

2020

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Experiencing Grace: A Review of the Empirical Literature

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ABSTRACT

Positive psychologists have used science to understand many virtues but have only just started to study grace, recently defined as ‘... the gift of acceptance given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver’. The purpose of the current article is to provide a systematic review of all empirical studies (published and unpublished) on grace. Broadly, the empirical study of grace has focused on what people believe and how people experience both divine and human grace. Additionally, empirical attention has shifted to explore outcomes of grace-based interventions (e.g., congregation-wide interventions, marital interventions). In general, beliefs and experiences of grace were associated with (a) positive mental health outcomes, (b) religiosity, (c) virtue development, and (d) interpersonal functioning. Human grace has not been extensively explored and divine grace has been studied mostly among Christians; future studies should address these limitations and explore causal relationships.

KEYWORDS

Positive psychology; grace; virtues; religion/spirituality; well-being; intervention

As the field of positive psychology has continued to flourish since the turn of the 21st century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the psychology of virtue has expanded exponentially. For example, virtues such as forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 2019), gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2004), and humility (Worthington et al., 2017) have developed strong empirical foundations, illustrating the important role of virtue in well-being, positive interpersonal relationships, and human flourishing. Although the study of many virtues has gained traction, the psychological study of grace has been largely unexplored (Bassett et al., 2020; Bufford et al., 2017; Emmons et al., 2017).

Recently, some scholars have suggested this is an oversight worthy of correction (Emmons et al., 2017; McMinn, 2017). Although grace does not appear in classic lists of virtues (McMinn, 2017), recent scholarly attention has (a) defined and distinguished grace from other psychological constructs associated with positive psychology (e.g., altruism, justice, mercy; Emmons et al., 2017) and (b) provided a foundation for the measurement of grace within the context of other virtues (e.g., forgiveness, self-compassion; Bufford et al., 2017). Additionally, theoretical conceptions of grace suggest that grace is foundational to spirituality and a prerequisite for human flourishing (Emmons et al., 2017). However, just as other virtues were once considered

to be simply ‘religious’ concepts – including forgiveness, humility, and patience, among others – such psychological constructs have proven to be deserving of empirical investigation and have garnered significant research programs based on scientific inquiry irrespective of spirituality or faith tradition (e.g., forgiveness: see Worthington & Wade, 2019; humility: see Worthington et al., 2017; patience: see Schnitker, 2012). We see a similar trajectory for the psychological construct of grace and suspect it plays a central role in the development and expression of virtue. Indeed, many of the most successful literatures (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness, etc.) within positive psychology cannot be properly understood unless we consider the historical, cultural, and religious contexts in which the notion of grace underpinned other ideas of how to become more virtuous (Graves, 2017). Thus, a fuller understanding of the nature and expression of virtue should include a thorough scientific investigation into the psychological experience of the construct of grace.

Grace is closely related to gratitude. Whereas research on gratitude has burgeoned, there is a relative dearth of psychological research on grace, perhaps because of difficulties in measuring and distinguishing grace from related constructs. As such, the term *grace* is used in a variety of ways. For example, people often ask for grace from an employer or supervisor in reviewing their work, billing

agencies may offer a 'grace-period' in which a penalty for a late payment is not enforced, and one might declare the movement of a swan as being graceful. The widespread use of grace is similarly observed in current psychological literature. Grace has been described and measured as (a) ease of movement (Dolores Merino et al., 2019), (b) positive social standing within an organization (Stamkou et al., 2020), (c) general spirituality (Gunton, 2012), and (d) used interchangeably with other virtues (e.g., forgiveness likelihood; Poling, 2017). The widespread use of the term grace may make it difficult to measure grace apart from other virtues or aspects of religion/spirituality.

Emmons et al. (2017) recently provided a definition of grace to distinguish grace from other virtues (e.g., altruism, forgiveness) based on psychological and theological traditions: '... the gift of acceptance given unconditionally and voluntarily to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver' (p. 277). As such, grace is experienced within a social/relational context in which the unobligated giver of grace intentionally violates social obligation to provide a benefit to another person who is undeserving of the gift (Emmons et al., 2017). It is this emphasis on social obligatory situations that most fully distinguishes grace from other related constructs (e.g., altruism, kindness). Additionally, the concept of grace is focused on the aspect of providing a gift to another person, and this gift may or may not be of significant cost to the giver. In distinguishing grace from other perceived gifts that one person may offer to another, Emmons et al. (2017) suggest that (a) forgiveness is distinct from grace because forgiveness requires that an offense must have taken place, (b) altruism is distinct from grace as altruism requires some level of sacrifice, and (c) mercy is distinct from grace as mercy is related to removing a consequence. In each of these cases, there is some condition or requirement in which the gift is offered to the recipient, whereas grace involves the giver laying aside social obligation and the undeservedness of the recipient to offer the gift from their own volition.

