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A Review of Theories in Gratitude Literature

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Abstract

Gratitude is not an uncommon emotion that can be easily neglected and deserves empirical and theoretical attention. Gratitude research, initially originated from psychology, expanded to all fields, in the last two decades. Various theories have been applied to explain the gratitude phenomenon in the research. The theories have their own advantages, and limitations in explaining the gratitude. This paper is a review of the theories applied in gratitude research. The paper also analysis the theories in their scope of level of analysis.

Keywords: Gratitude; Gratitude theories; Affective event theory; Moral Affect theory; Find Remind & Bind theory; Attribution theory.

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Introduction

The research on gratitude spanned personal (well-being), social (new relationship formation, strengthening of existing relationship), spiritual, and organizational life. Gratitude researchers have applied various theories to explain the phenomenon of gratitude in exploring its antecedents and consequences. These theories range from general psychological theories, positive emotions theories to gratitude theories. They broaden our understanding of antecedents, formation, and consequences of gratitude in various contexts. This paper explains and compares the significant theories used in the gratitude literature, and integrates the role of these theories in the gratitude formation process. This paper paints a holistic picture of how gratitude theories have been applied to explain their consequences within-person between a person, in groups, and at an organizational level. The role of the various theories in the gratitude process formation further broadens our understating of the theories' scope against each other. This nuanced view is essential since different theories applied in gratitude research appear to explain only one of these aspects. Therefore, a systematic review and synthesis of the theories can set subsequent research agendas for gratitude.

First, we have explained the theories that have been applied in the gratitude literature. These theories have been tabulated for their premise, antecedents, and consequences. We have given an overview of the level of analysis (individual, group, and organization) where these theories have been applied. Then we have examined the role of theories in the stages of gratitude formation and consequences.

Methodology of selection

The present study summarizes 45 research papers, both qualitative and quantitative, published in different journals. To ensure academic quality, we have included articles from international and peer-reviewed journals from the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Google Scholar, PsycArticles, Science Direct, and Research Gate. We have not included thesis work, dissertations, or books. We searched for papers using various search terms, including the following words to retrieve articles: gratitude, gratitude theory, and positive emotion. We included articles that (a) had gratitude in the title, and (b) had applied a theory to explain the studied relationships.

Gratitude

One of the crucial determinants of personal well-being is noticing and appreciating the positive things in life. Personally, a grateful mind is a panacea for insatiable yearning and life's ills. It causes peace of mind, happiness, good physical health and satisfies personal relationships. Socio-biologists have specified that gratitude is one of the four emotions (the other three being anger, pity, and guilt) that promotes gene survival. Gratitude is the moral memory of humanity as it ensures reciprocity in

all forms of human interaction. The phenomenon of gratitude has been explored in sociology, psychology, sociopsychology, management, philosophy, and medical domains.

Theories in Gratitude Literatures

Various conceptualizations of gratitude have resulted in different theorizations about gratitude. The most prominent of them are as follows:

- a) Psycho-analytic tradition
- b) Moral functions of gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001)
- c) Find, Remind, and Bind (Algoe, 2012)
- d) Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958)
- e) Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996)
- f) Broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2004)
- g) Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2000)
- h) Self-regulation theory (Baumeister et al., 1998)
- i) Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958)
- j) Amplification theory of gratitude (Watkins, 2011)
- k) Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen, & Uhl-Bien, 1995)
- l) Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970)

Psycho-analytic tradition

The discipline was established in the early 1890s by Sigmund Freud. One prominent theory that explains gratitude is the psycho-analytic tradition that explains how an infant's bond with her mother culminates in grateful feeling. The initial bonding that an infant develops is with their mother. The infant gets the first enjoyment and gratification after taking milk from the mother's breasts. The mother's warmth, comfort, and caress translate into feelings of gratitude in the infant. The feelings get rooted in the emotion and attitude of the infant—such feelings anchor appreciation for the good in others and oneself (Heilbrunn, 1972). Gratitude thwarts envy, promotes love, and builds relationships with others. Gratitude is closely bound to generosity. Hence there will be bonding, happiness, and assimilation with the loved one or integration with the loved one in the later part of life (Klein, 1957).

In contrast to gratitude, envy undermines the development of love. Such negative feelings eclipse the genuine appreciation towards the loved ones. We want to disrupt the object with the envious feeling, but we want to love and preserve the precious object with the grateful feeling.

