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Appreciation in the supervisor-employee relationship: Literature review and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that managers who demonstrate effective appreciation, as perceived by their subordinates, will enjoy more loyal, committed employees. Moreover, relationships bound and strengthened by expressed appreciation generate greater levels of individual performance, workplace harmony and overall organisational productivity. Yet empirical research on expressed appreciation behaviour is limited when compared to studies of appreciation as a disposition or trait. This paper examines the concept of expressed workplace appreciation (EWA) with regard to the supervisor-subordinate relationship. The role and proposed effects of EWA are presented within a conceptual framework labeled the workplace appreciation cycle. To further investigate EWA, a proposed research agenda is presented along with practical and theoretical benefits arising from the generation of new knowledge.

KEY WORDS: interpersonal behaviour; motivation; organisational culture; perception; work performance.

Study of human motivation is a longstanding pursuit. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC) proposed that people are motivated by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain in the ultimate pursuit of happiness (Franken, 1988). Franken explains how Humanistic theorists from the last century, including Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, advocated the essential goodness of people coupled with an innate ability to *grow*. To understand drivers of behaviour, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) have more recently advocated positive psychological approaches encompassing "…a science of positive subjective experience, [and] positive individual traits." (p.5). Essentially, the historic study of human motivation has concerned the impetus, direction and persistence of behaviours to explain what fundamentally arouses us and why. This paper considers whether appreciation is fundamental to workplace motivation in the 21st Century. A critical review of psychology and management literature on appreciation and related concepts is firstly presented. From this, further study on workplace appreciation appears warranted and hence a research agenda is proposed and justified to address extant knowledge gaps.

Benefits arising from a motivated workforce in the 21st Century

Principles drawn from positive psychology and human motivation theories provide insight to what makes employees 'tick' and how organisations can maximise employee productivity and well-being. This knowledge is important given the persistent low levels of employee engagement globally coupled with reduced operating budgets and new global competitors characteristic of the 21st Century business environment (Crabtree, 2013). These factors potentially hinder the economic performance of organisations and employees' quality of life at and outside of work. Given that a workforce provide organisations with competitive advantage, the question becomes how organisations should enhance employee well-being, job satisfaction and engagement levels to facilitate optimal productivity, greater shareholder returns, and a more harmonious, effective workplace for internal stakeholders and customers. The role of appreciation in promoting these aspects of organisational effectiveness is yet to be explored fully.

Management and broader psychology literature supports the contention that subordinates who feel appreciated in the supervisor-subordinate relationship are relatively more loyal and productive while holding a greater sense of subjective well-being (SWB) (Fagley & Adler, 2012; Gagnon & Michael, 2004; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2003). Appreciation is also proposed as a critical mechanism for enhancing social bonding and job satisfaction, promoting creativity, energising behaviour, and enhancing organisational commitment (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Fagley & Adler, 2012; Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010).

Appreciation as an everyday concept is readily known, identified and understood in the workplace. Reflecting on this universal concept, management literature provides abundant synonyms, definitions and variables connected with appreciation (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Emmons & McCullough, 2004). Notwithstanding, behaviours that manifest as workplace appreciation, and especially those as perceived by subordinates, have been categorically evaluated for their role as workplace motivators (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Beck, 2016; Stocker, Jacobshagen, Semmer & Annen, 2010). Research is therefore required to determine how appreciative behaviours, particularly where given from direct supervisors, engage and direct employees towards meeting an organisation's strategic goals.

DEFINING APPRECIATION

The concept of appreciation and related behaviours is multifaceted and subjective (Chen, Chen & Tsai, 2012; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Any useful definition applied to the workplace should consider the source, manifestation and transmittal of appreciation. On this, philosopher and psychologist William James (b. 1842) stated, "the deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated." (www.brainyquote.com). Interestingly, James uses the word '*craving'* which gives stronger meaning as opposed to, say, 'need' or 'desire.' So exactly what is *appreciation*?

