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Stephen M. Yoshimura & Kassandra Berzins

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Grateful experiences and expressions: the role of gratitude expressions in the link between gratitude experiences and well-being

Stephen M. Yoshimura and Kassandra Berzins

Department of Communication Studies, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

Research shows a consistent connection between the experience of gratitude and a variety of positive psychological, physical, and relational outcomes. Although this connection is largely traceable to the social meanings inherent to the experience and expression of gratitude, little is known about how such meanings are constructed via the process of communicating gratitude. In this review, we summarize the current state of knowledge on gratitude experience and expression, and examine the connection between gratitude expression and human well-being. We also propose a topography of gratitude expressions and review several issues that research on the communication of gratitude should consider in future research.

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Introduction

Gratitude is among the most meaningful and connective experiences humans can have. Defined as the “sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift”¹ and the “felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for benefits received,”² gratitude is known as a generally positive emotional state, a durable affective trait, a moral experience, and a signature character strength.³ It can involve a variety of cognitions and emotions, most of which are positive, but some of which are not necessarily so, such as the experience of indebtedness.⁴ Nevertheless, gratitude consistently associates with many positive social, psychological, and health states, such as an increased likelihood of helping others, optimism, exercise, and reduced reports of physical symptoms.⁵

While a growing body of research indicates that gratitude *experiences* promote social relationships, gratitude *expressions* also appear to be an important mechanism by which relational and personal well-being emerge. In previous research, however, gratitude expressions have usually been examined in very broad, general terms, such as by asking participants to rate the overall extent to which they show appreciation to others. Given the array of linguistic and nonverbal qualities that gratitude messages are likely to have, a significant program of research awaits researchers interested in examining the communication of gratitude.

The purpose of this review is to articulate the relevance of gratitude expressions to the connection between gratitude experiences and well-being. This is not to say that the experience or the expression of gratitude is more or less important or necessary than the other, but rather to elaborate on an aspect of gratitude that, to this date, has received less empirical attention than it deserves. To that end, we begin by conceptualizing gratitude as a social experience, and review research findings showing links between gratitude experience, expressions, and well-being. We then examine the probable topography of gratitude expressions, and the reasons why a link between gratitude expressions and well-being would exist. To close, we propose several aspects of gratitude messages that researchers embarking on a message-focused analysis of gratitude could examine, and discuss some of the practical considerations a research program in the area could involve.

Gratitude conceptualizations

Gratitude can be conceptualized as both a state and a trait. As a state, gratitude occurs as a function of experiencing a combination of admiration, approval, and joy over the intersection between someone/something else's actions and his or her own outcomes.⁶ It can fluctuate over moments or days, and it appears to have a unique thought/action tendency separate from related concepts (such as indebtedness), suggesting that gratitude associates with a unique appraisal pattern in the context of specific, short-term events.⁷

As a trait, on the other hand, gratitude can be thought of as a holistic inclination toward perceptions of appreciation and abundance.⁸ Accordingly, those who are high in trait gratitude would be hypothesized to have more frequent experiences of state gratitude. Understandably, however, trait gratitude overlaps with numerous other trait characteristics, including agreeableness, extraversion, and religiosity,⁹ suggesting the possibility that both trait and state gratitude are more likely to be elevated among people with certain personality patterns.

Commonly cited theory and philosophy around gratitude holds gratitude as a kind of moral or virtuous state, in which gratitude reflects merit in an individual's character. In one review, for example, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman classify gratitude as a human strength, among appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope, humor, and spirituality.¹⁰ These strengths are united by the theme of transcendence, as ways in which individuals can connect with concepts larger than themselves, such as excellence, goodness, and potential.

Likewise, Robert Emmons and Cheryl Crumpler review scholarship arguing that gratitude is a moral virtue, involving the repetitious inclination both to experience and express thankfulness in appropriate ways over time.¹¹ They argue that gratitude is a unique virtue, distinguished by its own set of rules and behaviors, and marked by the perceived obligation to try to repay seemingly impossible debts. Moreover, they suggest that gratitude is actually a relational virtue, emerging as a function of the interaction and relationship between two individuals.