Moral functions of gratitude (McCullough et al., 2001)

Gratitude has been conceptualized as a moral affect, like other moral affects such as guilt, and sympathy. It is both the cause for and consequences of a moral act. Gratitude is elicited in people when they are the recipients of pro-social behaviour. By synthesizing the literature on gratitude, McCullough et al. (2001) identified the three moral functions of gratitude: Moral barometers, Moral motive, and Moral reinforcement.

Moral barometer: Gratitude is a response from the beneficiary to the moral action of another person. It typically results from moral behaviour. Here, the beneficiary perceives that a pro-social action is a moral act as it is an extra role behaviour of the benefactor. Hence, gratitude ought to be exhibited. The presence or absence of the emotion of gratitude indicates the person's morality. If gratitude is not exhibited, one is labeled as an immoral person. The magnitude of gratitude is proportional to the magnitude of help. The higher the cost of the effort or help, the higher the amount of gratitude felt (exhibited) by the beneficiary, as the gratitude emotion is sensitive to the cost-benefit analysis of the altruistic act. Thus, gratitude acts as a moral barometer.

Moral motive: As the benefactor had a moral motive (no hidden agenda behind his act) in offering the help, this helps prompt the beneficiary to reciprocate the pro-social act towards the benefactor, the stranger. Thus, this gratitude ignites a kind of 'chain reaction.' It motivates not only pro-social behaviour but also inhibits destructive interpersonal behaviour. Thus, the emotion of gratitude has a moral motive of reciprocating the help received without considering the cost-benefit analysis.

Moral reinforces: After receiving help, the expression of gratitude by the beneficiary prompts (reinforces) the benefactor to behave morally in the future (to be pro-social). An expression of gratitude reinforces the moral function of helping others.

The theory encompasses both the gratitude experience (moral barometer and moral motive functions) and expression (moral reinforce function).

Find, Remind, and Bind (Algoe, 2012)

Researching the role of gratitude among intimate relationships such as those between romantic partners and friends, Algoe (2012) formulated the Find, Remind, and Bind theory. The theory narrates the role of gratitude in the existing relationship.

Find: Gratitude is a relational emotion. Experiencing the emotion of gratitude as a result of a received benefit helps find a new relationship. After receiving help, the beneficiary perceives the benefactor more positively and is willing to favor the benefactor. As an "empathic emotion," its roots lie in the capacity to empathize with others—the recognition or appreciation of a generous gift. Thus, the gratitude experience prompts new social relationships initiation (or finding). This is called the 'find function' of gratitude.

Remind: Grateful contemplation about the 'significant others' reminds us of the value of the existing relationship. When a partner is asked to feel grateful towards his or her spouse for various reasons, the grateful partner feels positive towards his or her spouse after recollecting grateful incidents. Thus, experiencing gratitude orients people to existing social relationships by recalling their benefits. This is the 'remind function' of gratitude.

Bind: The expression of gratitude promotes relationships and the urge to make investments. The relationship thus gets further strengthened. This is the 'bind function' of gratitude.

According to Algoe, whether the benefactor is a stranger or a known person when gratitude is experienced, it has the

same purpose: binding the benefactor and the beneficiary no matter how well the relationship is between them. Moreover, gratitude is probably best understood as a mechanism for forming or sustaining the most important relationships of our lives, such as our marital partners or friends.

Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985)

Attribution theory explains how laymen explain the causes of peoples' behaviour and events. It explains gratitude more than any other theory, as gratitude is an attribution-dependent emotion (Weiner, 1985). The literature on gratitude that focused on antecedents explored why laypeople attribute grateful feelings towards others. The antecedents of gratitude are the cost or effort of the help, the value of the help to the beneficiary, and the benefactor's intention (Tesser et al., 1968). Even though these antecedents are present, gratitude is dependent on the beneficiary's attribution to the cause. Though someone takes the effort to offer the benefit, the beneficiary may refuse to feel grateful (may refuse to attribute the cause to the person instead of the situation). It may be because of his personality (narcissist) or to avoid pro-social feelings and actions (reciprocity) towards the benefactor. The beneficiary may infer that the offered help was not a big thing to him or that he has also offered similar help many times to needy persons in such situations and that he benefitted from God's grace.

