, Gordon et al. (2012) found that feeling appreciative toward one's partner was positively related to one's relationship commitment, responsiveness, and relationship stability. Likewise, Joel et al.'s (2013) experimental study (Study 1) found that state gratitude, above and beyond trust, was positively related to relationship commitment. Joel et al. (2013, Studies 2 and 3), using a different method (daily surveys), replicated the positive association between state gratitude and relationship commitment. This pattern was also found by Kashdan et al. (2018). In terms of relationship intimacy, relational concern, and pro-relationship intent, Kashdan et al.'s (2018) and Parnell et al.'s (2019) survey studies found positive associations between state gratitude and relationship intimacy. In the context of relational dilemmas, Kong and Belkin (2019b) replicated a positive link between state gratitude and relational concern across five studies, whereas Mooney et al. (2016) replicated a positive link between state gratitude and intent to promote the relationship across three studies.

Third, state gratitude can determine a range of relational behaviors. This emotion binds people together and, thus, drives relationship maintenance. For example, Kubacka et al. (2011) found that state gratitude not only shaped an individual's perception of partner responsiveness but also motivated the individual's relationship maintenance. Algoe et al.'s (2008) field study with 278 sorority women found that state gratitude predicted these women's time spent with their sisters in addition to their feelings of integration with their sorority. Kong and Belkin (2019a) found that state gratitude led individuals to engage in escalation of commitment to a suboptimal decision for the sake of relationship maintenance, whereas Hendrickson and Goei (2009) found that state gratitude, above and beyond physical attraction and liking, explained individuals' compliance for the sake of relationship maintenance (also see Goei & Boster, 2005). State gratitude can also facilitate affiliative behaviors in various forms such as socially affiliative



decisions (Bartlett et al., 2012), social inclusion (Bartlett et al., 2012), mimicry (Jia et al., 2015), perspective taking (Gordon & Chen, 2013), dyadic adjustment (Kim et al., 2019), and social support (Lau & Cheng, 2017), while mitigating antisocial behaviors (Stieger et al., 2019). Finally, some experimental evidence indicates that state gratitude increases beneficiaries' willingness to violate moral norms (i.e., lying and avoiding due punishment) to protect their benefactors (Zhu et al., 2020).

In all, the gratitude literature renders strong support for the relational outcomes of state gratitude. While studies exploring relational outcomes of state gratitude are predominately conducted in samples of close friends and romantic partners, the evidence (e.g., Sun et al., 2019) suggests that these effects may be more universal than is presently assumed in the literature. Moreover, not all relational outcomes have a positive valence. That is, state gratitude may initiate pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., compliance, lying) that ultimately harm beneficiaries.

**Third-party Outcomes of State Gratitude.** One of the primary interests of scholars studying the moral outcomes of gratitude is promoting positive human relations (McCullough et al., 2001) through indirect (or upstream) reciprocity (kind acts towards third parties). The literature demonstrates support for this relationship and indicates that state gratitude inhibits acts that would harm third parties. We discuss each thread of the literature on state gratitude and indirect reciprocity below.

Indirect reciprocity is one of the central questions explored by Bartlett and DeSteno (2006). In their study, participants in the gratitude condition (who reported higher state gratitude than those in the control condition) extended help (agreeing to take a tedious survey) to both benefactors and strangers who requested their assistance. DeSteno and colleagues (2010) replicated this finding in a separate study.

State gratitude may promote prosocial behaviors and inhibit antisocial behaviors towards third parties. For example, some recent experimental evidence has revealed that the beneficiary is more likely to punish third parties for moral transgressions, a behavior framed as prosocial because its aim is to increase future cooperation (Vayness et al., 2020). However, another experimental study found non-significant effects for third-party punishment when the punishment given was designed to benefit the benefactor at the expense of the third-party (Zhu et al., 2020). Although punishment, as a form of prosociality, was not theorized by McCullough et al. (2001), it is in line with the findings that gratitude increases a focus on future rewards as opposed to present ones (DeSteno et al., 2014; Dickens & DeSteno, 2016), and is positively related to social justice behaviors (Michie, 2009). In terms of antisocial behaviors, DeSteno and colleagues (2019) found that participants with an induced feeling of gratitude cheated less. Moreover, they found that the more grateful participants felt, the less likely they were to cheat. There is also some evidence for the effect of state gratitude on competitive behaviors and sabotage in computerized games (Sasaki et al., 2020). These findings generally support the evidence that gratitude promotes human relationships by encouraging actions that support social cohesion.

In sum, research indicates support for the fact that state gratitude sets beneficiaries on a virtuous path of prosocial behaviors toward third parties. However, this research is entirely experimental. Thus, while initial evidence demonstrates a broad range of implications for third parties, external validity must be established. Thus, future research will need to address these concerns before strong conclusions on the third-party effects of state gratitude can be drawn.

**State Gratitude and Gratitude Expression.** Few studies have focused on the connection between state gratitude and expressed gratitude. Granted, one can express gratitude

without feeling grateful (i.e., inauthentic gratitude expression; see future research directions for further discussion of (in)authentic gratitude). Yet, gratitude expression is considered a common reaction of the grateful beneficiary (Baumgarten-Tramer, 1938; McCullough et al., 2001). In one study that did review this link, Naito et al. (2005) explored how college students reacted to hypothetical helping scenarios and found positive links between state gratitude and gratitude expression. It must be noted, however, that Naito et al. measured state gratitude as a mix of feelings of thankfulness, joy, warmth, and happiness. Given the limited research evidence on this link in our model, it seems that the literature has assumed (1) that gratitude expression implies beneficiary state gratitude and (2) that gratitude expression has positive benefits for the benefactor regardless of the beneficiary's underlying feelings.

### **Outcomes of Trait Gratitude**

Consistent with both state gratitude and gratitude expression, trait gratitude influences moral, relational, and wellness outcomes. However, the research on trait gratitude has two limitations. First, most research has focused on the consequences for individuals with higher trait gratitude. Second, most research on the consequences of trait gratitude has focused on wellness outcomes for beneficiaries. Thus, little empirical work has examined the outcomes of trait gratitude associated with a benefactor, a benefactor/beneficiary relationship, and third parties.

**Beneficiary Outcomes of Trait Gratitude.** Overwhelmingly, research has focused on beneficiary outcomes of trait gratitude. As a trait that facilitates positive attribution styles and greater experiences of state gratitude, many studies have demonstrated the positive implications of trait gratitude for the beneficiary's affective, cognitive, and physical well-being.

*Affective Consequences.* Affective outcomes fall into categories of diffuse affect states (Watkins et al., 2003), discrete positive emotions and a positive outlook (Lambert et al., 2012).

Trait gratitude has been shown, with overwhelming support, to lead to diffuse affective states such as increased positive affect (McCullough et al., 2002; Măirean, et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2019; Sun & Kong, 2013; Swickert et al., 2019; Watkins et al., 2003), decreased negative affect (Simons et al., 2019; Sun & Kong, 2013; Swickert et al., 2019; Watkins et al., 2003), affective well-being (Aghababaei et al., 2018; Bhullar et al., 2015; Chan, 2013; Chopik et al., 2019; Corona et al., 2020; Hill & Allemand, 2011; Jiang et al., 2016; Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Kim et al., 2019; Lin, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017; Lin & Yeh, 2014; McCullough et al., 2002; Măirean et al., 2019; Yue et al., 2017; Zhang, 2020), and eudaimonic well-being (Barrett-Cheetham et al., 2016). These studies have largely been cross-sectional in nature, but Simons and colleagues (2019) examined this relationship using a seven-day experience sampling study and found that trait gratitude predicted daily positive affect.