This advancement in the conceptualization of grace appears to be different from earlier theories of grace. For example, Sells et al. (2009) suggested that grace, within the context of marriage, is 'any act of kindness, mercy, or goodness that has neither the obligation nor the expectation of reciprocal compensation' (p. 208). Whereas the concept of social obligation appears here, as it does in other places that characterize grace as *unmerited* (e.g., Bufford et al., 2015, 2017; Emmons et al., 2017), there is less emphasis on what the gift actually is. Emmons et al. (2017) indicated that the gift of grace is unconditional acceptance, which may involve kindness, mercy, or goodness, but it is possible that acceptance may be shown

apart from these constructs, particularly in human relationships. Thus, narrowing in on human expressions of grace may result in less clarity as to what constitutes grace and what constitutes other similar virtues or gifts. If the qualification of grace is that unconditional acceptance must occur, then several important questions are raised. Is another person truly able to offer unconditional acceptance to someone else, or even themselves? If so, can it ever be determined that the giver of grace is not under some socially-facilitated obligation to offer grace? Does it matter whether unconditional acceptance was actually extended to the recipient of grace as long as the receiver perceives that they were unconditionally accepted? These are a few of the questions that could be explored to theoretically distinguish grace from other related constructs.

Nonetheless, many individuals claim that they personally experience grace frequently within interpersonal relationships and within their relationship to the divine. In experiences of divine grace, a divine power is attributed with providing a gift to individuals (e.g., life, eternal salvation), representing a unique experience of grace prevalent in many faith traditions (Tennent, 2007). Given this definition, both divine and human grace are fundamentally relational.

Empirical explorations into the experience of and beliefs about grace have largely focused on two areas. First, and likely due to the strong religious/spiritual associations with the term grace, prior research has attempted to measure both the experience of divine grace and belief in divine grace in divine/human relationships. For example, previous efforts to measure grace reveal that experiencing divine grace is associated with other well-studied virtues in positive psychology (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness, humility) and well-being (Bufford et al., 2017).

Second, empirical research on grace has focused on experiences of grace within human relationships. Initial exploration into experiences of human grace focused on providing empirical evidence for the Relational Conflict and Restoration Model (RCRM), a model for understanding relational patterns and processes between romantic partners (Sells et al., 2009). Briefly, the RCRM integrates systemic theory, emotion-focused marital therapy, and contextual theory. Specifically, RCRM borrows heavily from the I-Thou concept of contextual therapy, suggesting that healthy relationships are characterized by a sense of relational justice (Boszormenyi-Nagi, 1987). When someone disturbs the relational justice within a relationship, the offended person experiences pain because the offense disrupts their internal working model of self or other (Sells et al., 2009). That person may react defensively, which causes damage to the

relationship. Or the person may effectively manage the pain, which protects and restores the relationship. In RCRM, a person practices grace, justice, empathy, trust, and forgiveness/reconciliation in order to disrupt the typical cycle of conflict, with grace serving as a precursor to the experiences of empathy, justice, and forgiveness/reconciliation. If indeed the experience of grace is a predictor of empathy, justice, and forgiveness/reconciliation, grace warrants further empirical exploration.

Whereas there is some overlap in measuring experiences of divine grace and human grace, theoretical conceptualizations of divine grace and human grace appear to be distinct. Conceptualizations of human grace within the study of divine grace often emphasize that human grace is an extension of grace received from the divine, otherwise known as *enacted grace* (Blackburn et al., 2012; Sisemore, 2016). This is not explicitly the case in conceptualizations of human grace as illustrated in the RCRM. Within the RCRM, human grace is often paired with relational justice where both partners of a human relational dyad extend grace toward one another and share reciprocating obligations (Sells et al., 2009). Nonetheless, exploring how both divine and human grace impact a person's life, and disentangling experiences of divine grace and human grace, may be critical in better understanding well-being and human flourishing.

Purpose of current review

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on grace. After providing a summary of the relevant research conducted on grace, we discuss limitations of the field and offer suggestions for directions of future research. By consolidating the extant research on grace, we hope to set a course for further empirical explorations on experiences of grace and encourage the utility of considering experiences of grace in applied settings.

Method

Inclusion criteria

This literature review included empirical studies that focused on divine and human grace, and was intentionally broad in scope with the aim of gathering and summarizing the extant empirical research focused on experiences of and beliefs about grace (Tjeltveit, 2004). Theoretical articles, case studies, qualitative textual analyses, and sermon series aimed to develop an understanding of grace among religious/spiritual adherents were omitted. Both published and non-published studies

(e.g., dissertations, theses, unpublished manuscripts, presentations) were included. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included. To be included in the review, qualitative studies were required to have an explicit focus on describing experiences of, or beliefs about, grace as part of the research question. Thus, studies that did not define or attempt to describe the experience of, or belief about, grace as a gift provided by the divine, the individual, or another person were not included in the literature review.

Literature search

The literature review was first conducted by searching the following computer databases for articles published through August 17th, 2020: PsycInfo, PsycArticles, PsycTests, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. The search included the key term 'grace' for all databases. Because of the large number of hits on these databases, filters were used to narrow the results. For example, we required that the key term 'grace' appear in the title or the abstract for both searches. When searching ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, the following additional subject filters were utilized to narrow the results: 'psychotherapy,' 'psychology,' 'social psychology,' 'clinical psychology,' 'developmental psychology,' or 'pastoral counseling.'

Second, we searched the reference list of the articles that met the inclusion criteria to determine if there were additional studies that met inclusion criteria for the current literature review. These two steps resulted in the identification of 19 published articles, 23 theses and dissertations, and 10 references for unpublished manuscripts or conference presentations. Five of the identified theses and dissertations used samples and methods that were utilized in four published articles; the studies that used overlapping samples were only counted once.