Appreciation and associated behaviours may be analysed as a sociological (at the group level) or psychological phenomenon (at the individual level). From a psycho-social perspective, Stocker et al. (2010) state that appreciation refers to evaluation by others. Positive evaluations through appreciation enhances or sustains self-esteem, which in turn promotes employee well-being (Stocker et al., 2010).

Many questions about appreciation are yet to be tested empirically. For example, the proposed beneficial effects through positive evaluations may be stronger where a supervisor's expressed appreciation is unsolicited, unexpected, infrequent, provided in a group setting, linked to positive organisational outcomes, communicated to a wider audience, or falls outside a formal workplace evaluation processes. Conversely, a lack of or deficiency in appreciation may negatively affect employee self-esteem and exacerbate workplace stress (Semmer, Jacobshagen, Meier & Elfering, 2007).

Social support and exchange research also provide insights for defining appreciation. While motivation to express appreciation may be associated with some innate characteristic such as personality, Adler (2002) suggests that this expression can be learned over time. It follows that a manager's personality in some way combines with life and work experiences in developing their capability to transmit appreciative behaviours to subordinates. Nevertheless, supervisor behaviours eliciting appreciative feelings in subordinates may arise unconsciously or be delivered without intention.

This conceptualization of appreciation is underpinned by an important differentiation evident in two of the common research approaches on the concept. The first is research investigating the

association of appreciation with particular dispositions, traits or attitudes. The second approach considers transmission or *expression* of appreciation as enunciated behaviours. The utility of both approaches for understanding appreciation in the workplace is now considered.

Disposition versus expression approaches to researching workplace appreciation

Researchers use the term *gratitude* interchangeably with *appreciation* (Beck, 2016). To summarise previous research, Rusk, Vella-Brodrick and Waters (2015) recently conducted a deductive thematic analysis to identify empirical measures of gratitude and gratefulness representing types of *appreciative functioning*. Rusk et al. define appreciative functioning as "…a pattern of cognition and behaviour that involves the interaction of awareness, comprehension, emotions, goals, and relationships." (p. 1). Under the term appreciative functioning, *gratitude* refers to appraisal of benefit from another entity or person only, with *gratefulness* referring to appraisal of benefit not involving the agency another person or entity.

Rusk et al. (2015, pp. 12-13) also identified five English-language instruments developed to measure gratitude or gratefulness (Table 1). In application to workplace outcomes, an appreciative disposition has been found to positively influence employee SWB (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Fagley & Adler, 2012; McCullough, Tsang & Emmons, 2004; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson, 2001; Wood et al., 2010; Wood, Maltby, Stewart & Joseph, 2008). Presumably, the strength of an appreciative disposition will vary according to previous experience, inherent personality, or some combination thereof.

Whether managers and supervisors vary in the strength of their appreciative dispositions remains an important area for further research. The second research approach presumed the appreciative disposition resides within a *black box* (Rouse & Morris, 1986). Hence, the key variable relevant for the study of appreciation is governed by the concept's objective expression (Beck, 2016). Under this approach, appreciation here is considered to exist where manifest as expressed and communicated behaviours, often via the spoken or written word.

Expressed appreciative behaviour creates in the *receiver* feelings of being appreciated. Such behaviour may reinforce in employees their belief of being valued for what they do or who they are. It may be too simplistic however to consider appreciation as a one-way or linear cause and effect

process as the concept's conceptualisation and roles in the workplace are likely to be highly complex. To simplify this reality, Figure 1 presents the Workplace Appreciation Cycle (WAC) as an iterative framework. The WAC represents the transmission process of appreciation and resultant effects within the supervisor-subordinate relationship in six steps.

Step 1 of the WAC is initiated where some action or behaviour of an employee provides the manager with a positive cognitive evaluation. This evaluation is then communicated to the employee as an appreciative behaviour (step 2). In receiving this behaviour, the employee instils feelings of being appreciated (step 3). Cognitive processing of these feelings support SWB and social bonds (step 4). The employee then performs more productively (step 5), subsequently recognised by the manager in step 6. This systematic process represents a positive feedback loop supported by supervisor-subordinate communication. Social aspects underpinning relationships depicted in the WAC are reviewed in the next section.

SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES ASSOCIATED WITH EXPRESSED APPRECIATION

Interpersonal relationships, fundamental to the WAC, are important for all facets of human physiological and psychological welfare, reflecting humans' innate need to socially bond. Yet managers commonly underrate the importance of workplace interpersonal relationships (Cacioppo, 2008; Carmeli, Breuller, Dutton, 2009). Diener and Seligman (2002), for example, found that among undergraduate students social support was the strongest predictor of human happiness. This effect outweighed other measured geodemographic factors for personal fitness, wealth, living climate, age, education and gender. Similarly, Reeve (2005) argues that people seek bonding in the pursuit of relatedness, a feeling or perception fundamental to sustained happiness. As discussed next, fostering of positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace resides for the most part with leaders.

Leader theory and appreciation in the supervisor-subordinate relationship

The link between innate human need to receive appreciation and workplace leadership is addressed by theory. For example, Rock's (2009) research in social neuroscience examined the impact of social interactions on motivating human behaviour. This research suggests that tomorrow's leaders must understand effects of *social dynamics* on brain functioning including hormonal reactions that drive or reward behaviour. The WAC (Figure 1) presumes that appreciation within the supervisor-

subordinate relationship is founded upon these social dynamics. Rock, however, does not specify any underpinning desirable behaviours or actions relevant for the workplace. Leadership theory does however shed light on this.

Leadership demonstrated within relationships encompasses supervisor appreciation. Kouzes and Posner (2002, p. 19) stressed the importance of leaders *encouraging the hearts* of their people through genuine acts of caring and encouragement. Leader behaviours are a key determinant of employee job satisfaction, engagement levels and SWB (Batista-Taran, Shuck, Gutierrez & Baralt, 2009; Leary, Green, Denson, Schoenfeld, Henley & Langford, 2013). But understanding exactly *how* leaders can positively impact followers through demonstrating appreciation and genuine care would only enhance the proposed WAC positive feedback loop.

The WAC presumes also that the supervisor-subordinate relationship is central to positive functioning of appreciation in the workplace. On this, Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003) documented growing research on employee-supervisor linkages relevant for today's work environments. The globalisation of markets, associated mergers and acquisitions, plus other significant changes across organisations create new uncertainties among employees as to who really is their employer (organisation). Hence, the role and related importance of one's direct supervisor appears as the most tangible relationship within organisations for guiding appropriate employee behaviours. This contention is realised by examination of organisational and supervisor roles in workplace social support.

Workplace social support and appreciation

Workplace social support is defined as the degree to which individuals perceive their well-being as valued and supported in the workplace by supervisors and the broader organisation (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski & Rhoades, 2002; Ford, Heinen & Langkamer, 2007). From this viewpoint, the value of workplace social support may be examined through *organisational support theory*, which has been operationalised as perceived organisational support (POS) and perceived supervisor support (PSS). These conceptual approaches inform us on factors that potentially influence employee perceptions of social support within their organisation. One form by which social support is communicated is through gratitude or appreciation.

Organisational support theory and perceived organisational support (POS)

Aligned with workplace social support, organisational support theory asserts that employees build perceptions concerning the extent to which their contributions are valued by the organisation and, in turn, whether the organisation cares about their overall well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997; Shore & Shore, 1995). Put another way, employees form perceptions about how their contributions, efforts or ability are *appreciated* by the organisation. Eisenberger and colleagues have researched organisational support theory for over three decades through development of the POS concept (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Eisenberger et al. (1986, p. 500) originally defined POS as global beliefs developed by employees "…concerning the extent to which the organisation values their contributions and cares about their well-being." According to this definition, which runs parallel to organisational support theory, employees develop beliefs about the extent to which their organisation appreciates them and their work.

Perceived supervisor support (PSS)

POS concerns support at the *organisation* level. The related concept of PSS refers to the degree to which supervisors value employee contributions and care about their well-being (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, p. 700). Eisenberger et al.'s (2002) conceptualisation of organisational support theory contends that PSS leads to POS. This contention appears logical and has found support empirically (Dawley, Houghton & Bucklew, 2010). Shanock and Eisenberger (2006) suggested that supportive treatment of employees by *supervisors* leads to positive outcomes for both the individual employee and the organisation, including better performance and reduced workplace stress.