Discrete positive emotions correlated with trait gratitude include happiness (Aghababaei et al., 2018; Chan, 2013; Chen et al., 2012; Jun & Jo, 2016; McCullough et al., 2002; Watkins et al., 2003; Witvliet et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020), state gratitude (König & Glück, 2014; McCullough et al., 2004), gratitude to God (Bufford et al., 2017), and empathy (DeWall et al., 2012; Kruger, 2011). Finally, trait gratitude is negatively correlated with discrete negative emotions such as envy (McCullough et al., 2002), and beliefs like cynicism (Lee et al., 2018).

***Cognitive Consequences.*** In terms of cognitive consequences, trait gratitude is positively related to indicators of mental well-being and negatively related to indicators of mental distress. Because trait gratitude is theorized to influence the way people interpret their everyday life and interpersonal interactions, cognitive outcomes of trait gratitude—such as satisfaction and meaning, mental health indicators, and positive coping and appraisal styles—have been emphasized in this literature.

Satisfaction and meaning outcomes of trait gratitude include domain-specific satisfaction. In general, individuals high in trait gratitude tend to appreciate what they have. This is referred to as a “have-focus,” which increases their satisfaction in various areas of life (Fagley, & Adler, 2012). For example, many studies have linked trait gratitude to life satisfaction (e.g., Buschor et al., 2013). Though most of such research has been cross-sectional and based on self-report data, Buschor et al. (2013) found that both self- and peer-reported trait gratitude is related to life satisfaction. Moreover, Zhang (2020) found that across three studies, one of which was time-lagged by four weeks, there was a strong link between trait gratitude and life satisfaction. Trait gratitude is related to satisfaction in other life domains as well, including job satisfaction (Kim et al., 2019; Moon & Jung, 2020) and satisfaction in school (Sun et al., 2014). Trait gratitude is also correlated with compassion satisfaction (Kim et al., 2019), defined as the pleasurable and satisfying feelings that come from helping others, often relevant in healthcare/service contexts.

In addition to feeling more satisfied across various domains of life, individuals high in trait gratitude are better able to extract meaning from situations and life as a whole. Trait gratitude is positively related to meaning in life (Kleiman et al., 2013) and perceived autonomy (Aghababaei et al., 2018), and negatively related to burnout (Kim et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2018) and perceived stress (e.g., Corona et al., 2020; Moon & Jung, 2020; Wood et al., 2007).

Trait gratitude has been related to indicators of mental well-being (Green et al., 2019) and mental ill-being (Valikhani et al., 2019). Trait gratitude is correlated with general indicators of mental health including mind wellness (Green et al., 2019), psychological health (Hill et al., 2013), psychological well-being (Washizu & Naito 2015; Wood et al., 2009b), and psychological flexibility (i.e., the ability to flexibly cope with adversity; Frinking et al., 2019). Several cross-sectional survey studies identified the association between trait gratitude and self-esteem (e.g.,

Aghababaei et al., 2018; Corona et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2015), whereas only one study employed a time-lagged study design (i.e., Chen & Wu, 2014). Chen and Wu examined athletes' change in self-esteem across six months and found that higher trait gratitude increased self-esteem over time. This relationship was magnified when athletes had high trust in their coaches.

Trait gratitude is correlated negatively with mental distress for individuals in non-clinical populations. For example, trait gratitude is negatively related to general psychological dysfunction (Aghababaei & Tabik, 2013), depression (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Jiang et al., 2016) and depressive symptoms (Deichert et al., 2019a; Lambert et al., 2012). In college students, trait gratitude is negatively related to suicide ideation (Kleiman et al., 2013), suicide risk (Kaniuka et al., 2020), anxiety (e.g., McCullough et al., 2002) and aging anxiety (Allan et al., 2014).

Trait gratitude influences the ways individuals interpret stimuli, as evidenced by research that shows trait gratitude is associated with more positive coping (Lin, 2016; Lin & Yeh, 2014) and appraisal styles (Wood et al., 2007). For example, positive coping styles associated with trait gratitude include active coping (Wood et al., 2007) and growth-focused coping (e.g., Mofidi et al., 2014). Individuals higher in trait gratitude tend to engage in more grateful coping, "an enduring positive affective state...with distinct patterns of coping strategies...that include seeking social support, viewing stressful events as opportunities for personal growth, and using active coping strategies" (Mofidi et al., 2014, p. 330). In addition, trait gratitude is related to positive cognitive styles such as positive reframing (Lambert et al., 2012) and reinterpretation (Wood et al., 2007). Research shows that trait gratitude allows individuals to interpret their own behaviors and actions more positively. Specifically, trait gratitude is positively related to self-acceptance (Aghababaei et al., 2018; Homan & Hosack, 2019) and self-compassion (Homan & Hosack, 2019). Moreover, trait gratitude is negatively related to denial and self-blame, exemplars

of negative coping styles (Wood et al., 2007). Similarly, positive attribution styles associated with trait gratitude are positive past time perspective (Zhang, 2020), positive future time perspective (Allemand et al., 2019), and positive memory bias (Watkins et al., 2004).

***Physical Consequences.*** Trait gratitude is associated with physical well-being including health symptoms, health behaviors and intentions, and sleep-related outcomes. Health symptoms related to trait gratitude include perceived body wellness (Green et al., 2019), subjective health (e.g., Hill et al., 2013) and health symptoms (Deichert et al., 2019b). Trait gratitude is associated with various health behaviors and intentions such as healthy activities (Hill et al., 2013), reduced substance use (Wood et al., 2007), reduced substance misuse (Kaniuka et al., 2020), and an increased willingness to seek medical help (Hill et al., 2013). One study has also examined the sleep-related outcomes of trait gratitude. In a cross-sectional survey study of adults, trait gratitude was found to predict subjective sleep quality, sleep latency, sleep duration, and daytime dysfunction related to lack of sleep (Wood et al., 2009a), mediated by pre-sleep cognitions. Taken together, trait gratitude is a facilitative factor for affective, cognitive, and physical well-being.

**Benefactor Outcomes of Trait Gratitude.** Our review revealed only one study that explored the impact of trait gratitude on the benefactor. Yost-Dubrow and Dunham (2018, Study 2) found a positive influence of trait gratitude on reciprocity towards the benefactor.

**Relationship Outcomes of Trait Gratitude.** Trait gratitude is associated with functional social behaviors and outlooks that foster positive interpersonal connections (Leong et al., 2020). As such, empirical work has examined the associations between trait gratitude and other-focused dispositions that can promote wellness in social interactions, such as trait empathy (Miley & Spinella 2006), forgiveness (Chan 2013; Miley & Spinella 2006), and humility (Krumrei-

Mancuso, 2017). However, beyond attitudes and behaviors that should foster relationships, trait gratitude and relationship outcomes have not been directly examined.

**Third-party Outcomes of Trait Gratitude.** Three studies have explored the effects of trait gratitude on third parties. Two studies examined charitable giving and one examined social justice behaviors. First, trait gratitude was positively linked to self-reported charitable giving in a sample of Chinese adults, but this was qualified by socioeconomic status (Liu & Hao, 2017). Trait gratitude had a stronger positive effect on charitable giving for those with lower, rather than higher socioeconomic status. Second, in a study with MTurkers residing in the U.S., trait gratitude positively predicted individuals' likelihood of donating to charity in a dictator game (Yost-Dubrow & Dunham, 2018, Study 1). Third, in a study of employees and managers from 71 organizations, Michie (2009) found that leaders who reported a higher frequency of felt gratitude towards others at work, which she characterized as dispositional, were rated by employees as more likely to enact social justice behaviors at work. One further aspect of Michie's study deserves mention. Her results revealed a non-significant effect of leader trait gratitude on altruistic behaviors. In all, despite the limited research, results suggest that third parties stand to benefit from individuals higher in trait gratitude.