No situation per se has a grateful cause. It is because of the benefactors' attribution. For example, subordinates experience gratitude when they attribute their leader's help as not grounded in their relationship but as one of the leader's traits (Sun et al., 2019). So, attribution theory explains gratitude more than any other theory, as gratitude is an attribution-dependent emotion. The antecedents of gratitude are the effort of the help, the value of the benefit, and the benefactor's intention (Visserman et al., 2018). Though these antecedents are present, gratitude is dependent on the beneficiary's attribution to the cause. Though someone takes the effort to offer the benefit, the beneficiary may refuse to feel grateful (may refuse to attribute the cause to the person). It may be because of his personality (narcissist), or the beneficiary may infer that the offered help was not a big thing.

Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996)

Affective events theory explains how employees' emotional or mental state influences their work performance and job satisfaction (O'Donoghue et al., 2016). The affective event theory applies to all emotions (both positive and negative). The positive or negative workplace events impact the employees' feelings and influence their workplace behaviour, such as performance (Diener et al., 2020). A rise in salary or warning from the supervisor may affect their mood, impacting their performance accordingly. Similarly, when a manager thanks his teammates or the CEO thanks the employees, the employees might feel grateful, which predicts the workplace's well-being and relationship.

Broaden and Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2004)

Positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and build social, physical, and psychological resources. This happens even in the case of the emotion of gratitude. The effects of positive emotions appear to accumulate and compound over time. These emotions not only make people feel good in the present, but they also increase the likelihood that people will function well and feel good in the future. By broadening people's modes of thinking and action, positive emotions improve coping and build resilience, which predicts future experiences of positive emotions.

Gratitude broadens an individual's momentary thought-action repertoires to acknowledge and pay attention to the benefits obtained from others. Grateful individuals appear to creatively consider a wide range of pro-social actions as possible reflections of their gratitude.

Social resources: Pro-sociality enhances reciprocal altruism, which can be viewed as an index for enduring friendships and alliances (Trivers, 1971). Moreover, gratitude appears to build friendships and other social bonds among people who regularly feel grateful. These are social resources because these social bonds can become the locus of consequential social support in times of need.

Psychological resources: It shifts the attention from negative to positive and highlights the available social resources. It draws attention to a rarer and potentially more crucial social opportunity—the opportunity to solidify a connection with someone. This shifting of the attention process lays the foundation for well-being.

Physical resources: Gratitude has the 'undoing effect' on the lingering aftereffects of negative emotions, just like any positive emotion (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998; Fredrickson, 2000). In the short run, the pleasant emotion of gratitude increases the reservoir of 'positive affect,' which helps increase optimal functioning and emotional well-being in the long run (Emmons et al., 2003). The increased reservoir of the positive affect acts as a buffer against negative emotions. This is why those who practiced gratitude reported more progress in their goals, fewer physical complaints, more optimism, and higher overall well-being.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2000)

As per the self-determination theory (SDT), 'fulfilling the basic psychological needs (need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness)' is essential for the individuals' motivation, development, and integrative functioning (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This theory differentiates between autonomous helping behaviour (enjoying the act of help) versus controlled (helping for a purpose or under the influence of external factors).

Research in gratitude shows convincing evidence that autonomous helping behaviour yields enhanced well-being and relational functioning. Gratitude is elicited more for the independent helping behaviour (enjoying the act of help) than for the controlled factors. Grateful individuals tend to reciprocate more when the benefit is rendered with autonomous motivation than purpose. It also resulted in better well-being and closer relationship (Kindt et al., 2017). The 'need for

relatedness' motivates people to be pro-social (Shiraki & Igarashi, 2018). Though the consequences of gratitude depend on the helpers' motivation, attributing that help is autonomous or controlled is subjective (Weinstein et al., 2010).

Self-regulation theory (Baumeister et al., 1998)

It is a conscious process of guiding thinking, behaviour towards the goal. Self-control resources are an upper boundary on an individual's effort in controlling unhealthy desires. The theory has four components of self-control. They are standards of desirable behaviour, Motivation to meet standards, monitoring of situations and thoughts that precede breaking standards, willpower to control urges by restraining impulsive behaviour, and short-time desire.