Even though POS and PSS have been subject to much empirical research, Eisenberger and Stinglhamber's (2011) meta-analysis showed that knowledge of PSS antecedents (i.e., factors that lead supervisors to treat employees supportively) remains limited. What is known is that employees who feel supported and appreciated excel in achieving outputs that contribute to organisational success. Further, substantial research findings reveal a positive relationship between PSS and positive outcomes for employees and organisations. For example, high PSS is associated with psychological welfare (Li, Shaffer & Bagger, 2015; Russell, Altmaier & Van Velzen, 1987); job satisfaction (Babin

& Boles, 1996; Gagnon & Michael, 2004); safety performance (Mearns & Reader, 2008; Puah, Ong & Chong, 2016); productivity (Liaw, Chi & Chuang, 2010; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006); retention (DeConinck & Johnson, 2009; Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2013; Musso, Garay, Kyndt & Cascallar, 2014); loyalty/ commitment (Gagnon & Michael, 2004; Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988) and innovation/ creativity (Janssen, 2005; Škerlavaj, Černe & Dysvik, 2014).

Yet to be empirically tested, PSS presumably manifests in employees through appreciation behaviours received from supervisors. As now discussed, this relationship offers generally the most frequent and direct pathways for expressed appreciative behaviour.

Sources for appreciative relationships

Although many forms of employee relationships exist in the workplace (e.g. with co-workers, senior managers, human resources), the *direct supervisors* of employees are recognised as the most influential employee support body (Ng & Sorenson, 2008). Despite the supervisor being posited as central to the flow and effects of appreciation in the WAC, Kossek, Pichler, Bodner and Hammer's (2011) meta-analysis conceptualised workplace social support emanating from multiple sources (e.g., supervisors, co-workers, and the organisation). Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) assert that the type of support afforded to employees differs significantly depending on the other actor's position; that is, immediate supervisor, senior manager, co-workers and even subordinates, all of whom they describe as 'organisational agents'.

An employee's direct supervisor will, in most cases, have a relatively stronger influence on perceived workplace social support, possibly via the WAC, relative to upper managers and the CEO. This outcome may be explained through the frequency of interaction, among other factors. Generally, supervisors have more direct contact with their subordinates and hence more time and opportunity than 'the organisation' (including senior managers and CEO) to demonstrate supportive behaviour and influence over employees (Maertz, Griffeth, Campbell & Allen, 2007; Tremblay & Gibson, 2016). In support of this contention, Goleman (1998) posits that the employee-manager relationship in the workplace represents a 'vertical couple' or 'organisational marriage' where this social bond that most shapes an organisation's fabric. This research supports the focus of the WAC (Figure 1) as the most suitable unit of analysis for examining the role of appreciation in the workplace.

The supervisor influence on workplace outcomes

Documented studies of PSS suggest workplace support provided by the supervisor facilitates employee job satisfaction and retention (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Empirical studies have shown also that employees who experience such positive relationships with their manager enjoy greater SWB and productivity (Achor, 2010; Wagner, Feldman & Hussey, 2003). Conversely, a lack of supervisor support encompassing limited appreciation may also explain high organisational turnover (White, 2014; 2015). Exactly *how* supervisors may demonstrate appreciation to subordinates, and so strengthen the supportive relationship, is not fully understood.

STUDIES OF APPRECIATION IN THE WORKPLACE

A few studies have specifically considered the role of expressed appreciative behaviour in the workplace consistent with the WAC (Figure 1). These include Stocker et al.'s (2010) study of Swiss military personal (males only) and Beck's (2016) study of sales and marketing representatives.