As such, gratitude has a distinct social element; it is an intrinsically altercentric experience, directed toward others or beyond (e.g. a spiritual source or natural environments).¹² Other people's actions are typically the source of gratitude, as those actions are symbolic of the generosity, gifts, good fortune, or benefits that one believes he or she does not necessarily deserve.¹³

By way of explanation, gratitude is sometimes considered an adaptive mechanism evolved for the purpose of alerting individuals to the presence of others' altruistic acts and motivating reciprocation.¹⁴ This notion is supported by emotion theorists, who propose that emotions are experienced in response to interpretations of social experiences, and that gratitude would follow one's empathic perception that he or she has benefited as a result of someone else's cost.¹⁵ In short, gratitude is not only a pleasant emotional experience, but also pleasant emotional experience that primarily surfaces in the context of social interaction.

Gratitude as a social experience

To be sure, social interaction is not necessarily a prerequisite for all positive emotional experiences, and not all positive emotions share the same social meanings. For example, feeling happy conceivably stems from conditions under which one believes that his or her goals are being facilitated, which can happen outside of social contexts.¹⁶ Yet, gratitude can potentially be conceptualized as a unique social experience given the contexts in which it normally occurs. For example, Michael McCullough, Marcia Kimeldorf, and Adam Cohen argue that gratitude is a unique emotion, separate from happiness because it "typically flows from the perception that one has benefitted from the costly, intentional, or voluntary action of another person."¹⁷ Thus, the state experience of gratitude is not only a social experience, but also one derived through the process of social interaction and communication. To experience it, one must receive a message (i.e. recognize that one has received something of positive value) and interpret the message (that someone [or something] is responsible for the benefit they gained).

Implied here is that gratitude, as a social emotion stemming from its own unique appraisal process, would also have its own action tendency associated with it.¹⁸ Some research suggests that gratitude's action tendency is most likely marked by actions related to affirmation, bonding, and maintenance of new or ongoing relational ties. For example, Kaska E. Kubacka et al. found that people felt increasingly grateful for their romantic partners when they reported believing that their partners engaged in increased levels of relationship maintenance actions, and when they perceived their partners as being responsive.¹⁹ In turn, feeling grateful predicted increased reports of one's own performance of relationship maintenance actions. In addition, Amie Gordon and colleagues showed that feeling appreciated by one's partner (i.e. recognizing one's partner's expressions of appreciation) increased the likelihood that individuals would act responsively to their partner's needs.²⁰ Thus, gratitude's main action tendency is prorelationship behavior and messages.

Of course, gratitude also has a strictly cognitive component to it, such as the private perception of an undeserved gain from nature, the feeling of having been granted extraordinary physical abilities, or the like. However, highly grateful people are marked by a tendency to attribute their own positive outcomes to other people who contributed to them, as well as a set of personality traits that make them more inclined to socialize with others, such as extraversion and agreeableness.²¹ Therefore, the experience of gratitude is still likely to connect with intrinsic motivation toward social interaction, even when it is experienced intrapersonally and is sourced at non-social aspects of life.

Gratitude experiences and well-being

Although thought on the nature of gratitude has long existed, empirical research on the associations between gratitude experiences and well-being is a relatively recent endeavor.²² Nonetheless, this body of research makes a consistent and compelling argument that gratitude experiences promote psychological and physical well-being.

For example, a recent meta-analysis indicates that as of 2010, at least 20 studies had uncovered an association between trait gratitude and various aspects of psychological well-being.²³ Related research shows that trait gratitude explains between 2% and 6% of the variance in general psychological well-being beyond the big five personality traits (extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism).²⁴ This finding complements other research showing that trait gratefulness associates with numerous increased positive states, such as life satisfaction, vitality, hope, optimism, and reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and envy, even after controlling for measures of positive affectivity and agreeableness.²⁵ Large-scale studies show similar effects. For instance, in a study of over 5,000 volunteers in three separate samples, Nansook Park, Christopher Peterson, and Martin Seligman found that inclination toward grateful emotion and expression correlated with life satisfaction and other positive affective and cognitive experiences, such as hope, zest, curiosity, and love.²⁶ The positive effects of gratitude experiences appear to hold across numerous population contexts. For instance, one study on the measurement of trait gratitude in children younger than 19 found that dispositional gratitude positively associated with levels of positive affect and life satisfaction across three different measures,²⁷ and yet another study found that trait gratitude predicted less burnout and higher job satisfaction among mental health professionals.²⁸