From the self-regulation theory perspective, gratitude restrains one from exhibiting short-term, impulsive desire and behaviour. It acts as an anecdote for negative thoughts and behaviour. The grateful contemplation restores the positive energy by focussing on the positive things in life.

Social exchange theory (Homans, 1958)

The basic tenets of social exchange theory are the 'norms of reciprocity'. In any relationship, there is an exchange: it can be tangible (monetary, materials) or intangible (love, care, moral support). People do the cost-benefit analysis of such an exchange and decide to continue or not to continue. They continue any social relationship only if the benefits overshadow the cost. Gratitude develops in social interaction for a received benefit. The grateful beneficiary reciprocates pro-social behaviour. The appreciative interaction is beyond the 'cost-benefit analysis and is transformational.

Amplification theory of gratitude (Watkins, 2011)

This theory gives the well-being explanation of gratitude. What is the role of the amplifier? It increases the sound. Similarly, Watkins (2011) contends that gratitude amplifies the wondrous thing in life. Gratitude is defined as "an individual's experiences of grateful emotion when they affirm that something good has happened to them, and they recognize that someone else is largely responsible for this benefit." Thus, Watkins clearly states the 'state' aspect of gratitude (emotion, not trait). The 'good' can be anything that happens at any point in life. Simple awareness that some good happened in the life or life is good is enough to amplify that good further. This enhances personal well-being. The focus on the positive, or good thing in life, drives away from the focus towards life's negative aspect.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen, & Uhl-Bien, 1995)

LMX theory addresses three facets of leadership: leader, follower, and situation. Derived from social exchange theory, LMX assumes that the leader establishes a special relationship

with one set of followers (in-group) than the other (out-group) based on the group members' social exchange in the workplace. The in-group members access unique benefits from the leaders, such as rewards. Leaders' social exchange relationship with the subordinate leads to the subordinates' gratitude elicitation and pro-social behaviour (Kim & Qu, 2020). Because of the special treatment of the members, they perceive justice in the organization, which enhances their work engagement (Verma & Yu, 2019).

Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970)

Servant leadership is a trait exhibited by the leaders where the needs and interests of the subordinates are addressed first. The tendency to serve the subordinate dominates before the aspiration to lead. This other-oriented tendency is positively

associated with gratitude. The motive to serve others is moral. It elicits gratitude among the employees towards the leader or supervisor.

Overview of the theories used in gratitude research

Table 1 below captures the five theories in a nutshell. The table highlights an interesting fact about when the theories diverge and how gratitude is created. For example, the exchange is essential to creating gratitude according to the moral effect theory. In turn, good quality relations and mutuality are also necessary for gratitude. According to the affective event theory, events help create gratitude, whereas according to the moral barometer and Find, Remind and Bind theory, gratitude is

Tab. 1. Gratitude theories

Theories of gratitude in literature	Premise	Antecedents	Consequences
Moral Affect	Gratitude acts as a barometer and reinforces morality.	Cost, Favour, Effort, Perceived Benefits, Perceived Intentionality.	Prosocial, social integration.
Find, Remind, and Bind	Gratitude may help feel essential or worthy against the backdrop of insecurity and uncertainty.	The maintenance of social ties, responsiveness in a special relationship, understanding about the excellent quality of others.	Social integration brings members together, binds societies.
Broaden and Build	Creates help the person understand and absorb information, which broadens and builds perspectives.	A grateful feeling.	Well-being, reciprocity. Social integration.
Affective Event Theory	Situations and events encountered shape both positive and negative emotions. Gratitude is an elevating emotion shaped by circumstances.	Events that help us appreciate how we have benefitted from others.	Well-being, pro-social intentions, and behaviours, strengthening group norms.
Attribution	How information and causality are established determines gratitude. It could be situational or dispositional.	Both situation and disposition could lead to gratitude.	Reciprocity, pro-social.
Self Determination Theory	Autonomy, relatedness, and competence influence people's motivation.	The motive of the help (autonomous help induces grateful feeling).	It generates a feeling of connectedness and competence. Satisfies the need for affiliation.
Self-regulation theory	Gratitude restores required personal resources for regulating the self towards goal achievement.	Grateful contemplation.	The self-restrains from involving in undesirable, impulsive behaviours.
Social Exchange Theory	The cost-benefit analysis governs the social relationship.	A rendered help.	Reciprocal help in terms of pro-social behaviour.
Amplification theory of gratitude	Focusing on the good in life amplifies the good (well-being).	Any positive events, a good thing in life.	Positive perception less focuses on what we lack.
LMX theory	The one-to-one hierarchical relationship of the leader and followers; how a set of followers gets, not gets benefit from the leaders because of their relationship with the leader.	The leaders in group members feel grateful for the treatment they get from their leaders.	Those in group members reciprocate their leaders in extra-role behaviour and job performance.
Servant leadership	The need of the subordinates comes first before the conscious choice of leading.	The moral motive of helping others.	Selfless service elicits subordinates' gratitude and their pro-social behaviour in the organization.

