



Short Communication

Cognitive correlates of gratitude among prison inmates[☆]Y. Joel Wong^{a,*}, Nicole T. Gabana^a, Nelson O.O. Zounlome^a, Nancy Goodrich Mitts^a, Matthew Lucas^b^a Indiana University Bloomington, USA^b Lucas Counseling LLC, Bloomington, IN, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined two cognitive correlates of state gratitude, namely, positive benefit appraisals (positive attributions regarding help received from others) and positive reframing (viewing an experience previously perceived as negative in a more positive light) among male prison inmates. Both positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing uniquely predicted state gratitude 4 weeks later. Moreover, a multiple mediation model revealed that positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing were both indirectly associated with reduced psychological distress via their relations with state gratitude. These findings are discussed in light of how gratitude can be cultivated among individuals, particularly among prison inmates.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, a burgeoning body of studies has demonstrated that gratitude is correlated with multiple indicators of well-being (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). This literature has also spawned research attesting to the benefits of gratitude interventions on mental health (e.g., Wong et al., 2016). In this study, we advance the literature by examining two cognitive correlates of state gratitude, namely, positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing.

1.1. Positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing

Benefit appraisals refer to people's attributions about the help they receive from others (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley, & Joseph, 2008). People with highly positive benefit appraisals perceive that the help they receive is valuable, costly to helpers, and motivated by helpers' intention to aid them. The notion that benefit appraisals are linked to gratitude is embedded within contemporary conceptualizations of gratitude. For instance, McCullough, Kimeldorf, and Cohen (2008) defined gratitude as "a positive emotion that typically flows from the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person" (p. 281). Consistent with this notion, Wood et al. (2008) found that an experimental manipulation of situations with high (vs. low) benefits engendered higher state gratitude, and this effect was mediated by greater positive benefit appraisals.

In addition to benefit appraisals, positive reframing is another cognitive resource that explains why individuals experience gratitude. Positive reframing refers to perceiving an experience, previously viewed as negative, in a more positive light (Lambert, Fincham, & Stillman, 2012). Examples of positive reframing include focusing on the social support one received or opportunities for personal growth as a result of a difficult experience. Positive reframing might engender gratitude because it helps individuals notice and appreciate the positive things in their lives that they otherwise might have overlooked due to a negative lens. In one study, participants who were randomly assigned to engage in positive reframing reported higher levels of state gratitude than those in a control condition (Lambert et al., 2012).

In this study, we sought to address several limitations in the literature on the cognitive correlates of gratitude. First, given previous research on the positive correlations between positive benefit appraisals and gratitude (Wood et al., 2008) and between gratitude and mental health (Lambert et al., 2012), it seems reasonable to assume that positive benefit appraisals would also be indirectly associated with better mental health via its association with gratitude. Nevertheless, no research has tested this mediation hypothesis. Second, conceptually, positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing represent two different types of cognitive resources. Given that positive benefit appraisals focus explicitly on the evaluation of help received from *other individuals*, they appear to have a greater interpersonal focus than cognitive reframing. However, because no study has tested both cognitive resources as correlates of gratitude in the same model, it has not been empirically established that both have unique effects on gratitude. Third, most research on gratitude has been conducted using university samples (e.g., Lambert et al., 2012); specifically, research on the correlates of gratitude among prison inmates is lacking. What

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: joelwong@indiana.edu (Y.J. Wong).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among variables.

Variables	Positive benefit appraisals	Positive reframing	State gratitude	Psychological distress
Positive benefit appraisals	–	0.50**	0.42**	0.13
Positive reframing	0.50**	–	0.51**	–0.06
State gratitude	0.42**	0.51**	–	–0.26**
Psychological distress	0.13	–0.06	–0.26**	–
<i>M (SD)</i>	2.85 (0.56)	3.45 (0.96)	6.43 (2.15)	7.03 (7.31)

Note: Positive reframing and positive benefit appraisals were measured at Time 1; state gratitude and psychological distress were measured at Time 2.

** $p < 0.01$.

follows is a discussion of why the study of gratitude might be particularly relevant to prison inmates.