### **Outcomes of Gratitude Expression**

McCullough et al. (2001) argue that one's gratitude expressions do more than fulfill societal obligations to be polite; they also reinforce a benefactor's desire to engage in good deeds in the future, effectively initiating a cycle of prosocial behaviors. Thus, there has been more research focused on the reinforcement effect of gratitude expression on a benefactor (e.g., what they do after being thanked, and how they think and feel about themselves) and third parties (e.g., upstream/indirect reciprocity) than on beneficiary outcomes. Moreover, given its



interpersonal nature, gratitude expression is of significant interest to relationship scholars. In all, our review of the literature indicates that gratitude expressions can benefit beneficiaries, benefactors, their relationships, and third parties.

**Beneficiary Outcomes of Gratitude Expression.** Research indicates that gratitude expressions have positive intrapersonal effects on beneficiaries and benefits for how they are perceived by others. For example, research suggests that a beneficiary who expresses gratitude experiences elevated positive mood (Kumar & Epley, 2018; Lambert et al., 2012, Study 4). Moreover, gratitude expressions positively predicted self-reported happiness, life satisfaction, and vitality among college students who wrote about and shared their grateful experiences with their partners (Lambert et al., 2012, Study 4).

Gratitude expressions also have implications for how a beneficiary is perceived. Participants who evaluated a fictitious interview transcript for a female job candidate (Percival & Pulford, 2019; Study 2) had elevated perceptions of interviewee trustworthiness for the candidate who expressed gratitude. A similar pattern emerged for several other perceptions (i.e., increased likeability, employability, friendliness, and reduced formality).

**Benefactor Outcomes of Gratitude Expression.** Our literature review revealed two categories of outcomes for the benefactor who receives gratitude expressions from the beneficiary. First, consistent with McCullough et al. (2001), gratitude expressions are positively related to a benefactor's future prosocial behaviors. Second, research suggests that gratitude expressions can promote a benefactor's well-being.

***Gratitude Expressions and Benefactor Prosociality.*** Evidence suggests that when a beneficiary expresses gratitude to a benefactor, the benefactor feels valued or appreciated and thus enacts prosocial behaviors (Grant & Gino, 2010; Sheridan & Ambrose, 2020). For example,

across four experiments, Grant and Gino (2010) found that participants (as a benefactor) who were thanked by a beneficiary for their efforts (vs. otherwise) helped the beneficiary more, and social worth rather than self-efficacy, mediated this prosocial effect of expressed gratitude. Relatedly, the benefactor thanked for his/her effort perceived himself/herself as having made a higher prosocial impact on his/her coworker-beneficiary and was also more engaged in work (Lee et al., 2019).

Other work has indicated that in contexts where individuals are motivated to make sense of others' emotional expression, gratitude expressions may signal a beneficiary's relational intention toward a benefactor, triggering the benefactor's prosocial motivation. Kong and Belkin (2019a) conducted four experiments where participants engaged in zero-sum resource allocation exchanges. They found that the benefactor who received gratitude (vs. neutral feelings) expressed by the beneficiary perceived the beneficiary as more benevolent, and this perception shaped the benefactor's prosocial motivation (with obligatory motivation controlled for) toward the beneficiary and subsequent prosocial resource allocation.

***Gratitude Expressions and Benefactor Well-being.*** A few studies have found that receipt of gratitude expression is related to affective, cognitive, and physical well-being of a benefactor. Affective outcomes include positive and negative affect (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Kumar & Epley, 2018). Additionally, gratitude expressions increased nurses' satisfaction with the care they delivered to patients (Starkey et al., 2019). Another study with healthcare workers found that employees who received gratitude expressions from their patients had decreased burnout compared to those that did not receive gratitude (Converso et al., 2015). Finally, gratitude expressions are positively related to indicators of physical health (Elfering et al., 2018; Starkey et al., 2019).

**Relational Outcomes of Gratitude Expressions.** Gratitude expressions in relationships can convey meaningful information about the grateful partner's desire to be closer to the benefactor (Algoe, 2012). Empirical accounts have shown that gratitude expressions yield positive benefits for relational cognitions and evoke positive relational behaviors in receivers.

*Gratitude Expressions and Relational Cognitions.* The receiver of gratitude expressions tends to perceive a high-quality relationship with the expresser, as evidenced in research on romantic couples in the personal relationship literature (e.g., Duncan et al., 2018). Specifically, research has shown the positive influence of gratitude expressions on various forms of relational cognitions such as perceived partner responsiveness, perceived partner trustworthiness, and perceived communal strength, which can shape positive relational attitudes such as relationship satisfaction (e.g., Algoe et al., 2013; Fincham & May, 2020; Gordon et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2020; McNulty & Dugas, 2019; Park et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2015) and relationship commitment (Park, et al., 2019).

In the organizational literature, gratitude expressions also yield positive relational cognitions. For example, Ritzenhöfer et al. (2017) found some evidence suggesting that compared to leader pride expressions, leader gratitude expressions were more effective in building follower trust. This effect was mediated by follower perceptions of leader trustworthiness. In two more studies, Ritzenhöfer et al. (2019) found that leader gratitude expressions facilitated follower satisfaction with the leader and commitment to (rather than intent to leave) the leader.

Research also indicates that expressers experience stronger relational cognitions after expressing gratitude to a partner. Lambert et al. (2010) found that expressed gratitude shaped individuals' perceptions of communal strength. Across three studies, these results held even

when relationship satisfaction, social desirability, relationship length, and basic demographic factors were accounted for. Thus, gratitude expressions increase the sense of responsibility expressers feel for their relationship partner's welfare (Mills et al., 2004).

Expressed gratitude has also been shown to buffer against relational threats and conflicts. For example, in an advising context, Belkin and Kong (2018) found that expressed gratitude can buffer against the threat of rejection of the given advice on advisor social worth, presumably because it conveys feelings of social worth to the receiver (Grant & Gino, 2010). Cho and Fast (2012) found that an expression of gratitude could alleviate the denigration of power holders whose competence was threatened, and again, this moderation effect of expressed gratitude could be explained by reduced threat to power holders' social worth.

***Gratitude Expressions and Relational Behaviors.*** Expressed gratitude can also motivate perceivers of such expression to build and strengthen existing relationships. For example, relationship partners who receive gratitude expressions desire affiliation (Algoe et al., 2019; Williams & Bartlett, 2015) or engage in affiliative behaviors in the forms of behavioral self-disclosure (Algoe et al., 2019) and autonomous (relative to controlled) helping behaviors (Kindt et al., 2017). Gratitude expressions also increase change-oriented behaviors (i.e., voice) regarding relationship concerns (Lambert & Fincham, 2011).

***Third-party Outcomes of Gratitude Expressions.*** Early work on helping behaviors revealed that helpers reinforced by gratitude expression were more likely to help third parties (Clark, 1975; Goldman et al., 1982; Moss & Page, 1972). The reinforcement effect also seems to extend to indirect third parties. For example, in a study where voters received a piece of mail thanking them for voting in the past and reminding them about an upcoming election,

participants voted at higher levels than those who received reminders without gratitude or no reminder at all (Panagopoulos, 2011).