Tab. 2. Scope of gratitude at different levels of analysis

	Personal level	Interpersonal and Group level	Organizational level
Moral Affect	Explains the cognitive level moral contemplation – analyzing the motive, and cost of the rendered help (Yoshimura & Berzins, 2017)	Explains the one-to-one grateful consequences because of the ‘moral barometer’ and ‘moral motive’ function (Mangus et al., 2017). The ‘moral reinforcement’ function explains how the grateful consequences extend beyond the beneficiary to the third party (Pillay et al., 2020).	The theory has the scope of explaining organizational level outcomes but remains unexplored.
Find, Remind, and Bind	The process of positive evaluation and positive memory bias happened personally.	The consequences of those positive evaluation results in finding or binding the social relationship. The consequences are interpersonal and beyond (Ma et al., 2017; Pillay et al., 2020).	The theory is more applicable at the interpersonal level. The outcome of such unity at the organizational level is not explored.
Broaden and Build	By building psychological resources, it increases well-being (Xiang & Yuan, 2020).	By building social resources, gratitude influences interpersonal, and group (Chang et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2017; Pillay et al., 2020).	By building social resources, gratitude influences organizational consequences (Chen et al., 2020; Stegen, & Wankier, 2018).
Affective Event Theory	Explains the antecedents of gratitude at a personal level.	This theory explains workplace antecedents and consequences. The consequences are at the interpersonal, and group levels. (Do, 2016; Ford et al., 2018).	The consequences are at the interpersonal, group, and organizational levels (Müceldili et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2020).
Attribution	Explains the antecedents of gratitude at a personal level. The process of ‘attributing’ the grateful cause happened at a personal level only (Wood et al., 2010).	The social consequences depend on the way one attributes the cause. Positive attribution results in a better relationship than negative attribution (Wood et al., 2010).	The employees’ attribution of the organizational benefit determines their organizational gratitude. This aspect is unexplored.
Self Determination Theory	At a personal level, gratitude results in well-being, defined as the need for autonomy and competence (Froh et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015). To what extend the beneficiary attributes the motivation as autonomous vs. introjected determines the gratitude elicitation (Weinstein et al., 2010).	By fulfilling the need for relatedness, gratitude results in a social relationship (Lee et al., 2015). The quality of the relationship depends on the motivation attributed. Higher the autonomous, high quality is the relationship (Weinstein et al., 2010).	The desire to have control over the outcome may result in a better outcome in an organization that remains untested.
Social exchange theory	Less relevance on a personal level.	Widely researched in interpersonal and group (Chang et al., 2012).	When employee perceives the reward, support, growth opportunity positively, they exchange their loyalty and commitment to the organization (Kim, & Qu, 2020; Locklear et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2018).
Self-regulation theory	Applicable at a personal level (Locklear et al., 2020).	Lesser application beyond the personal level, though the available research says that the outcome of the self-regulation is directed towards the social (Locklear et al., 2020).	
Amplification theory of gratitude	Focus on personal well-being (Watkins et al., 2015; 2021).	Very much applicable in social relations. By focusing on a good relationship, it may enhance relational well-being. Not explored.	By focusing on the organization’s good things, employees can ‘amplify’ their organizational outcomes. Remains unexplored.
LMX	As the LMX explains dyadic or group relationships, studying outcomes beyond the personal level will be more meaningful.	Applied in the context of dyadic and team in explaining the grateful consequences.	The leader can channel the subordinates’ gratitude towards benefitting the organization.
Servant leadership	As leadership theories are applied in interpersonal or group contexts, no studies used this theory to explain personal consequences.	Positively related to interpersonal citizenship behaviours and upward voice (Sun et al., 2019).	Enhances organizational performance through innovative capacity of the employees (Baykal et al., 2018).