1.2. Prison inmates

According to a U.S. Bureau of Justice Special Report, more than half of all prison inmates in the United States have mental health problems (James & Glaze, 2006). It is, therefore, important to identify protective factors that may buffer against these mental health concerns. Past research has found that positive psychological constructs, such as social support, religiosity, and forgiveness serve as protective factors for inmates' mental health (e.g., Randall & Bishop, 2013). Gratitude is another potential protective factor for this population; nevertheless, research on gratitude among prison inmates is sorely lacking. In one of the few studies on gratitude among inmates, Huynh, Hall, Hurst, and Bikos (2014) found that a positive psychological intervention that focused on principles and skills to foster the use of strengths increased inmates' levels of gratitude. However, the intervention did not focus primarily on cultivating gratitude and the authors did not examine the role of gratitude as a protective factor against psychological distress. Given the hardship experienced by inmates, the cultivation of positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing might engender gratitude, which could in turn buffer against psychological distress and potentially reduce recidivism rates. For example, using positive reframing, inmates might be able to view their difficult experiences in prison as an opportunity to build resilience or learn a new skill, which could prepare them for life after incarceration. Similarly, positive benefit reappraisals might help inmates better appreciate the help they receive from fellow inmates and correctional officers, which could buffer against psychological distress and potentially assist with a successful reentry into the community upon release.

1.3. Aims of this study

Against this backdrop, we proposed two hypotheses. First, we predicted that prison inmates' positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing would each uniquely predict¹ their state gratitude four weeks later. Second, we tested a multiple mediation model in which both positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing would indirectly predict reduced psychological distress via their positive associations with state gratitude. One advantage of our design is that it enabled to specify the temporal sequence of variables in our model (i.e., positive benefit appraisals and positive reframing as predictors of state gratitude rather than the reverse).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 97 male inmates (age $M = 34.86$, $SD = 8.61$) in a U.S. federal medium-security prison who were taking General

Educational Development classes. In terms of racial background, 43.3% were African Americans, 33.0% were Latino Americans, 9.3% were White Americans, 5.2% were Native Americans, 4.1% were Asian Americans, and the rest identified with other racial backgrounds. On average, participants had served 3.85 years in prison ($SD = 3.03$) and had a prison sentence of 8.01 years ($SD = 5.84$). Participants completed two paper surveys 4 weeks apart (Time 1 and Time 2).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Benefit appraisals scale (BAS)

Because there are no existing multi-item measures of positive benefit appraisals, we developed the BAS, a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree* (administered at Time 1). High scores reflect more positive benefit appraisals. Participants were told to list a few examples of help they received from others during the past month. They then rated these items. Following Wood et al.'s (2008) conceptualization of benefit appraisals, the scale consisted of nine items with three items that each addressed perceptions that the help they received was (a) valuable to participants, (b) costly to helpers, and (c) genuinely motivated by helpers' intention to help participants (e.g., "In general, people helped me because they were genuinely interested in my welfare"). We used an exploratory factor analysis with a Promax rotation, which allow factors to be correlated with each other. Findings based on the "bend" of the elbow in the scree plot and parallel analysis provided strong evidence of one factor (rather than three factors), constituting 71.20% of the variance in the nine items. Hence, the composite score was based on the average of the nine items ($\alpha = 0.90$). A copy of the BAS is available upon request from the first author.

2.2.2. Cognitive restructuring subscale (CRS)

Positive reframing was measured by the four-item CRS, a subscale of the Coping Strategies Inventory—Short Form (Tobin, 1995; administered at Time 1). This measure asks participants to recall a particularly stressful situation in the past week and then rate their level of agreement with four statements related to their interpretation of and reaction to the event. High scores reflect greater positive reframing. A sample item is "I looked for the silver lining, so to speak; I tried to look on the bright side of things." Response options are on a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *very much*. The composite score was based on the average of the four items ($\alpha = 0.80$).

2.2.3. Gratitude adjectives checklist (GAC)

The GAC (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; administered at Time 2) measures state gratitude. Participants were asked how accurately the adjectives "grateful," "thankful," and "appreciative" describe oneself over the past week. Items are rated on a 9-point Likert scale from 1 (*inaccurate*) to 9 (*accurate*). High scores represent higher levels of gratitude. The composite score was based on the average of the three items ($\alpha = 0.95$).

2.2.4. Brief symptoms inventory-18 (BSI-18)

The BSI-18 (Derogatis, 2000; administered at Time 2) measured participants' recent symptoms of psychological distress. Participants were asked to rate how much 18 problems had bothered them in the past

¹ We use the term "predict" because the literature conceptualizes benefit appraisals and positive reframing as antecedents of state gratitude and because, in our model, benefit appraisals and positive reframing precedes the other two variables. However, our research did not allow us to demonstrate a causal link between these variables.

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