Third, corresponding authors from the relevant studies were contacted via email for additional/unpublished studies and datasets. Seven of the ten previously identified unpublished studies were obtained and six additional studies were provided that did not include participants used in previous samples reported in the initial literature search. Citations for primary sources that provided data from unique samples are included in the supplemental online appendix. Overall, a total of 61 independent studies were included in the literature review. Citations for studies that provided greater explanation of results or provided enhanced clarity to the primary sources are also identified in the supplemental online appendix as secondary sources.

Results

We have organized the results in two sections. First, we review the methodology of the studies included in the literature review. Second, we review the results of the studies included in the literature review.

Overview of methodology for empirical studies on grace

Research design

Of the 61 reviewed empirical studies, 50 were quantitative and 11 were qualitative. The studies largely used cross-sectional designs ($n = 48$) (e.g., surveys, interviews), with fewer studies employing experimental designs ($n = 12$) (i.e., intervention, grace priming) and one study utilizing a cohort design ($n = 1$). Six experimental studies examined the effect of making grace salient to the participant on a variety of related variables (e.g., forgiveness, shame statements). One study examined the effect of attending an 8-hour workshop on Chinese church leaders' feelings of self-efficacy and hope in teaching the virtue of grace to marital partners, whereas another study compared the efficacy of a religious/spiritual mental health therapy group to a non-religious/spiritual mental health group. Two studies examined the effects of a marital intervention emphasizing the role of human grace, whereas two crossover intervention studies employed a grace intervention in Christian church congregations. The cohort study examined the relationship between grace and cultural humility of graduate students in clinical psychology during the course of an academic year.

Participants

Sample size was reported in all 61 studies. One study (Bufford et al., 2017: Study, p. 2) utilized a sample comprised of (a) participants from a different study included in this review (Bufford et al., 2015) and (b) an additional set of participants. Thus, the demographic information for participants included in all primary sources is based on 60 studies, rather than the full 61 studies to avoid double-counting participants utilized in Bufford et al. (2015).

The total number of participants in the 60 studies was 9,452. Participants were largely obtained from convenience samples (e.g., undergraduate/graduate students [$n = 4,560$], marital church members [$n = 493$], therapy intervention groups [$n = 86$], community members [$n = 4,056$], not specified [$n = 257$]). All 60 studies reported participants gender, with just over half of the participants identifying as female (57.4%; 42.1% male, 0.6% did not report). Forty-two of the sixty studies

(70.0%; $n = 6,346$) reported participants' mean age, which averaged 25.99 years.

Thirty-six of the sixty studies (60.0%; $n = 6,711$) reported demographic information regarding race/ethnicity or nationality. Using data reported in the 36 studies that indicated participants race/ethnicity, participants were primarily White/Caucasian (73.1%; 7.4% Black/African American; 5.8% Asian/Asian American, 3.7% Latinx/Hispanic, 2.9% Lebanese, 0.3% American Indian, 0.2% Arab American, < 0.1% Pacific Islander, 3.1% Multiracial/Other, 3.1% missing/not reported).

Forty-one of the sixty studies (68.3%, $n = 7,344$) reported participant religious affiliation. The majority of participants identified as Christian (93.2%; 0.5% Islam, 0.1% Buddhist, < 0.01% Christian/Buddhist, < 0.01% Jewish, < 0.01% Unity, < 0.01% Hindu, < 0.01% Eclectic, 0.6% Spiritual, 0.6% Atheist/None, 0.02% Agnostic, 3.3% Unsure/Other, 1.7% did not report). Additionally, 12 studies that did not report religious affiliation obtained their samples at Christian-affiliated institutions, so it can be assumed that these studies primarily included Christian participants as well ($n = 1,264$).

Measures

The quantitative studies examined in this literature review utilized 11 different self-report measures of grace. These eleven measures were developed to capture different aspects of grace (e.g., divine grace, human grace).

Measures of divine grace. Nine measures were designed to specifically measure experiences of and beliefs about divine grace. Three of the ten measures were only used in one of the reviewed studies to specifically measure beliefs and experiences of divine grace. The first study used two items from the MMPI-A to measure divine grace (Arnett, 2017). The second study converted qualitative responses on questions exploring Seventh-Day Adventists understanding of the interplay between grace and works to receiving grace for salvation (Regal, 2005). The third study developed a scale to examine religious/spiritual beliefs regarding grace versus works on a bipolar Likert scale, with grace and works being on opposite anchor points of the scale (Duggar, 1994). The other seven measures were used in several studies and will be discussed in further detail.