The benefits of gratitude experiences extend to perceived physical health as well. For example, Robert A. Emmons, and Michael E. McCullough induced state gratitude by asking three samples of participants to think of and list things they were grateful for, and to report their daily affect, somatic symptoms, and health behaviors.²⁹ The results across the three studies variously showed, depending on the sample, that those who were induced to experience gratitude reported fewer symptoms of physical illness, more exercise, greater life satisfaction, greater optimism, and even better quality sleep than those who were asked to think of hassles or daily events. Induced gratitude associated with greater life satisfaction in both healthy and clinically ill groups, although reduced somatic symptoms were only reduced in healthy samples. These findings were partially replicated by Michael E. McCullough, Jo-Ann Tsang, and Robert A. Emmons, and similar findings have emerged in adolescent samples, as well as in healthy samples in Spain and Hong Kong.³⁰

A number of theoretical explanations exist for the effects of gratitude experiences on well-being. Most broadly, gratitude is a considerably positive emotional state, which promotes a number of additional positive cognitive and physical experiences. For example, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions proposes that positive emotions broaden one's ability to think and act in a variety of ways, and promote personal, psychological, and even physical resources by way of motivating individuals to seek out new experiences, people, and activities.³¹ Put together, these motivations predict a range of additional mechanisms promoting well-being, including the ability to reappraise challenging situations, the increased awareness and enjoyment of everyday activities (e.g. the

simple pleasures in life), and the increased ability to put closure on unpleasant or even traumatic memories.³² Perhaps most importantly to this review, gratitude promotes social relationships by giving grateful people an appearance of warmth and responsiveness, increasing their trust in others, and motivating them to approach and bond with their benefactors.³³

The find-remind-bind theory of gratitude extends from this latter idea, and is based on the main assumption that gratitude is primarily a social emotion and is beneficial not only because it is experienced, but also because it is actually expressed.³⁴ According to this theory, gratitude essentially helps people find high-quality relationship partners, reminds them of positive aspects of their current relationships, and motivates them to further bind into their current relationships via gratitude expression. Research further indicates that the expression of gratitude not only benefits the sender by way of promoting perceived social support and increasing future receipt of prosocial actions, but also gives receivers a sense of responsiveness in their own lives, and promotes relationship satisfaction up to six months later.³⁵ As such, the expression of gratitude appears to be an essential component of the explanation for the connection between gratitude experience and well-being.

As applied to gratitude experiences, the broaden-and-build and find-remind-bind theories complement one another. Although they explain the effects of gratitude on well-being at different levels (with the find-remind-bind theory explaining the effects of gratitude more proximally than the broaden-and-build theory), they share the assumption that gratitude would relate to well-being by way of increased social awareness and increased social activity, both of which would increase one's sense of social connectedness. Thus, good reason exists to believe that the social dimension of gratitude is a main explanatory mechanism for its effects on well-being. However, underlying the possibility that social connectedness helps explain the connection between gratitude and well-being is the assumption that gratitude is recognized not only in one's self, but also as present in others. The way in which gratitude would be recognized in others, of course, is through expression. The qualities of gratitude expressions therefore appear to deserve consideration as a factor by which gratitude would promote human well-being.

On the topography of gratitude expressions

As with many expressions of positive affective experiences, the precise messages used to communicate gratitude are likely to vary far and wide along both verbal and nonverbal channels. The difficulty lies in distinguishing a single message as distinctly one of gratitude rather than a message of affection, compassion, politeness, kindness, or other constructs. Overlap between such constructs certainly exists, but some distinct characteristics might be discerned from research on gratitude. Although only limited research on the qualities of gratitude messages exists, current findings hint that expressions of gratitude are likely distinguished by altercentric, relationship-oriented content regarding appreciation for something the sender perceives as valuable having been granted, expressed with nonverbal immediacy and indicators of responsiveness (i.e. a sense of understanding, validation, and caring).