Initial evidence also suggests the effects of gratitude expression on helping behaviors extend beyond the benefactor. In a recent study conducted by Algoe and colleagues (2019, Experiments 1-3), third-party participants who witnessed beneficiary gratitude expressions for help with an editing-and-review task spontaneously corrected more typos in the same task than those in the control condition.

### **Mechanisms Underlying the Effects of Gratitude**

A notable place in the literature where the three unique outcome groups of gratitude are salient is in examining the mechanisms through which gratitude influences these outcomes. Indeed, different mechanisms transmit the effects of gratitude to wellness outcomes, relational outcomes, and prosocial outcomes. Each of these differing mechanisms align with specific functions that have been elucidated and explained by gratitude theory and, more broadly, emotion theory. However, the literature is preliminary, and further research is needed to understand fully the mechanisms underlying the effects of gratitude. As such, we do not focus on the operating mechanisms in our process model, but we discuss the current state of the literature below.

Gratitude has long been examined as a tool of promoting wellness. The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions suggests that gratitude promotes wellness by broadening mindsets and building personal resources (Fredrickson, 2004). In line with this theory, empirical work demonstrates two main mechanisms by which gratitude promotes well-being and decreases ill-being: affective and cognitive resources. The affective mechanism demonstrates that gratitude can increase personal wellness through an increase in positive emotions. Indeed, empirical work

demonstrates that gratitude promotes both diffuse positive mood/affect (Drażkowski et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2012; Lin, 2015a; Măirean et al., 2019; Rash et al., 2011; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sun & Kong, 2013) and discrete positive emotions (Booker & Dunsmore, 2017; Layous et al., 2017). Moreover, research has also shown that gratitude influences wellness through decreases in negative mood/affect and emotions (Rash et al., 2011; Sun & Kong, 2013).

The second mechanism by which gratitude promotes wellness is by promoting positive (and suppressing negative) cognitions. Indeed, gratitude has been shown to influence wellness outcomes through the appraisals one makes about their self and their environment. Self-focused cognitions that transmit the effects of gratitude to wellness include self-esteem (Lin, 2015) and meaningfulness in life (Kleiman et al., 2013). Positive cognitions about one's environment includes the ways that individuals perceive their social connections and their appraisal styles. For example, research has shown that gratitude promotes perceptions of social support (Kaniuka et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2020; Lin, 2016; Lin & Yeh, 2014; Ni et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2014) and decreases perceptions of loneliness (O'Connell & Killeen-Byrt, 2018; O'Connell et al., 2016). Appraisal styles that transmit the effects of gratitude to wellness include decreased rumination and negative thoughts (Heckendorf et al., 2019; Kranabetter and Neissen, 2019).

As previously mentioned, a landmark theory was created by Emmons and McCullough in 2001. The moral affect theory of gratitude implicates gratitude as an emotion that promotes prosocial behaviors toward benefactors. In line with this theory, the effects of gratitude on prosocial behaviors are transmitted by concern for others such as through prosocial motivation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009, Study 3; Kong & Belkin, 2019) and perceived social worth (Cho & Fast, 2012; Mattila et al., 2016)—the sense of being valued by others (Grant & Gino, 2010). Similarly, one study found that need for relatedness (one's propensity to feel connected to others;

Baumeister & Leary, 1995) transmits the effects of gratitude to third parties' prosocial behaviors (Shiraki & Igarashi, 2018).

In addition to research on prosocial outcomes of gratitude, scholars have recently begun to examine the effects of gratitude on antisocial behaviors. To date, there have been only a few studies, so interpretations of the findings should be done with caution. However, two of the three studies in this area found that the effects of gratitude on antisocial behavior are transmitted through concern for others (Dewall et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2020) whereas the third study found that this relationship was transmitted by personal resources (while controlling for other possible explanations; Locklear et al., 2021). Given the state of this literature, more research is needed to understand the similarities and differences among the relations between gratitude and prosocial outcomes and between gratitude and antisocial outcomes.

Building on existing research, Algoe and colleagues (2008, 2012, 2016) recognized that theories of gratitude and emotions focused on reciprocity but did not fully capture the implications that gratitude exchanges had for interpersonal relationships. As such, the find-remind-and-bind theory was created to explain the influence of gratitude on relationships and relationship outcomes, suggesting gratitude helps individuals identify potential high-quality relationship partners, reminds individuals of existing high-quality relationships, and binds or strengthens dyadic relationships (Algoe, 2012). Empirical work has largely bore this out, demonstrating that the effects of gratitude on relational outcomes like relationship satisfaction are transmitted by positive perceptions of the relationship partner. Indeed, consistent with this theory (Algoe, 2012), gratitude felt by an individual, or expressed gratitude from a relationship partner, signals to individuals that their relationship partner is worthy of affiliation and is a valuable social resource. As such, empirical papers examining the relationship between gratitude

and relational outcomes tend to demonstrate that positive perceptions of the relationship partner drive relational outcomes (Algoe et al., 2008; Algoe et al., 2019; Lambert & Fincham; Park et al., 2019; Puente-Diaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2016; Ritzenhöfer et al., 2019).

### **Application and Translation of the Process Model of Gratitude for the Workplace**

Our process model of episodic gratitude highlighted the role of beneficiary appraisals of benefaction events in eliciting gratitude (state and expressed). It also showed that trait gratitude, along with other moderators, can influence this process. Each manifestation of gratitude, though often segmented in the gratitude literature, demonstrated implications for beneficiaries, benefactors, their relationships, and third parties. Most of these outcomes are considered positive (e.g., prosocial behaviors, well-being, high-quality relationships), though some evidence suggests there can be downsides as well (e.g., moral violations, suboptimal decision-making).

Our review revealed that much of the gratitude literature has ignored the employment context, with only 47 articles examining workplace gratitude or utilizing employee samples. Despite this lack of attention to organizations, the consequences delineated in our review suggest outcomes for each category (i.e., beneficiary, benefactor, beneficiary-benefactor relationship, and third parties) that are relevant to the workplace. However, in reviewing the literature underlying our process model, it became clear that two limitations of the present research may preclude a seamless translation of findings to the organizational context. First, our review indicated that the types of relationships examined in the gratitude literature rarely include organizations or supervisors as benefactors (see Ford et al., 2018 for an exception) or beneficiaries as units/groups. A beneficiary's felt responsibility for the benefit is commonly ignored in gratitude research on appraisals (e.g., Tesser et al., 1968) or unrelated to the beneficiary's work effort (e.g., Okamoto & Robinson, 1997), but benefits bestowed in



organizations (e.g., appreciation, rewards) almost always implicate the beneficiary's work efforts. Indeed, work is an achievement context where outcomes are highly self-relevant and social comparison processes have implications for how individuals appraise work events (Garcia et al., 2013), but little research examines benefaction events in organizations.

Second, the present research tends to examine benefits bestowed in private, where the beneficiary and the benefactor are the only two parties privy to the benefaction event. In organizations, benefits can be bestowed in private. However, they are also commonly bestowed in the presence of others (e.g., organization-wide announcements, team meetings, daily observation of kind words and support among supervisors/coworkers/units). This tendency within the literature to focus on the private means that we know very little about how public benefits affect the gratitude process for beneficiaries and how third-party witnesses to public benefaction events appraise and respond to these episodes. However, many literatures suggest that public interactions have important consequences for third-party witnesses such as public awards (Gallus & Frey, 2016) or interpersonal mistreatment (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). This is consistent with the witnessing effect of gratitude (Algoe et al., 2019). As such, the effects of public benefaction events on third parties should also be explored in the context of gratitude.