The earliest studies on grace ($n = 10$) utilized the grace subscale of the Sin/Grace scale (Watson et al., 1985, 1987). The grace subscale consisted of four positively worded items (e.g., 'Grace entered my life when I was forgiven of my sins') with responses recorded on

a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Second, six studies employed the Richmond Grace Scale (RGS; Sisemore et al., 2006, 2011; Watson et al., 2011) which aimed to measure grace-related beliefs associated with the divine. Importantly, the RGS is also reported to measure *enacted grace*, which suggests that fully realized grace believed to have been received from the divine is demonstrated by an individual through living a life in which grace is offered to self and others (Blackburn et al., 2012; Sisemore, 2016). The RGS initially started with the four items included in the grace subscale of the Sin/Grace scale and the RGS is reported to be a continuation of this scale (see Bufford et al., 2015 for a review). The RGS includes 27 items that uses an agree-disagree Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An example item that illustrates how the RGS measures grace-related beliefs and how these beliefs may influence one's engagement with others is, 'My acceptance of God's grace has allowed me to love others more effectively.' Watson et al. (2011) identified four subscales in the RGS, although alphas for each subscale were not reported: (1) graceful forgiveness orientation, (2) grace and responsibility, (3) graceful avoidance of personal legalism, and (4) graceful avoidance of interpersonal legalism. One of the six studies that employ the RGS (Allen et al., 2015) solely used the graceful avoidance of personal legalism to measure legalism.

Third, six studies utilized The Amazing Grace scale (TAGS; Bassett et al., 2012; Bassett and the Roberts Wesleyan Research Group, 2013; $\alpha = .97$), which measures one's orientation toward grace in their life. Three studies had participants record their responses on the TAGS using a 6-point, agree-disagree Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), whereas the other three studies adapted the TAGS to a 7-point Likert scale. The TAGS has two subscales: (1) grace awareness (e.g., 'Because of God, I feel like I have a greater sense of power and energy in my life'; $\alpha = .91$) and (2) grace identified (e.g., 'Although I may sin, God can still use a failure like me' $\alpha = .86$).

Fourth, six studies utilized the Grace scale (GS; Payton et al., 2000; Spradlin, 2002, $\alpha = .72-.83$) to measure personal experiences of (a) receiving grace from the divine, (b) receiving grace from others, and (c) extending grace to others. Initial development of the GS utilized 20 items to measure grace; however, 20 additional items were included in later uses of the scale to improve internal reliability (Bufford et al., 2015; Spradlin et al., 2015). In total, the GS is comprised of 40 items using a 7-point, agree-disagree Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An example

item of this scale is, 'At some point in my life a person outside my immediate family responded with unexpected grace to a significant failure or misdeed of mine.'

Fifth, nine studies employed the Dimensions of Grace Scale (DGS; Bufford et al., 2017) to measure both divine and human grace. The DGS is the most recent measure of grace developed with the attempt of making a stronger scale based on items used from grace scales previously created. The developers of the GS, RGS, and TAGS collaborated to initially consider how a stronger scale could be made, as the three scales appeared to measure different aspects of grace (Bufford et al., 2015). This collaboration led to a set of studies in which items from all three scales were combined to identify dimensions of grace through factor analysis (Bufford et al., 2017). The final DGS scale includes 19 items from the GS, 14 items from the RGS, and three items from the TAGS. The DGS includes 36 items using a 7-point, agree-disagree Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Internal consistency for the total DGS has ranged from .71 to .98 (Bufford et al., 2018). The DGS also has five subscales: (1) Experiencing God's Grace, (2) Costly Grace (3) Grace to Self, (4) Grace from Others, and (5) Grace to Others with internal consistencies ranging from adequate to good (at least .70) or higher in the initial scale development study. Internal consistencies for the subscales of the DGS ranged from .58 – .81 in a recent crossover intervention study; however, the test-retest correlation for the control group in this study at Time 1 and Time 2 was .90.

Sixth, one study utilized a measure of grace orientation to measure how individuals understand salvation as a free gift from God, rather than viewing salvation as achieved through obedience to God's will and performing good works (Dudley, 1995). The grace orientation measure, which was developed for the study, was based on four items (e.g., 'There is nothing I can do to earn salvation') rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha for the grace orientation measure was .72.

Measures of human grace. Seven studies used the Global Relational Attitudes Conflict Exam (GRACE; Beckenbach et al., 2010) to measure experiences of grace in romantic relationships. Use of the GRACE scale varies across studies, as the number of items and item responses (i.e., yes/no response format, 4-point Likert scale) are inconsistent. Initially, the GRACE scale was developed as a 13-item self-report measure with a yes/no response format (Beckenbach et al., 2010). An example item is 'It is common for my spouse to do good things that I do not deserve'. The initial scale demonstrated problems with internal consistency ($\alpha = .48$).

However, a dissertation utilizing an exploratory factor analysis on a 10-item version of the GRACE scale demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$) and two factors within the GRACE scale, GRACE receiving ($\alpha = .84$) and GRACE taking ($\alpha = .70$) when utilizing a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*) (Cook, 2014). One other study used this 10-item Likert-type scale (Khalaf-Moughabghab, 2019), whereas three studies used a 12-item Likert-type scale (McCarthy, 2012; Mikkelsen, 2015; Morgante, 2013), and one study uses a 7-item Yes/No response format scale (Patrick et al., 2013).

Qualitative methodologies. Four of the eleven qualitative studies utilized a grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis with the purposes of (a) developing an obstacles to grace scale, (b) understanding what Christian religious leaders wish psychologists knew about the doctrines of sin and grace, or (c) exploring how Christian participants understand and experience divine grace. Six studies used various coding methods (e.g., transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology) with the purpose of describing individual experiences of divine and human grace. One study used a SIFT (i.e., sensing, intuition, feeling, thinking) approach to Biblical hermeneutics to explore individual personality differences, based on Jungian theory, on how Anglican church leaders read and interpreted two passages in the Bible on grace.