Stocker et al.'s study attempted to distinguish types of appreciation communicated in the workplace while assessing the impacts of received or experienced appreciation. Participants were randomly chosen commissioned and non-commissioned officers. An online survey used a 10-item scale measuring appreciative behaviours received from supervisors *and* co-workers. The authors reported that appreciation correlated positively with measures of job satisfaction and negatively with feelings of resentment towards the organisation. Factor analysis revealed two subscales for the items measured, one representing five items related to appreciation by *supervisors*, the other representing five from *co-workers*. This suggests that the impact of supervisor appreciation is different to that received from a co-worker, a hypothesis supported by the research studies of Ng and Sorenson (2008) and Babin and Boles (1996). Whether Stocker et al.'s results are generalisable beyond males in military service remains in contention.

Beck (2016) reported a study focused on gratitude in the manager-employee relationship. The aim was to investigate optimal types and frequencies of appreciation expression in the workplace and to identify employees' preferred ways of receiving appreciation. The study also assessed the employee's relationship with the larger organisation. Elements of gratitude communications best *avoided* by managers - what Beck labelled *dark sides of gratitude communications* - were also

investigated. Beck tested for the influence of age, gender and ethnicity on the importance of receiving managerial gratitude and the employee-preferred form of gratitude from among six categories: verbally (one-on-one), verbally (in a group setting), electronic note (e-mail, social media), handwritten (thank you card, etc.), monetary bonus, and other. Beck's results reiterated the importance of employees receiving gratitude, with a majority of employees citing *one-on-one verbal gratitude* as a preferred medium of appreciation. No differences on ethnicity were found regarding preferred mediums of gratitude. Females placed more value on receiving gratitude than males overall, yet no statistical significant differences on receiving gratitude were found for age or ethnicity. To facilitate further study, Beck recommended replicating the study to other countries with different cultural practices.

While both the Beck (2016) and Stocker et al. (2010) shed some light on the concept of appreciative workplace behaviours, neither study appeared to employ a rigorous and comprehensive process for developing categories or items used to represent expressed appreciation behaviour (Hinkin, 1995). Further, the studies did not report empirical validation of the scale measures.

In reviewing scale development procedures, Hinkin (1995) states that the accuracy of measurement constructs is one of the greatest challenges when conducting survey research. Hinkin's review of 75 published articles in leading academic journals (from 1989 to 1994) reported details of how scale items were generated, was often lacking.

A workplace appreciation research agenda

This paper has proposed a model of workplace appreciation to facilitate study of expressed appreciative behaviour. It has been argued, based on reviewed literature, that the pertinent relationship to consider is between the supervisor and subordinate, although clearly other organisation factors have influence.

The research agenda proposed below presumes a black box approach to the study of appreciation as a disposition, and instead focusses on expressed appreciative behaviours, and their effects, readily recognisable in the workplace. A conceptual approach for this study is proposed in line with the WAC (Figure 1). The proposed research agenda begins with a working definition for

expressed workplace appreciation (EWA). This is *workplace behaviours enacted by supervisors that instil feelings of being appreciated within subordinates*.

Based on empirical studies of PSS, EWA is hypothesised to play an important role in many workplace outcomes desired by organisations. Yet no instrument has yet been developed to measure EWA. Instrument development provides the first step. Such an instrument should encompass a rigorous process for specific appreciative behaviours ecologically valid for today's workplaces (Hinkin, 1995). Following this, a scale measure requires development and testing. This test should include a range of workplaces and employment sectors to ensure adequate representation and allow for identification of operational differences in expressed appreciation; a resource to diagnose and improve both workplace efficiency and harmony. The final step would be to assess this scale against established scales or measures of workplace outcomes hypothesised to be related to expressed appreciative behaviours (e.g., innovation, commitment, safety, or productivity).

CONCLUSION

Sincere managerial appreciation shown towards employees has been claimed to positively impact engagement levels, commitment and overall productivity (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Fagley & Adler, 2012; Kark & Carmeli, 2009). Yet research on the specific behaviours that express appreciation and determinations on how these impact employees remains absent. A research agenda presented here will contribute to greater understanding of the concept of workplace appreciation in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. A conceptual framework (WAC) based on expressed workplace appreciation (EWA) underpins this research agenda.