Third, scholars have begun to explore mediators to explain why beneficiaries, benefactors, and third parties are motivated to engage in various behaviors as a result of gratitude, but this literature is preliminary and scholars should make theory testing a priority. In fact, of the 396 papers in our sample, only 66 examined mediating mechanisms (16.67%). Without explicit theory testing, the mechanisms through which gratitude influences outcomes is unclear. This is especially relevant given that there are three main outcomes of gratitude. To date, extant research suggests that different mechanisms transmit the effects of gratitude on

moral, relational, and wellness outcomes, but this research is preliminary. More theory testing is needed, especially in workplace contexts, to better understand how gratitude functions, and whether the mechanisms that transmit the effects of gratitude in general life domains are the same ones that transmit the effects of gratitude in the workplace.

Given these limitations, we see three aspects of our process model of episodic gratitude that require clarification and revision to advance the science of workplace gratitude. First, we believe there are several features of the workplace context that should be incorporated in the agenda for OB research on gratitude. Thus, in our model of episodic workplace gratitude, we include types of benefactors (i.e., organizations, supervisors, coworkers, customers, and units/workgroups), types of beneficiaries (i.e., individuals or units/workgroups), relational attributes such as job status (e.g., temp/full-time), organizational tenure, and relationship quality, as well as attributes of the work context itself (e.g., organizational climate, culture, norms, and organization size) that may moderate beneficiary appraisals. We also acknowledge that the social nature of the workplace suggests benefits can be delivered in public or in private, and that beneficiary factors like social status and social comparisons can influence how benefaction events are appraised. Second, we incorporate a simultaneous appraisal and response process that involves third parties who witness benefaction. Third, we explicitly acknowledge the mechanisms through which gratitude has been shown to influence a beneficiary, a benefactor, a beneficiary-benefactor relationship, and third parties. Therefore, we present a *process model of episodic workplace gratitude* in Figure 2 to explicitly recognize the influence of the organizational context on gratitude processes, and to highlight important areas for future research.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Insights from our review suggest that the present findings may neither seamlessly translate to organizational research, nor encompass the full array of factors that influence gratitude in the workplace. Indeed, the organizational context introduces constraints and affordances that influence how individuals feel, think, and act. Therefore, “an understanding of gratitude in organizations requires explicit attention to how the organizational context shapes the emergence and functions of gratitude itself” (Fehr et al., 2017, p. 361). That is, the nature of workplaces suggests an array of factors that have yet to receive sufficient attention in the gratitude literature. Therefore, we highlight the ways in which the organizational context proves unique in the process of episodic workplace gratitude including the nature of benefaction events, various types of benefactors in the workplace, appraisals of those benefaction events, work-relevant consequences, and multiple levels of analysis.

In addition to the organizational context, there are several other limitations in the existing literature that, if left unresolved, risk our ability to fully understand the influence of gratitude in organizations. Going forward, gratitude scholars should improve the rigor and consistency with which gratitude is measured, include professional relationships in examinations of relational impacts of gratitude, expand the nomological network of gratitude to capture its potential dark side, its cross-cultural differences, and the impact of inauthentic gratitude expressions. Additionally, the field must move toward refining the mechanisms by which gratitude influences outcomes through systematic theory testing. We provide guidance for each of these suggestions below.

**Benefaction Events in the Workplace.** Our review revealed that benefaction events have been narrowly defined, largely examined as a discrete incidence of helping. In the workplace, however, the benefits associated with benefaction events can reflect one-time actions

(i.e., helping, time off) or on-going rewards (i.e., social support, loyalty) beneficiaries experience because of their employment. As such, the gratitude literature offers insights into beneficiary reactions to one-time acts of kindness but offers much less evidence as to the way beneficiaries appraise ongoing benefits. Moreover, the literature has largely ignored how social comparisons influence gratitude (see Wood et al., 2011 for an exception), but social comparisons are endemic to organizational life. In organizations, benefits may also be distributed simultaneously to more than one individuals (e.g., such as when a supervisor assists a team or rewards a workgroup) and may be bestowed publicly. Thus, the parties to a benefaction event are potentially broader than the two-party (i.e., benefactor and beneficiary) structure that dominates the gratitude literature. Therefore, future research should examine the temporal and social dynamics associated with benefaction events and the influence of benefaction events on third parties and witnesses.

**Benefactors in the Workplace.** Unlike common benefactors in everyday life (e.g., friends, strangers), benefactors in the workplace are not always another individual, and may differ from the beneficiary's position in the organizational hierarchy. Specifically, the nature of the workplace means that benefactors may exist at multiple levels of analysis. For example, benefactors may be organizations, supervisors, coworkers, customers, or other organizational outsiders. Moreover, extant research has primarily examined two individuals of similar status. However, in organizations the nature of the relationship between a benefactor and a beneficiary can be horizontal (e.g., coworkers), vertical (e.g., supervisors/subordinates), inter-organizational (e.g., employees/customers/etc.), and intra-organizational (e.g., units/workgroups). Indeed, McCullough and colleagues (2001) theorize that "the relative status of the benefactor might also modify people's... gratitude" (p. 255). Some evidence indicates that employees report rarely thanking their supervisors (Kaplan, 2012) and supervisors report doing many things they believe

worthy of recognition (Toegel et al., 2013). This suggests there is a potential for lack of gratitude across various types of organizational relationships. Therefore, future research should examine the types of benefactors that exist in the workplace and how gratitude might differ based on benefactor types and benefactor-beneficiary status differences.

**Appraisals at Work.** We view the appraisal process as one of the most important areas for future research on workplace gratitude. The organizational context can shape and distort the types of behaviors and situations that individuals perceive as gratitude-inducing. For example, an act of helping outside of work might be appraised as a benefaction event, but inside of the organization, the same act of help might instead be appraised as part of job responsibilities (i.e., in-role)—and thereby not gratitude-inducing. In most situations, individuals attribute behaviors to personal dispositions rather than situations (Ross, 1977), and thereby attribute helpful actions of others to benevolent motives or positive personal qualities of the helper. However, the organizational context where individuals engage in role-based behaviors makes attributions of actions to external factors such as the work context more likely than internal factors like benefactor benevolence (Belmi & Pfeffer, 2015). As such, gratitude may not emerge in the workplace because altruistic acts, helping, and kindnesses—eliciting events for state gratitude and expressed gratitude—are likely attributed not to personal factors but to the organizational context. This is supported by work from the Greater Good Science Center which finds that employees receive less gratitude at work than in any other life domain (Kaplan, 2012), despite a desire and expectation of gratitude at work (Luthans, 2000).

There are several possible reasons why beneficiary appraisals of gratitude-inducing events at work may be more complex than the present understanding of the appraisal process. Recall that individuals tend to feel and express gratitude when a benefaction event is perceived

as costly to the benefactor, valuable to the self, intentional, and non-obligatory (McCullough et al., 2001). These criteria are much less straightforward to appraise and evaluate in organizations because interactions among organization members or organizational outsiders are role-based, rife with interaction norms, or even contractual (Lieberman, 1956). Consider perceptions of costliness; when the beneficiary makes an evaluation of costliness to the benefactor at work, he/she may believe that the cost to a coworker for helping is minimal because the coworker is being paid to do such tasks. Moreover, because benefactors can be non-human entities like organizations, a benefaction event costly to an organization, which is (at least perceived to be) rich in resources, may have to clear a higher bar to produce gratitude. It is tricky to parse the intent because benefits bestowed by a benefactor can also have instrumental value for the benefactor. For example, it may be hard for employees to view an organization that rewards employees with retention bonuses during a downturn as unselfish if keeping employees (as necessary resources) helps keep the organization in business.