Summary of grace methods

Overall, the research designs and measurement of grace appear to lack rigorous methodologies found in more established fields of psychology, which may be related to difficulties in defining grace as a psychological construct (Emmons et al., 2017). As Emmons et al. (2017) noted, grace is often conceptualized and measured as a trait in psychological research, although the presence or experience of grace in an individual's life has not been measured over time. Additionally, when comparing three measures of divine grace, Bufford et al. (2015) found that the three scales appeared to measure different aspects of grace. In their factor analytic studies, Bufford et al. (2017) found five factors; all three scales had items that loaded on God's Grace and all the TAGS items loaded here; the RGS contributed all the items to the Costly Grace; the Grace to Self, Grace from Others, and Grace to Others subscales consisted mostly of GS items, though the RGS contributed one item to Grace to Self and three items to Grace to Others. It is also highly plausible that the GRACE scale (Beckenbach et al., 2010) and the grace orientation measure also measure unique aspects of grace. Nonetheless, recent collaboration

among grace researchers has resulted in the development of the DGS (Bufford et al., 2017), which provides a strong foundation for further quantitative explorations into the experience of grace.

To date, research on grace has largely utilized convenience samples rooted in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Future research is needed to explore and understand the experience of grace in other religious traditions, as well as in the experience of individuals who do not identify as religious/spiritual. Furthermore, there is ample opportunity for researchers to improve the measurement of grace, and to explore both the effects of experiencing divine and human grace and beliefs about divine grace.

Summary of empirical findings

The results of the empirical findings of this literature review are summarized in four main categories: (a) description of personal experiences and beliefs about grace, (b) measurement and correlates of divine grace, (c) measurement and correlates of human grace, and (d) examining grace as a focus or topic of intervention. Detailed information about the results of each study can be found in the supplemental online appendix.

Personal experiences and beliefs about grace

Eight qualitative studies explored individual experiences of grace. Five of the qualitative studies explored the experience of grace in relation to a specific event (e.g., following an experience of disgrace, recovery from addiction, childhood sexual abuse, eating disorder), one study explored general experiences of divine grace/assistance in making a positive change, and two studies used a standardized interview to explore how participants understand and experience divine grace. For example, Gowack (1996) described experiences of *feeling grace* in individuals who had voluntarily served someone in the dying process. Gowack indicated the experience of *feeling grace* is described as transpersonal, transcendent, and mystical, indicating that several participants described a sense of connection to both a higher power and other humans. Utilizing an existential-phenomenological approach, participants in Gowack's study reported grace as (1) feeling present in the moment, often with heightened awareness, (2) feeling oneness or connection, often without fear, (3) feeling blessed and/or loved, (4) feeling energized, (5) feeling guided, (6) feeling peace, and (7) feeling joy. All six studies emphasized experiencing grace in relationship to the divine and with others, as well as reporting some sort of condition or challenge that promoted the experience of grace.

Four qualitative studies and two quantitative studies reported Christian individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and interpretations of grace in a Christian context. The first qualitative study found that Christian leaders wished psychologists understood that (a) grace is a way to redeem/repair the problem of sin, (b) grace is fully revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and (c) grace is observed and is evident in all of creation through *common grace* (McMinn et al., 2006). The second qualitative study reported that Anglican church leaders approach and interpret Bible passages pertaining to grace differently based on psychological types of sensing, feeling, intuiting, and perceiving (Francis et al., 2018). Two additional studies – one with older adults and one with participants identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual – utilized the same interview questions to explore how different Christian experiences might be related to understanding and experiencing grace (Baker et al., 2020; Schollars et al., 2020).

Another qualitative study utilized a grounded theory approach to identify themes pertaining to obstacles of receiving grace (Johnson, 2019). Participants were students from two universities and local church members. Seven themes emerged from the data, which was provided in response to an online survey: (1) doubting grace is real, (2) feeling undeserving of grace, (3) thinking the giver of grace probably has a hidden motive or expectation, (4) feeling guilty for receiving grace, (5) wanting to be independent and not rely on others, (6) feeling a need to earn what one receives, and (7) not wanting to feel obligated to paying back.

Regarding the quantitative studies, Bassett et al. (2017) examined Christians' understanding of three types of grace based in Wesleyan theology: (a) prevenient grace, (b) justifying grace, and (c) sanctifying grace. Less spiritually mature participants perceived (a) more differences in the three types of grace, (b) prevenient grace as less repulsive, more concrete, and easier, and (c) sanctifying grace as more personal. Spiritually mature participants were more inclined to see prevenient grace as rational, and all participants perceived prevenient grace to be less deep and more passive. The second quantitative study found that grace orientation (i.e., belief that salvation is by grace and not works) in a nationally representative sample of Seventh-Day Adventist young adults was positively related to (a) commitment to the church, (b) religious commitment, and (c) agreement with Seventh-Day Adventists standards (Dudley, 1995).

Measurement and correlates of divine grace

Thirty-two studies measured divine grace and explored relationships between grace and related constructs (e.g., forgiveness, religiosity). Given that the study of divine grace has largely focused on scale development and

exploratory studies examining what grace may be related to, the results are best explained by broadly examining significant correlates of divine grace identified in the literature.