This endeavour is justified on both practical and theoretical grounds. A better understanding of appreciation will allow managers to build an appreciative organisational culture resulting in a more productive, committed, harmonious workplace. Empirical knowledge of the operation of workplace appreciation will potentially inform human resource practices and policies in areas including staff selection, training, performance management, coaching, and associated reward systems. Managers with a better understanding of appreciation will have the capacity to build an appreciative, productive workplace culture. In turn, stronger relationships will generate greater levels of individual performance and overall organisational productivity. From a theoretical viewpoint, developing a scale

measure of appreciative behaviours will allow more precise testing of hypothesised relationships among categories or components of appreciative behaviors and workplace, situational and person factors. This new and empirical knowledge will provide a basis for better understanding about how to best motivate and support employees in today's dynamic and global business environments.

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APPENDICES

Figure 1. A conceptual framework: The 'Workplace Appreciation Cycle' (WAC)

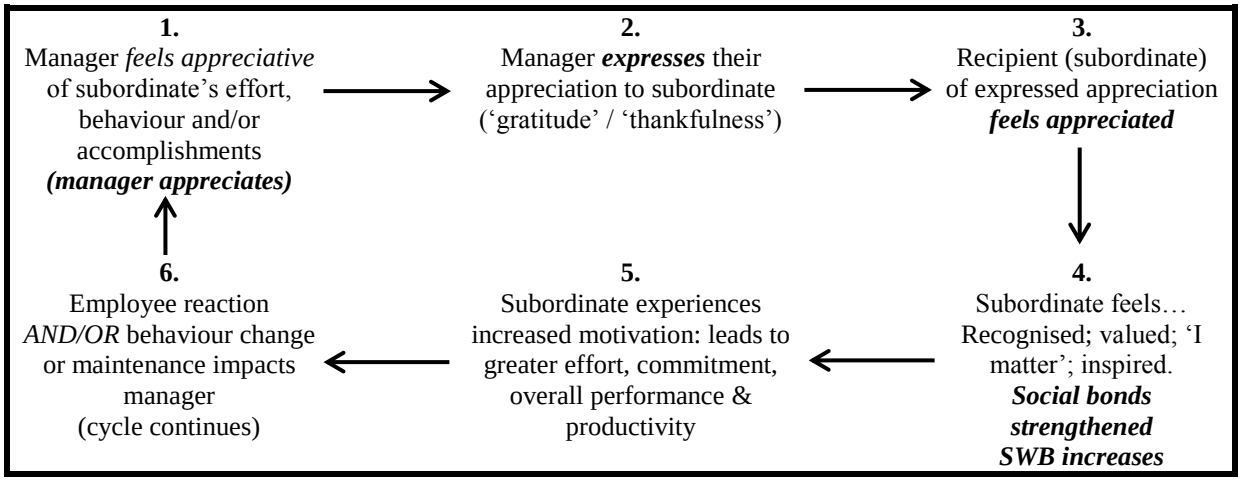


Table 1. Summary of Rusk et al.'s (2015) empirical measures and instruments of gratitude and appreciation

Measurement instrument title	Author / developer and year of publication	Summary of measurement instrument
GQ-6: The Gratefulness Questionnaire.	McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang (2002).	A unifactorial measure of gratitude consisting of six statements (only) designed to measure the intensity, frequency, density and span of gratitude.
GRAT-R : The Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test.	Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts (2003); revised by Thomas and Watkins (2003).	Studied the trait of gratitude and its relationship with happiness and SWB. They established 53 items, later reduced to 44.
AI: The Appreciation Inventory.	Initially drafted by Adler (2002); further refined by Adler and Fagley (2005).	Consisted of 81 rating-scale items to assess the frequency of the construct of appreciation and attitudes relating to it; further refined by Adler and Fagley (2005) to 57 items. Exploratory factor analysis revealed eight factors that comprise appreciation.
VIA-IS Gratitude Subscale: Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS).	Peterson, Park & Seligman (2005).	240-item inventory containing a 10-item subscale designed to measure dispositional gratitude.
GAC: The Gratitude Adjective Checklist.	McCullough et al. (2002).	Comprises the adjectives 'grateful', 'thankful', and appreciative', with respondents rating themselves against each one.