In all, individuals' appraisals of benefaction events will be shaped by and potentially muted by the organizational context. Therefore, future research should explore whether and how the workplace decreases the incidence of gratitude, and how the work context shapes individuals' appraisals of benefaction events. Future research should also investigate interventions to encourage more positive, altruistic, and internal attributions and appraisals among employees to encourage workplace gratitude.

**Mechanisms of Workplace Gratitude.** We see theory testing, including the exploration of mechanisms underlying the effects of gratitude in the workplace, as an important next step for OB research on gratitude. As with any theory-rich area, choosing which theory best explains a given phenomenon or relationship is challenging, because several alternative explanations exist.

For example, our review identified three main functions associated with the influence of gratitude. First, gratitude relates to wellness outcomes through increased affective and cognitive resources. Second, gratitude relates to prosocial behaviors through increased concern for others. Finally, gratitude relates to relational outcomes through positive perceptions of a relationship partner. However, it is not clear whether these functions of gratitude—resource replenishment, other-focused concern, and partner perceptions—explain the effects of gratitude *only* on each of their respective outcomes examined previously or whether these functions *also* explain the effects of gratitude on various possible outcomes in the workplace. For example, some evidence indicates that both receiving gratitude at work and cultivating gratitude through a workplace gratitude intervention influences discretionary outcomes (e.g., helping, CWBs) through an influx of resources (i.e., energy, Sheridan & Ambrose, 2020; self-control, Locklear et al., 2020). Yet much of the gratitude literature suggests that the moral effects of gratitude are mediated by concern for others' welfare. Understanding how resources and cognitions influence moral outcomes in the workplace is just one example of how gratitude theory can be refined as we advance the science of workplace gratitude.

Indeed, without theory pruning, the field cannot know which theory or mechanism best explains or transmits a relation and theory proliferation can occur (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Leavitt et al., 2010; Platt, 1964). Theory pruning is particularly important for OB scholars who tend to borrow theory from psychology, without examining whether these theories function the same in organizational contexts as they do in general. Theory pruning can help move workplace gratitude research forward by providing clear evidence on how existing theories work similarly and differently in organizations. As such, future research should pit multiple theories against one another to understand the most efficacious theories to explain any given relation

between gratitude and outcomes and to facilitate theory pruning (e.g., Locklear et al., 2021). These competitive tests of theories have yet to be conducted systematically in the literature, but these tests would allow gratitude scholars to understand where the boundaries of specific theories lie and would promote strong inferences in the literature.

**Work-Related Consequences.** Because research on workplace gratitude is minimal, job- and organization-specific consequences of state, trait, and expressed gratitude are not fully understood. However, workplace gratitude should have implications for beneficiaries, benefactors, beneficiary-benefactor relationships, and third parties that are relevant to the workplace. Using findings from our review, we propose directions for future research on consequences of workplace gratitude for the parties present in our process model of episodic workplace gratitude.

For beneficiaries, state gratitude positively influences their attitudes and well-being. Thus, state gratitude can be expected to increase positive job attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational commitment) and work-related well-being (e.g., burnout, flourishing, positive mood, absenteeism). Research also indicates that state gratitude influences beneficiaries to behave in ethical ways (e.g., cheating and sabotaging less) and to be more engaged. Thus, state gratitude may increase beneficiaries' positive functioning at work (e.g., work engagement, ethical decision-making). State gratitude, in turn, may trigger beneficiaries' gratitude expressions. Finally, when beneficiaries express gratitude at work, they may enjoy enhanced social standing/status, as beneficiaries who express gratitude are perceived positively by others.

For benefactors, our review indicates that they may both receive reciprocity from grateful beneficiaries and reciprocate to beneficiaries who expressed gratitude. We expect reciprocity may often take the form of work-related prosocial behaviors, such as OCBs directed at the



organization and others, but it may also manifest in other ways (e.g., social support). The literature also indicates that benefactors should experience elevated social standing/status, self-perceptions, and work-related well-being because of beneficiary gratitude.

Our review indicates that workplace relationships stand to benefit from beneficiary gratitude. Although much of relational research on gratitude has been conducted in close friends and romantic partners, workplace relationships share similar characteristics (e.g., mutual dependence, interpersonal connections, repeated interactions; Reich & Hershcovis, 2011). Thus, given the preponderance of studies that reveal the facilitative effects of gratitude on interpersonal relationships, beneficiary gratitude should influence indicators of high-quality workplace relationships (e.g., higher LMX, trust) and desirable outcomes (e.g., prosocial voice, psychological safety, lower turnover, etc.).

The literature suggests that both state gratitude and expressed gratitude have consequences for third parties in the workplace. Experiments have demonstrated that state gratitude promotes indirect (or upstream) reciprocity towards third parties and prosocial behaviors, broadly speaking. Third parties in an organizational setting may be individuals or groups, customers or employees, and the organization itself. The research suggests that outcomes directed at third parties include prosocial behaviors by a beneficiary or a benefactor (e.g., OCBs, reduced CWBs), a beneficiary's moral judgment (e.g., social sanctioning), and customer loyalty. As such, OB scholars should continue to expand the nomological network of workplace gratitude to better understand how gratitude is related to these outcomes directed at third parties.

**Levels of Analysis in Organizations.** In contextualizing workplace gratitude for OB research, considerations of levels of analysis should be noted. As illustrated in this review, neither theories of gratitude nor the accumulated empirical evidence has given much

consideration to the multiple levels of analysis inherent to the workplace—such as teams, departments, and organizations (see Tsang, 2021 for an exception). Moreover, research has not yet examined the many sets of interrelated dyadic relationships that coexist (e.g., one supervisor with many subordinates), which may shape the context in which benefits are exchanged.

The group/team level of analysis might be particularly important given that collective-level emotions can influence collective outcomes (e.g., Collins et al., 2013). As teamwork is becoming more common and important to organizational functioning (e.g., Allen & Hecht, 2004), OB scholars have placed emphasis on collective-level feelings (Ashkanasy, 2003), emotion expression (e.g., Coté, 2007), emotion norms (e.g., Delvaux et al., 2015), and emotion cultures (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014; O’Neill & Rothbard, 2017). Therefore, a promising avenue for future research is to examine collective gratitude, gratitude norms, and grateful tone as the collective manifestations of state gratitude in the workplace, which are situated as moderators in our process model of episodic workplace gratitude. This can help generate a multilevel view of workplace gratitude.