Mental health correlates. Twenty-two studies examined the relationship between grace and various constructs related to mental health. Across studies, grace was observed to be negatively related to depression ($n = 11$), shame ($n = 8$), guilt ($n = 2$), hopelessness ($n = 2$), irrational belief of dependency (i.e., believing that one needs help outside of oneself; $n = 2$), scrupulosity ($n = 2$), somatic symptoms ($n = 1$), perfectionism ($n = 1$), and general mental health concerns/distress ($n = 3$). Grace was observed to be positively associated with spiritual well-being ($n = 5$) adverse childhood events ($n = 2$), and the belief that negative emotions are okay (i.e., emotional responsibility; $n = 2$).

Additionally, five studies examined the relationship between grace and constructs related to intrapersonal functioning. Grace was found to be positively related to an internal state of awareness ($n = 3$), inner support ($n = 1$), and time competence ($n = 1$), whereas grace was negatively related to exploitiveness ($n = 1$), Machiavellianism ($n = 1$), believing personal values are based on current needs ($n = 1$), and individualism ($n = 1$).

Results pertaining to the relationship between grace and guilt were mixed, as two studies reported a negative relationship between grace and guilt and four studies reported a positive relationship between grace and both self-guilt and other-guilt. However, self-guilt and other-guilt were conceptualized as positive guilt in recognizing that one had committed a wrongdoing. Interestingly, four studies found a negative relationship between grace and anxiety, whereas two studies reported a positive relationship. High levels of guilt explained the relationship between grace and social anxiety in one study (Watson et al., 1988a: Study, p. 1), whereas the relationship between grace and social anxiety was not explained by guilt in the second study (Watson et al., 1988b: Study, p. 2).

Religious correlates. Twenty studies examined the relationship between grace and various constructs related to religion. Across studies, grace was observed to be positively related to intrinsic religiosity ($n = 14$), identifying as religious ($n = 5$) with four studies indicating that this was specific to identifying as Christian, positive religious coping ($n = 4$), importance of religion ($n = 1$), healthy beliefs about sin ($n = 2$), church attendance ($n = 1$), public religious observance ($n = 1$), private religious observance ($n = 1$), belief in the importance of Christian evangelism ($n = 1$), and pro-religious humanistic values ($n = 1$). Grace was observed to be negatively related to negative

religious coping ($n = 4$), feeling that one has a special relationship with God ($n = 1$), and antireligious humanistic values ($n = 1$). Reported relationships between grace and extrinsic religiosity were mixed, as grace was observed to be negatively related to extrinsic religiosity as conceptualized and measured by Allport and Ross (1967; $n =$, p. 4), but was positively related to the personal extrinsic religiosity ($n = 4$) and social extrinsic religiosity ($n = 1$) as conceptualized and measured by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989).

Interpersonal correlates. Five studies examined the relationship between grace and interpersonal functioning. Grace was positively related to empathic concern ($n = 3$), public self-consciousness ($n = 3$), and one's tendency to transpose oneself into the thoughts and feelings of fictitious characters ($n = 1$), whereas grace was negatively related to assertiveness ($n = 1$). Grace was positively associated with personal distress in tense interpersonal settings in one study, whereas this relationship was negative in a different study.

Virtue correlates. Nine studies examined the relationship between grace and other related virtues. Three studies reported a positive relationship between grace and forgiveness, with grace being related to dispositional forgiveness in three studies and situational forgiveness in one study. Additionally, a positive relationship between grace and gratitude was found in six studies, a positive relationship between grace and self-compassion was identified in one study, and a positive relationship between grace (specifically Grace to Others from the DGS) and cultural humility was identified in one study. In the study looking at cultural humility, it is interesting to note that the Experiencing God's Grace dimension of the DGS was negatively related to cultural experiences (Weeks, 2020).

Demographic correlates. Eight studies explored the relationship of grace with salient demographic factors. Three studies found that experiencing divine grace was positively related to age. One study found that the Grace to Self dimension of the DGS was higher in advanced students in a clinical psychology training program, whereas the Grace to Others dimension of the DGS was lower among advanced students (Weeks, 2020). Two studies reported that females experienced higher levels of divine grace on certain items, likely due to different conceptions of experiencing grace, whereas one study found that males in a clinical psychology training program reported higher levels of grace than females (Weeks, 2020). Another study found that (a) women who were physically or sexually abused reported greater

awareness of God's grace than women who were not abused and (b) Black/African American women reported higher awareness of grace than White/Caucasian women (Childress-Beatty, 2003).

Dimensions of grace. First, it should be noted that the five dimensions of the DGS, the most recent scale measuring divine and human grace, appear to measure different aspects of grace. This scale provides a more nuanced look at experiences of divine and human grace and four studies have examined relationships between the five dimensions of the grace scale. Notably, two studies examined the degree to which each grace dimension was predicted by the other four grace dimensions in regression models (Bufford et al., 2017). The pattern of relationships was mostly similar across studies and most relationships were positive. Bivariate correlations reported in these two studies suggest that the dimensions of grace are related but independent, with correlations observed between the dimensions of grace ranging from $-.07 - .50$ across the two studies. Although these studies indicate that the various dimensions of grace are somewhat distinct, the intercorrelations between the various subscales of the DGS and other variables are mostly consistent. Thus, when discussing relationships between the DGS and various correlates in the section below, we refer to grace as a singular construct.