The copresence of linguistic and nonverbal codes is particularly relevant to distinguishing gratitude expressions from others. Although hundreds of linguistic terms could exist

for expressing gratitude, including thank you, gracias, grazie, arigatô, merci, danke, xièxiè, big ups, H/T, or kthx, among others, nothing about these words alone necessarily makes them expressions of gratitude. Rather, the extent to which the words imply gratitude depends on the presence of other codes that help impart meaning to them.

For example, gratitude expressions serve to promote relationship quality mainly by way of being perceived as messages of responsiveness by the person they are directed toward.³⁶ Messages of responsiveness, in turn, are coded as those involving global cues of understanding (i.e. comprehension), validation (i.e. indications of value and respect for the other), and caring (i.e. expressions of love and affection), as well as by 19 microanalytic codes including summarizations or paraphrases of the partner's messages, perspective or elaboration (i.e. framing the event in larger terms), self-referencing (i.e. giving examples of one's personal experiences), and emphasizing joint outcomes or involvement (i.e. what the event means for both partners together).³⁷ Thus, gratitude expressions would include linguistic and nonverbal codes associated with responsiveness and yet would be marked by specific linguistic content recognized as symbolic of one's experience of gratitude, such as in a variation of the phrase, "thank you."

The nonverbal immediacy involved in gratitude expressions has received scant attention, but there are some indications that it is an important element. For instance, one study shows that participants were increasingly likely to leave their contact information (a move toward affiliation) for a person who previously wrote them a gratitude letter that reflected increased degrees of interpersonal warmth (e.g. friendliness, positivity, and likableness).³⁸ Other research shows that people were more motivated to help others when they previously received gratitude expressions that communicated a sense that they were valued and appreciated, and were effective in making a positive difference in a person's life.³⁹ Although these studies focused only on written expressions, it would be reasonable to predict that observed behavioral expressions of nonverbal immediacy (e.g. touching behavior, mutual eye gaze, forward lean, smiling, etc.) would have similar effects. In essence, the above research suggests that gratitude expressions become more recognizable and effective as such when they are imparted with a degree of immediacy.

Given research indicating that gratitude expressions mainly serve the function of relationship promotion, one might also expect that gratitude messages would carry a distinct relational focus.⁴⁰ Although a brief text message of "kthx" might suffice in some conditions, messages of gratitude are likely most effective at promoting relationship quality when they include elaborated linguistic and nonverbal content indicative of how important the person and the relationship are to the individual.⁴¹

Effects of gratitude expressions on personal and social well-being

The idea that gratitude expressions and subjective well-being are related has compelling empirical and theoretical support. For example, one study shows that expressing gratitude in the form of a letter written to someone "who had been especially kind to them but had never been properly thanked" increased participants' happiness and reduced depression for at least one month afterward.⁴² Nansook Park, Christopher Peterson, and Martin E. P. Seligman explain that the expression of gratitude would be connected to well-being by way of reflecting a sense of satisfaction with the past.⁴³ Others argue that gratitude expressions are likely to promote health outcomes by way of signaling the presence of

connectedness and a sense of communal strength, and by developing structural and functional social support.⁴⁴

Although research on gratitude has started examining the effects of communicating gratitude, such research has so far operationalized grateful expressions in broad terms. For example, Nathaniel Lambert and colleagues use a three-item measure of grateful behavior that includes the item, "I express my appreciation for the things that my partner does for me."⁴⁵ In their laboratory experiment on the relationship enhancement effects of expressed gratitude, Sara Algoe, Barbara Fredrickson, and Shelly Gable instructed participants to think about a positive act that their partner had recently engaged in and then asked them to "thank [the] partner for his or her kind gesture in your interaction."⁴⁶ Despite the promising results stemming from these measures, such operationalizations leave the door open to questions about the message-level factors that might play a role in predicting some of the effects that gratitude expressions have on individual or relational well-being. Presumably, the kinds of gratitude expressions that have the effects these studies show are not simply the words, "thank you," spoken without nonverbal cues, context, and further elaboration. Rather, they likely have a rich texture of features that impart a number of potential meanings for both senders and receivers.