**Measurement.** Our review demonstrated that the operationalization and measurement of gratitude is problematic, owing to issues of discriminant validity among measures of state, trait, and expressed gratitude. These issues are particularly important in the context of our process model, for example, regarding the relationships among state, trait, and expressed gratitude in the workplace. Moreover, measurement of gratitude in the workplace should be context-specific, and not all measures used in psychology research are appropriate or applicable for OB research. Regarding state gratitude, over half of the samples ( $k = 114$ ; 56%) we reviewed employed the Gratitude Adjective Checklist (GAC-3; Emmons & McCullough, 2003) or an adapted version of this measure (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2009). These measures assess the extent to which individuals

feel “grateful,” “thankful,” and “appreciative,” and have been adapted to reflect specific contexts and targets (e.g., in the workplace, to a particular benefactor). Given this measure’s demonstrated reliability and validity across samples, life domains, and cultures (e.g., Chen et al., 2009), OB researchers should continue the use of the GAC-3 (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) to measure state gratitude, and adapt it to the context (i.e., the workplace) or specific event of interest (e.g., a helping event). Scholars should avoid using the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002)—which is a measure of trait gratitude—to assess state gratitude. Even when the items from the GQ-6 are adapted to a state-like construct for a certain time period, the items reflect statements that should be stable. Lastly, our review revealed that the measurement of expressed gratitude has the least consensus, and thus would benefit from more empirical research to establish good psychometric evidence. Indeed, of the 93 samples that examined expressed gratitude, only 19 measured it with a survey-based measure. Most studies (80%) have used an experimental manipulation to operationalize gratitude expression. Notably, Lee and colleagues (2019) employed a measure of received gratitude expressions at work by creating and validating items tapping the extent to which perceivers agree with statements such as “the recipient expressed gratitude toward me.” The three items in the measure could be adapted to reflect any specific individual(s) in the workplace (e.g., coworkers, customers, subordinates) or could be adapted to others in general (e.g., “others at work,” “organizational members”).

A final point about the measurement of expressed gratitude should be considered. The dominant approach has focused on the frequency/level of gratitude expressions, which neglects *how* gratitude is expressed. However, gratitude can be expressed in different ways (Baumgarten-Trammer, 1938). Moreover, different ways of expressing gratitude may convey more (e.g., writing a handwritten thank-you note) or less (e.g., sending out an automated email) intensity of

gratitude and thus have varying psychological effects. Notably, Lee et al.'s (2019) measures can be used to assess the level of gratitude expressions. However, other measures are needed to capture different ways of expressing gratitude at work. Thus, more work is needed to validate measures that can delineate the ways gratitude is expressed in the workplace and how such variations can influence the perceived intensity and psychological effects of gratitude expressions. Overall, given the dearth of survey measures and survey research on gratitude expressions, OB researchers should validate measures of their choice in a specific workplace context.

**Interpersonal Relationships.** As demonstrated by our review, one of the main functions of gratitude is to promote the formation and maintenance of new relationships and strengthen existing relationships (Algoe, 2012). Despite the significance of this function to both social exchanges in the workplace (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2017) and the belongingness need and flourishing of employees (Reich & Hershcovis, 2011), studies that have focused on this function of gratitude have primarily used samples of romantic couples and close friends. Thus, we lack a good understanding of how gratitude, as a “relational glue,” functions in other relationships, such as those in the workplace. For example, coworkers and supervisors may be considered close friends or like family (i.e., “my work wife”; Owen, 1987), but may also be seen as strictly professional associates in which economic or exchange-based norms govern benefit exchanges (Clark & Aragon, 2013). Thus, it will be important for scholars to explore, for example, the potential of gratitude to positively influence employees’ sense of attachment, perceived support, and felt regard as well as long-term affective commitment and sense of thriving that may arise from high-quality connections in the workplace (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

**Dark Side of Gratitude.** Our review shows that gratitude overwhelmingly leads to positive individual and interpersonal outcomes. However, despite its evident benefits, preliminary research has also demonstrated that state and expressed gratitude may have downsides or dark sides (e.g., moral violations, suboptimal decisions). For example, some beneficiaries may place loyalty to benefactors above doing what is right when experiencing high state gratitude (e.g., Zhu et al., 2020). Similarly, evidence indicates perceivers' relational concerns may undermine their best interests by escalating their commitment to suboptimal decisions when they receive gratitude expressions from partners (Kong & Belkin, 2019a). While this area of the literature is sparse, the initial evidence indicates that negative outcomes may stem from gratitude's inducement of positive relational cognitions. Thus, future research should explore how gratitude that arises in relationships can promote negative outcomes.

**(In)Authentic Gratitude.** The extent to which emotional expressions are perceived as authentic (or not) has received much attention in OB (e.g., emotional labor; see Grandey et al., 2013). In contrast, little research has examined the authenticity or perceived authenticity of gratitude expressions. Implicit in the concept of authentic gratitude expressions is that feelings of gratitude underlie those expressions. However, expressers can express gratitude without feeling grateful—what would be considered an inauthentic gratitude expression (some scholars have called this shallow gratitude; Baumeister & Ilko, 1995). Even if an expresser feels grateful and expresses gratitude accordingly, witnesses or receivers may not perceive such expressions as authentic. The implications of actual and perceived (in)authentic gratitude are unknown, but an important area for future OB research. Indeed, the workplace has unique power and social dynamics that may exacerbate the use of self-presentation tactics, and gratitude expressions could be one such ingratiation or presentation tactic that employees use. As such, scholars should

parse out when and why expressers express gratitude when they do not feel grateful (i.e., antecedents) and the implications for those that express or receive inauthentic gratitude expressions (i.e., outcomes).

**Cross-Cultural Factors.** Gratitude is ubiquitous across cultures. However, our review revealed that much of the foundational research on gratitude has been conducted with Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic (WEIRD) samples (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Gordon et al., 2012; McCullough et al., 2002). Preliminary research suggests that gratitude may be felt and expressed differently in non-Western cultures. For example, Bello et al. (2010) found that the overall frequency of appreciation expression in the U.S. was higher than that in China. Moreover, compared to Anglo-Americans who wrote about their gratitude toward a benefactor and thus felt positive, Indians who completed the same task experienced both positive and negative emotions, reporting higher feelings of sadness and guilt than their Western counterparts (Titova et al., 2017). Finally, gratitude produces indebtedness in Koreans but not Americans (Oishi et al., 2019). As such, future research should more thoroughly explore the cross-cultural functions and manifestations of gratitude and examine gratitude in non-western contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Gratitude research has been flourishing in the social sciences, but this body of work has been largely siloed. The current review has synthesized insights from social science research on gratitude, shedding light on various issues related to gratitude research in non-work settings, and translated these findings for OB researchers. In doing so, we created a process model of episodic workplace gratitude to guide future research on workplace gratitude. Accordingly, we provided a roadmap for advancing the science of workplace gratitude. We hope the current review will

energize scholarship on workplace gratitude, which we believe is a very promising research area for theoretical and empirical contributions as well as better work practice.

