Umbrella Summary

Gratitude

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is gratitude?

There are three ways of thinking about gratitude—as a state, a trait, or a tendency that can be improved through practice. A person can experience a brief state of gratitude in response to a specific event or another person's kind actions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude is also considered a more enduring personality trait, disposition, or life orientation in which an individual has a general propensity to feel grateful for, notice, and appreciate the positives in day-to-day life (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2010). Finally, individuals can enhance their tendency to feel grateful over time by intentionally practicing gratitude-focused habits (Dickens, 2019).

There are at least 10 measures that assess gratitude (Card, 2019; Portocarrero et al., 2020), some of which treat gratitude as unidimensional and others as multidimensional. The most widely used measure is the unidimensional, 6-item *Gratitude Questionnaire* (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002). Sample items include: "I have so much in life to be thankful for" and "I am grateful to a wide variety of people." If a multidimensional measure is desired for more nuance, the 16-item *Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test* (GRAT-short; Thomas & Watkins, 2003) assesses three factors of gratitude: sense of abundance, simple appreciation, and appreciation of others. Another option is the 10-item *Gratitude at Work Scale* (GAWS; Cain et al., 2019), which is a new measure of gratitude in the workplace that assesses two subscales: gratitude for supportive work environment and gratitude for meaningful work.

Is gratitude important?

A quick Internet search of gratitude in the workplace or review of top business books affirms that organizations are implementing gratitude-centered strategies in hopes of improving workplace outcomes. However, the meta-analytic research has yet to explore the relationship of gratitude with important work outcomes such as performance and turnover. Despite this research gap, organizations continue to promote these low-cost strategies, and there is promising evidence for the relationship between gratitude and personal outcomes. Specifically, gratitude is associated with (a) greater psychological well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction and (b) lower anxiety, depression, and stress (Portocarrero et al., 2020).

Experiencing gratitude is also associated with being more likely to act in a prosocial, or helpful, way toward another individual, group, organization, or society (Ma et al., 2017). In a workplace context, this could translate to more organizational citizenship behaviors, which are

discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as volunteering, helping others, and making suggestions for improvement, that benefit the group and organization (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

How can gratitude be increased?

Strategies to increase gratitude can be simple, individual-level practices or more extensive initiatives at the organization level. Personal approaches are often free and self-guided. The most common intervention that has been studied is gratitude journaling, or making lists of things that one is grateful for (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This practice can include making a gratitude list at the end of the day or week. The duration of the intervention can vary widely, from one to twelve weeks (Dickens, 2019). Another common strategy involves writing a thank-you letter to a person who has made a difference, but has not been properly thanked. In some studies, the participant also delivers the letter to the recipient in person, which is called a "gratitude visit" (Seligman et al., 2005). Organizations can also implement gratitude-focused HR practices, such as employee appreciation programs, direct contact with customers or clients, and developmental feedback (Fehr et al., 2017), but further research is needed to understand the impact of these organizational initiatives.

Through randomized control trials, it has been established that individual-level gratitude interventions result in immediate improvements in gratitude, quality of relationships, optimism, happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being, as well as decreased depression (Davis et al., 2016; Dickens, 2019). Some of these beneficial effects have been shown to persist long after the intervention period has ended. Specifically, improved happiness and well-being and decreased depression have been detected one week to 6 months post-intervention (Dickens, 2019).

Are gratitude interventions effective?

There is also emerging evidence that gratitude interventions may be effective for improving some work outcomes. Gratitude interventions have been shown to moderately improve *desirable* work outcomes, such as job well-being, job satisfaction, and prosocial behavior; however, they do not affect *undesirable* work outcomes (e.g., burnout and turnover intentions; Donaldson et al., 2019). Additional research is needed to examine these connections further and to determine whether gratitude interventions affect job performance or turnover.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Gratitude can be considered an emotional state, a personality trait, or a tendency that can be improved through practice.
► Gratitude is associated with (a) greater psychological well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction, (b) lower anxiety, depression, and stress, and (c) greater prosocial behaviors.

► The most common strategies for improving gratitude are low-cost, self-guided practices (e.g., gratitude journaling and gratitude visits), which vary in frequency (e.g., daily vs. weekly practice) and duration.
► Through randomized control trials, it has been established that gratitude interventions result in immediate improvements in gratitude, quality of relationships, optimism, happiness, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being.
► Some of the beneficial effects of gratitude interventions (improved happiness and well-being and decreased depression) have been shown to persist weeks or months after the intervention period has ended.
► Gratitude interventions have been shown to moderately improve desirable work outcomes (e.g., job well-being, job satisfaction, and prosocial behavior), but not undesirable work outcomes (e.g., burnout and turnover intentions).
► Further research is needed to understand the effect of gratitude and gratitude interventions (including personal and organization-level strategies) on work outcomes, such as performance and turnover.
► Further research is needed to determine the impact of intervention frequency and duration on outcomes.
► Practitioners or researchers who would like to assess gratitude should consider the *Gratitude Questionnaire*, the *Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test-short*, or the *Gratitude at Work Scale.*

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Author(s)

Stephanie Weddington, MA, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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