Research on relationship maintenance provides a look into how specific types of gratitude expressions might not only connect to perceptions of personal well-being, but also improve social well-being. Relationship maintenance refers to a variety of processes and goals focused on keeping relationships in existence, in a specific state or condition, or in repair.⁴⁷ Positivity, openness, assurances, network affiliations, and sharing tasks are some common strategies used to maintain relationships. While these categories are relatively broad, the idea that the increased use of these relationship strategies can predict relationship longevity and enhance relational satisfaction is not typically considered controversial.⁴⁸ One could reasonably surmise that gratitude expressions could classify into a number of different categories of relational maintenance activities, including positivity, openness, and assurances.

The positive relational messages conveyed by gratitude expressions appear to be linked to some of the effects on social and personal well-being. For example, gratitude expressions promote receivers' motivations toward prosocial behavior, and ultimately affect relationship quality up to six months after a deliberate expression to one's relationship partner.⁴⁹ Gratitude expressions also reinforce perceptions of connectedness for senders and increase the comfort individuals have with talking with their partner about relationship concerns.⁵⁰ Sara Algoe, Shelly Gable, and Natalya Maisel explain that moments of gratitude can act as "booster shots" for even healthy relationships, using the metaphor to argue that, just as vaccines provide a periodic boost toward one's immune system functioning, appearing grateful towards one's partner can act as a boost to maintaining a healthy relationship.⁵¹ Notably, these researchers found that only couples who expressed gratitude toward their partner felt an increase in relational quality the following day. As they expected, expressing and receiving gratitude increased relational satisfaction and feelings of connectedness the following day, whereas feelings of indebtedness alone did not.

Thus, gratitude expressions function as a way to maintain and promote relationship well-being on a routine, daily basis. Most broadly, expressing gratitude to a relationship partner may also enhance the expresser's perception of the relationship's communal strength, or "the degree of felt responsibility for a partner's welfare."⁵² Indeed, a sense

of interdependence has long been known to be one of the strongest predictors of relationship quality, persistence, and willingness to engage in prorelationship activity.⁵³

Others have also argued that gratitude experiences and expressions potentially affect specific aspects of social integration, including likability, trust, inclination toward prosocial behavior, and social bonding and reward.⁵⁴ Social integration, of course, consistently predicts reduced risk of mortality of all causes. In fact, the effect sizes of this connection rival or even crush the effects of not smoking, abstaining from alcohol, getting a flu vaccine, and living in a clean-air environment.⁵⁵ One possible implication here is that social connectedness, perhaps through the increased willingness and ability to communicate gratitude, could serve as a recommendable health practice. Further research on this idea would be valuable to theorists and practitioners alike.

Suggestions for research on the communication of gratitude

Research on gratitude experiences and expressions has clearly taught us much about the potential for the communication of gratitude to benefit the well-being of individuals and relationships. Yet, most of the research findings remain applicable to the psychological and relational quality level. A message-focused study in this area would examine the linguistic or semantic features of gratitude expressions, the nonverbal codes that are frequently paired with the most strongly positive expressions of gratitude, the topics that people focus on when thanking others, the messages that are exchanged before and after gratitude expressions occur, and others. Research on these questions could lend insight into gratitude expressions as an aspect of conversation, and show how gratitude expressions can represent and help construct various relationship meanings. For example, it could be that various qualities of gratitude expressions promote feelings of autonomy, relatedness, competence, or responsiveness, all of which have been identified as social predictors of daily psychological and physical well-being.⁵⁶

A message-focused approach would essentially conceptualize gratitude expressions as a type of relational message, one of many “verbal and nonverbal expressions that indicate how two or more people regard each other, regard their relationship, or regard themselves within the context of their relationship.”⁵⁷ In this way, the features of gratitude expressions would be considered the mechanisms by which relational meanings such as responsiveness and relatedness are conveyed. Of course, a number of relational meanings beyond responsiveness are possible to infer, most broadly including the relational “frames” of dominance-submissiveness (i.e. power or status) or affiliation-disaffiliation (i.e. liking or esteem for each other), and also along more specific themes such as immediacy, emotional arousal, composure, similarity, formality, and task-social orientation (i.e. degree of task or social purpose) in relationships.⁵⁸ One might hypothesize, for example, that the length, timing, and linguistic and nonverbal emotional content would convey various relational meanings that would later have the potential to impact not only the relationship between the sender and benefactor, but also the partners’ individual-level well-being.