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**Table 1. Definitions of Gratitude and Related Constructs**

<b>Gratitude Construct</b>	<b>Definitions</b>
State gratitude	Grateful and thankful feelings in response to an act of kindness received.
Gratitude expression (or expressed gratitude)	Physical, facial, nonverbal, and verbal cues intended as a signal of an internal state of gratefulness (or a superficial communication of nonexistent grateful emotion)
Trait gratitude (or dispositional gratitude)	A generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful feelings to the roles of other people's benevolence in one's positive experiences and outcomes (McCullough et al., 2002)
Expressed appreciation	Specific behaviors that directly signal recognition, acknowledgement, and value of another person, highly regarding the person as an individual or the person's performance, behaviors, or qualities.
Feeling appreciative	Feelings that arise as a result of acknowledging a partner's inherent value or worth, or their behaviors or performance.
Feeling appreciated (or felt appreciation)	Feelings that arise in response to being recognized, acknowledged, or valued by another individual.
Trait appreciation	This disposition is said to contain eight aspects: focusing on what one has ("Have" focus), Awe, Ritual, Present Moment, Self/Social Comparison, Gratitude, Loss/Adversity, and Interpersonal (Adler & Fagley, 2005)

Figure 1. Process Model of Episodic Gratitude

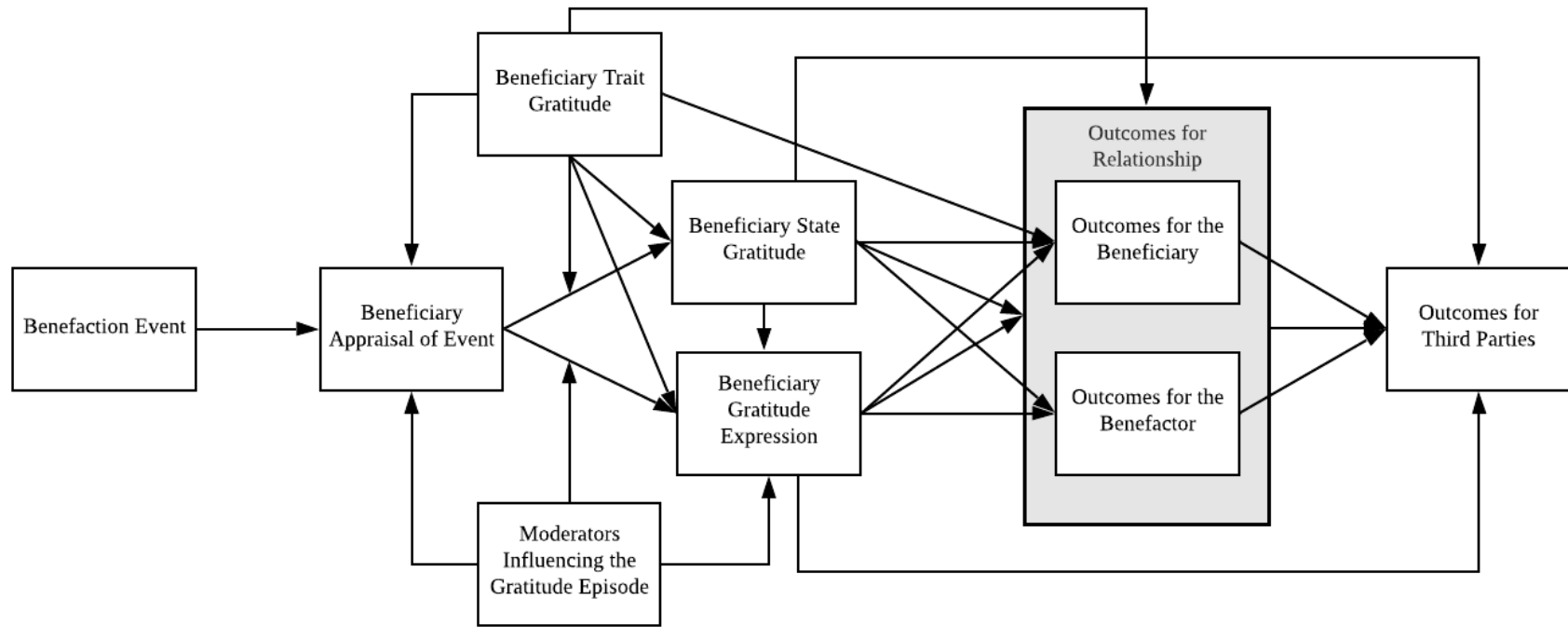
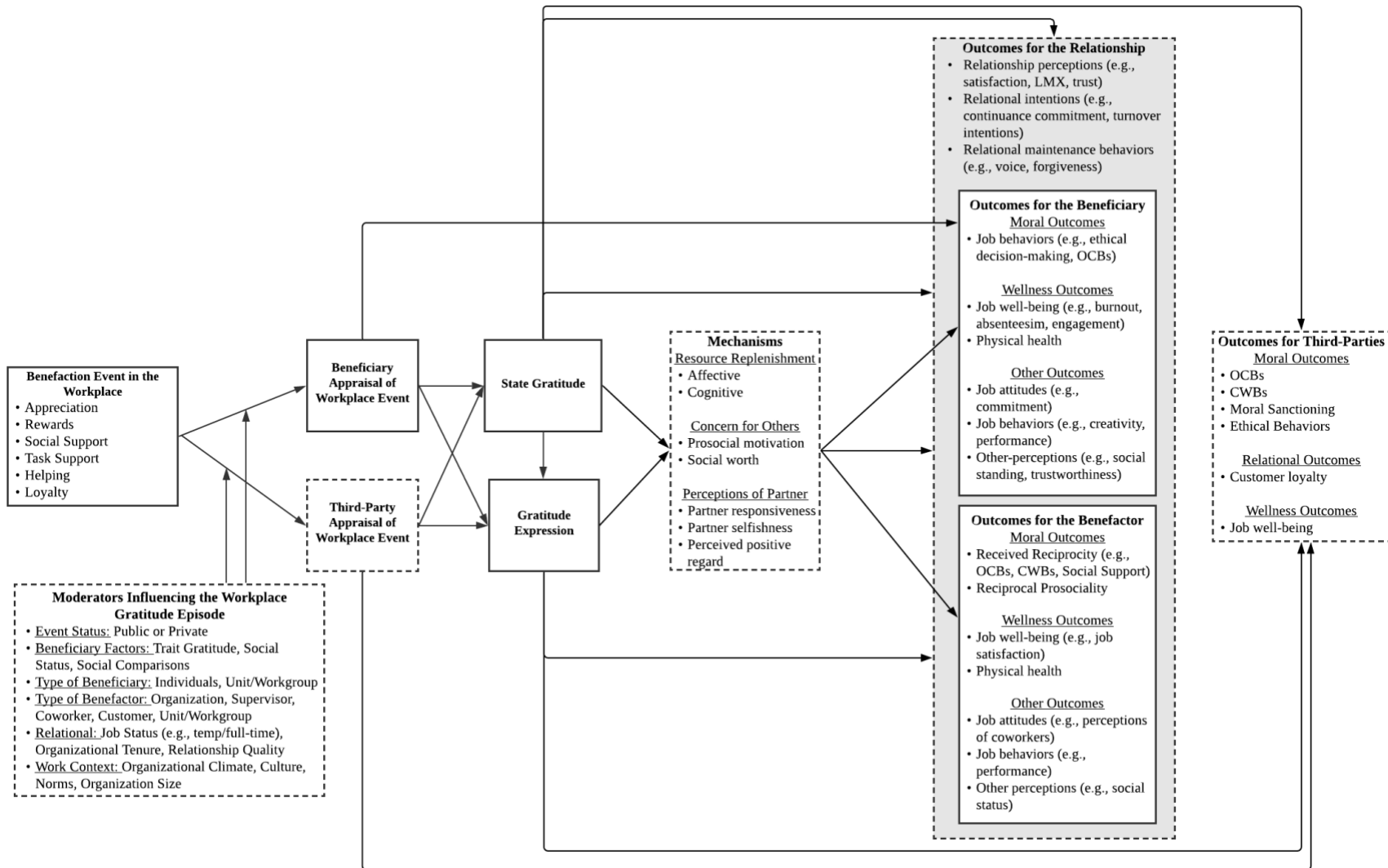


Figure 2. Process Model of Episodic Workplace Gratitude



Note. Dashed boxes denote areas for future research.

APPENDIX A: PRISMA Diagram of Systematic Literature Search