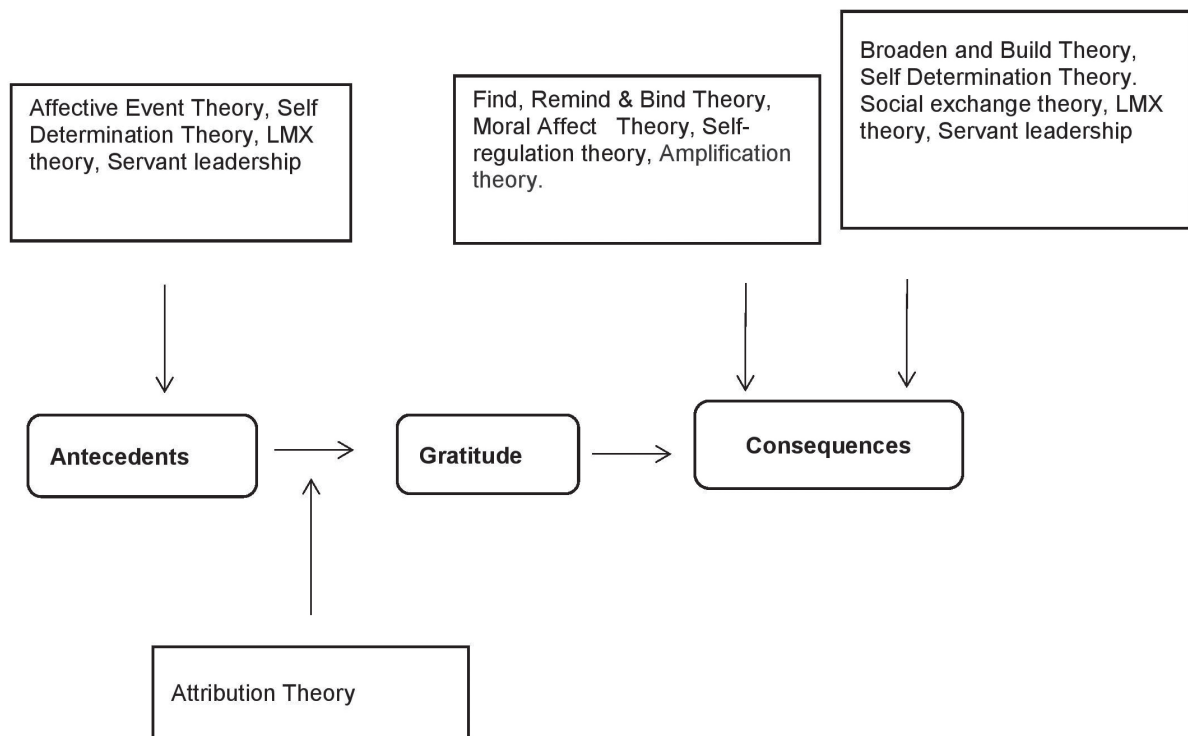
created through individuals. According to these theories, gratitude is like a lubricant and a binding force that can bring people together.

To what extend the theories explain gratitude at various levels (from personal to social and organizational) is presented in Table 2.

Role of theories in the process of gratitude

The figure below presents different theories regarding their virtual distance from gratitude. The proximity of the theory to gratitude can represent the theory’s strength to explain the antecedents and consequences of gratitude. For example, attribution is closer

Fig. 1. Locating theories in the process of gratitude formation



to gratitude than the Affective event theory, meaning that events can influence gratitude, but, more importantly, the beneficiary is made attribution. Similarly, the broaden and build theory is closer to gratitude. The theory mainly discusses personal consequences and how a person feels while experiencing gratitude.

Discussion

In this paper, we have attempted to review and integrate the theories applied in the gratitude literature and explain how theories have been applied at micro and meso levels.

The broaden and build theory captures both personal and social consequences. Personal consequences are well-being, positive emotion, and reduced heart rate. Hence it is proposed that the personal consequences precede the social consequences of gratitude. Broaden and build theory also discusses social consequences. The building of social resources results in pro-sociality and reciprocity (Fredrickson, 2004). This theory applies to any positive emotion.