As research on the qualities of gratitude expressions grows, theoretical models will become easier to substantiate. Indeed, a number of important questions exist that serve as a solid foundation for future modeling.⁵⁹ For example, what antecedent factors precede particular expression qualities, such as the frequency, style, and perceived genuineness of gratitude expressions? Likewise, do certain types of events or messages from

others instigate experiences of state gratitude or ingratitude? In addition, aside from health and well-being, what additional functions might specific gratitude expressions serve in the context of interpersonal relationships? A number of possible functions exist, including persuasion (e.g. “Thank you. I so appreciate you being willing to help me with this task”), identity management (e.g. “I am so grateful for the opportunity to be honest with you”), interaction management (e.g. “Thank you for giving me the chance to speak”), and others. Theoretical models can be more substantively generated once the qualities of gratitude expressions are described in future research.

Examinations of the efficacy of those theoretical models can and will be conducted in a variety of ways, but some practical considerations are in order across methods. For example, some research suggests that the precise effects of gratitude expressions on senders’ well-being depend upon a number of individual-level factors, such as ambivalence toward emotional expression, the emotional state of the individual at the time of writing and delivering a gratitude letter, and the initial level of one’s dispositional gratitude.⁶⁰ According to this research, ambivalence toward emotional expression suppresses the effects of writing gratitude expressions, and people who are low in initial positive affect or gratitude experience significantly larger increases in subjective well-being after expressing thanks than do others. Researchers would do well to include measurement of relevant potential confounding variables when testing the effectiveness of interventions.

Some ethical considerations also deserve consideration, particularly in light of recent research on the distinction between gratitude and indebtedness. Receiving unearned benefits can result in either experience, and they are mainly distinguishable by valence. Of concern here is the possibility that studies involving attempts at gratitude induction inadvertently induce feelings of indebtedness instead and ultimately provoke negative affective experiences, urges to repay past debts to avoid negative repercussions, and increase feelings of psychological distance from benefactors.

To illustrate the ease with which indebtedness can be mistakenly manipulated instead of gratitude, Maureen Mathews and Jeffrey Green asked participants think of a gift or favor that someone had given them or done for them, and then to indicate the magnitude of the gift or favor, how close they felt to the benefactor, and how committed they were to their relationship with the benefactor.⁶¹ Some participants were purposefully made objectively self-aware by being situated in front of a mirror (much like those commonly found in many observation rooms) while they completed the tasks. Others were asked to complete the tasks in front of an antireflective window. Those who were made self-aware by the presence of the mirror reported experiencing greater degrees of indebtedness than gratitude, and reported feeling less close and less committed to the benefactor, despite the fact that there was no difference in the magnitude of favors and gifts recalled by participants in both groups. These findings suggest that gratitude researchers might be able to protect their participants from similar unseen psychological or relationship distress by including in their procedures and lab settings measures to minimize the objective self-awareness of research participants during gratitude inductions.

Conclusion

As a social emotion, gratitude involves communication and social interaction in the context of interpersonal relationships. Although research findings consistently show

that gratitude experiences and even general reports of gratitude expressions predict positive psychological, physical, and social well-being, much will be gained by examining the communicative features of gratitude messages. Research on this issue could consider gratitude expressions as a type of relational message, and examine how the specific qualities and features of the message play a role in predicting positive outcomes. This type of focus would make for an excellent interdisciplinary endeavor and would offer much potential for the discipline of communication to contribute to additional research and practice in human health domains.

Notes

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12. Emmons, McCullough, and Tsang, "The Assessment of Gratitude," 327.
13. Emmons and McCullough, "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens," 377–78.
14. Michael E. McCullough, Marcia B. Kimeldorf, and Adam D. Cohen, "An Adaptation for Altruism? The Social Causes, Social Effects, and Social Evolution of Gratitude," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 4 (2008): 281–85; Robert L. Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46, no. 1 (1971): 35–57.
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16. This conceptualization draws from appraisal theory. See Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation*, 265–70. However, the definition of happiness can be more complicated. For a longer discussion and analysis of various approaches to happiness, see Christopher Peterson, Nansook Park, and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Orientations to Happiness and Life Satisfaction: The

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