Measurement and correlates of human grace

Five cross-sectional studies were conducted to provide empirical evidence for the Relational Conflict and Restoration Model (RCRM; Sells et al., 2009). All five studies examined the relationship between human grace with at least one other construct described in the RCRM (e.g., justice, empathy) and marital satisfaction. Grace was positively associated with trust and forgiveness in two of three studies that explored these relationships. The one study that did not find a significant relationship between grace and trust or forgiveness may have been the result of poor psychometric properties of the initial GRACE scale (Beckenbach, 2010). Grace was positively associated with marital satisfaction in four of the five studies assessing this relationship, and the one study that did not identify a positive relationship had reported issues with sample size and measurement (Beckenbach, 2010). One study also revealed that grace was the second strongest predictor of marital satisfaction when forgiveness, gratitude, trust, and humility were included in a multiple regression model (Khalaf-Moughabghab, 2019).

Three of the five studies explored relationships between grace, demographic variables, and constructs

theorized to be related to grace but not included in the RCRM (Cook, 2014; Khalaf-Moughabghab, 2019; McCarthy, 2012). Two studies found a positive relationship between the total grace score, grace taking, and grace receiving with gratitude. Utilizing a sample of Lebanese participants, Khalaf-Moughabghab (2019) also reported positive relationships between (a) total grace, grace taking, and grace receiving with appreciation, (b) total grace and grace receiving with family honor, integrity honor, and feminine honor, (c) total grace with relational humility, and (d) grace receiving with masculine honor. Cook (2014) reported significant negative relationships between total grace, grace receiving, and grace taking with hostile automatic thoughts (i.e., revenge) and vengeance. McCarthy (2012) reported negative relationships between grace and defense style in males and negative feelings toward relational injury. However, feelings of injury were not a significant predictor of grace when included in a regression model with male gender, defensive style and relationship satisfaction (each of which were significant positive predictors of grace).

Regarding demographic factors, one study indicated protestant Christians reported significantly higher levels of grace compared to Catholic and Muslim participants, but not orthodox Christians (Khalaf-Moughabghab, 2019), whereas another study found no difference in reported grace when comparing Christians to non-Christians (Cook, 2014). Of three studies that examined gender effects, two studies reported a positive relationship between identifying as male and grace, although one study was marginally significant ($p = .051$), whereas one study did not identify a relationship between gender and grace (Khalaf-Moughabghab, 2019). One study also reported higher levels of grace among individuals who had been in a committed relationship for over 10 years compared to participants who had not been in a committed relationship for 10 years (Cook, 2014).

Additionally, one study was unique in that path analysis was used to test the theory of the RCRM (Patrick et al., 2013). Patrick et al. (2013) explored the function of grace within the RCRM as promoting empathy and justice for the partner following pain from a relational hurt or offense, which in turn resulted in higher levels of forgiveness leading to greater marital satisfaction. In this model, grace was a significant positive predictor of empathy and justice, whereas the direct relationships of grace with trust, forgiveness, and marital satisfaction were not reported.

Grace as a focus or topic of intervention

Twelve studies used grace as an aspect of an intervention to measure positive outcomes that may be

attributed to grace. First, six studies by Bassett and colleagues have experimentally examined the effects of making a Christian notion of grace salient, utilizing samples that largely report they identify strongly as a Christian. To make grace salient, participants are asked to write and reflect upon God's grace and read a graphic account of what happened to the physical body of Jesus Christ leading to his crucifixion. Grace salient participants were compared to a control condition in each study. The six studies used varied outcome variables. When comparing the grace salient condition to a control condition, individuals in the grace salient condition have shown greater (a) self-serving bias, (b) report of positive and negative personal attributes, (c) impression management, (d) positive attitudes toward God, (e) humanization of offender (statistically significant) and self (marginally significant) after offending someone else when positively valenced secondary emotions were considered, (f) reparative action (three studies) and emotional forgiveness (three studies), and (g) guilt self-statements. Interestingly, one of the studies indicating a positive relationship between grace salience and emotional forgiveness was qualified by an interaction with a recalling benefits condition, in which the participant had to recall the benefits of being harmed or offended by the target offender. When grace salience interacted with the recalling-benefits condition in this study, both emotional and decisional forgiveness increased, but a main effect was not observed (Bassett et al., 2019b). Grace salience did not appear to have a direct effect on decisional forgiveness (three studies) or shame self-statements (one study).

Second, two studies explored whether experiences of grace and self-forgiveness could be increased as a result of a grace intervention in four Friends (Quaker) churches. In both studies, a 'grace emphasis' campaign was developed collaboratively by the researchers and church leadership. The grace campaigns consisted of (a) a sermon series on grace, (b) small group studies focused on grace, and (c) a provided list of personal grace practices that congregants could carry out. Utilizing cross-over intervention designs, one study found an increase in the experience of grace in both congregations after the respective interventions (Bufford et al., 2018: Study, p. 1). In the same study, participants who were not married reported higher scores on grace to others than married participants at times two and three. The second study did not find changes in total experiences of grace following the grace interventions (Bufford et al., 2018: Study, p. 2). However, both congregations reported increased grace to self and one congregation reported increased grace to others after the respective grace interventions. Additionally, both congregations in

this second study reported increased trait self-forgiveness, spiritual well-being, and daily spiritual experiences. This study incorporated two different measures of state self-forgiveness and only one of the measures showed improvement in state self-forgiveness across participants from both congregations at the final assessment. However, there was not an interaction regarding when the congregations implemented the grace intervention. Thus, this study revealed there does appear to be a relationship between grace and self-forgiveness. Increases in intrinsic religiosity were observed in both studies following the respective grace campaigns.