Moral Affect and Find, Remind, and bind theories pertain more to social than individual consequences (though individual consequences are present). Both theories robustly explain the social consequences of gratitude in one or group. While other theories are broad, gratitude researchers formulated these two theories for explaining the nature of grateful emotion. Most of the studies of gratitude were grounded in these theories. Both theories are strong in explaining social well-being than personal well-being. Both are robust in explaining why grateful feeling or emotion elicits pro-social behaviours. The theories gave reasons for the 'spilling over' effect of gratitude through moral reinforcement and reminder functions.

The Self-determination (SDT) theory is applicable in both antecedents and consequences of gratitude. By differentiating autonomous vs. benevolent motivation, SDT explains gratitude formation. By promoting personal well-being, socially connected with others, SDT has the scope of explaining both personal and social consequences of gratitude. There are fewer research works in gratitude literature through the lens of SDT because the theory is weak in explaining both the persona and social consequences of gratitude.

Affective event theory is another popular theory of emotion, particularly in the workplace. Fehr, Fulmer, Awtrey, & Miller (2017), one of the earliest works on gratitude in the organization, unfolds the organization's level and sources of gratitude. This process can be very well understood from the perspective of 'affective event theory'. However, though lesser, the available studies in organizations have not used this theory. Any workplace study that examines gratitude can apply affective event theory, but less explored. The theory offers sound justifications for the consequences of employees' grateful behaviour in the organization. The theory also highlights the possible sources of gratitude in the organization.

Attribution theory applies to all emotions. Being an attribution-dependent emotion, gratitude is better explained by this theory. Because the helper may take more effort, have no hidden intention in helping the helper. Still, if the beneficiary fails to 'attribute' the gratitude to the helper, the gratitude will not be elicited. So, all the antecedents (perceived cost and intention of the help) depend on the attribution one makes. Thus, the attribution theory bridges the act and emotion elicited gap.

Self-regulation theory is the continuance of broaden and build the theory of positive emotion as grateful contemplation results in positive resources (building personal resources).

While the broaden and build theory discusses such resources' personal and social well-being, self-regulation theory only explains personal consequences.

Social exchange theory explains the norms that govern social relations. Gratitude supplements the emotion in such a relationship. Because social exchange theory is about 'cost-benefit analysis, the relationship may not be continued when there is more costly than the benefit. Nevertheless, the presence of grateful emotion converts the cost-benefit-based relationship into a 'transformational' one. Grateful people may help others at their own cost. They may help even the unknown people (moral reinforcement function). Social exchanges happen when there is an expectation that the other party will reciprocate. When the other party fails to reciprocate, the relationship is not continued. However, there is no hidden motivation in helping or reciprocating others in the case of grateful exchanges. This premise is strengthened when a grateful person helps an unknown third party. So, in a typical sense, social exchange theory fails to explain the grateful consequences.

Amplification theory is as 'old wine in a new bottle.' the core of this theory is that Counting the blessing increases the positive emotion is. It replicates the argument of 'broaden and build a theory of positive emotion and hardly adds new. The scope is restricted to personal well-being only. Though gratitude researchers developed it, it was not found broader application in the subsequent research.

LMX theory can explain the antecedents and consequences in the workplace. Like affective event theory, the applicability of LMX theory is limited to the workplace. The scope of analysis ranges from individual to group to organization. Just behaviour is essential because a leader is perceived as the management representative by the subordinate. While the leaders' special treatment of 'in-group' elicits gratitude, it has the opposite effect in the out-group. Hence, gratitude, being a moral emotion, is not applicable in the LMX context. There is limited research that applies this theory in gratitude studies.

Conclusion

This review aims to summarize the theories that apply to gratitude research. The review gives a broader picture of mainly applied and under-explored theories in gratitude research. Those theories that have been applied in different contexts and different levels of analysis have a broader scope in explaining the gratitude phenomenon. It develops a summary of the gratitude research as this paper is not available to the best of our knowledge. This paper contributes in the following way. It places each theory sequentially to explain the phenomenon in totality – antecedents, episodic development of gratitude, and outcomes. Such deconstruction further broadens our understanding of gratitude and the associated theories. Next, we highlight the scope of various theories, from micro to meso levels. This comprehensive overview can help future researchers understand the strength and limitations of gratitude theories. The review of the theories in this paper is not exhaustive. A meta-analysis kind of research may further validate these findings.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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