Third, two studies examined the use of marital interventions focusing, at least in part, on utilizing grace in the RCRM. Regarding the programming of the marital interventions, (a) one study used the Grace and Hope Model (GHM), a Biblically-based marital intervention utilizing a combination of the RCRM (Sells & Yarhouse, 2011) and Hope-Focused Couples Approach to marital therapy (HFCA; Worthington, 2005), (b) another study solely used the HFCA. The intervention study utilizing the GHM did not have adequate sample size to detect significant changes in the variables measured before and after the intervention (Mikkelsen, 2015), whereas the intervention study utilizing HFCA with additional grace-focused interventions reported (a) no significant relationship between religious commitment and grace at pre-test, (b) significant positive relationships between grace and marital satisfaction at pre-test, post-test, and two-month follow-up, and (c) a significant increase in perceived grace from pre-test to post-test that was maintained at follow-up.

Fourth, a single field study described the development of a virtue-based curriculum, informed by aspects of the GHM, attachment theory, and emotion-focused therapy, which aimed to increase the self-efficacy and hope of Chinese church leaders to teach virtues (e.g., forgiveness, humility, grace) to their congregation (Ripley et al., 2019). The curriculum developed in this study was published as a book and workbook. Participants reported greater self-efficacy and hope of teaching virtues (e.g., grace) to marital partners within the church following the intervention, although participants indicated a need for more assistance with applying relational virtues, such as grace, specifically in a marital context.

Fifth, one study compared the efficacy of a religious/spiritual mental health support group (Life Grace Group; LGG) to the National Institute of Mental Health Peer-to-Peer program (P2P). The description of LGG includes the statement, '... the emphasis is on learning how to filter difficulties through God's grace and implementing the many practical skills and tools presented during the

meetings' (Padilla & Stanford, 2011). Individuals who elected to attend an LGG group were generally more religious and expressed a desire to include a religious emphasis in treatment compared to individuals who elected to attend a P2P group. Participating in the LGG group appeared to be as effective as participating in the P2P group regarding the alleviation of depression and anxiety symptoms. Moreover, the LGG group reported a greater positive change in their assessment of personal recovery from mental illness and a reduction in negative religious coping compared to the P2P group.

Discussion

In this article, we conducted a systematic literature review on empirical studies that explored the virtue of grace. The studies in the literature review were primarily quantitative and assessed both experiences of divine and human grace and beliefs about grace. Several qualitative studies were also reviewed that described experiences of grace and personal interpretations of grace based on psychological types.

Previous reports on the psychological literature on grace have underestimated the number of studies on grace, although the majority of studies found in this literature review were unpublished (i.e., theses or dissertations). Although research on grace is still in its beginning stages, the fact that 61 unique studies were identified through this literature review indicates there is a solid empirical groundwork for the psychological study of grace. The extant research appears to be more exploratory as seen in the numerous scales that have been developed to measure experiences of grace and beliefs about grace ($n = 10$). This may be due to a lack of consensus regarding definition and measurement in the early years of studying grace, which is likely to improve in upcoming years with greater interest and advancement in describing and measuring grace (Bufford et al., 2017; Emmons et al., 2017).

Several key findings emerged from the literature review. First, all qualitative studies describing experiences of grace emphasized some aspect of grace being related to religious/spiritual experiences, regardless of whether the specific research question was focused on experiences of divine grace. This may suggest that experiencing grace is often experienced through a spiritual connection with the divine or another person. Additionally, it may also be possible that the word grace serves as a type of religious prime (see Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), as the term grace is often associated with religious/spiritual concepts (Emmons et al., 2017).

Second, the large majority of quantitative studies pertaining to the measurement of divine grace and human grace show a general pattern suggesting that experiencing or believing in grace is positively related to religiosity, positive mental-health outcomes, adaptive interpersonal functioning, spiritual well-being, and virtues such as forgiveness and humility. For example, a significant positive correlation between experiencing divine grace and intrinsic religiosity was reported in 14 studies. Whereas some relationships between grace and other constructs appear more reliable (e.g., grace and depression, grace and intrinsic religiosity), other relationships reported in the review only had minimal support (e.g., grace and cultural humility; Weeks, 2020).

Third, all twelve studies using grace as a topic of intervention yielded promising results, such as improvements in mental health, the development of virtues, and relationship satisfaction. All twelve interventions included some form of collaboration between religion/spirituality and psychology, whether it was through direct collaboration to develop a curriculum based on grace (Bufford et al., 2018) or developing groups that incorporate religious scripture and science with the attempt of alleviating mental health concerns. Caution is warranted when interpreting the above findings as most studies used cross-sectional designs, and the intervention studies had varying methodologies and protocols for incorporating grace as a part of the intervention.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations were found in this literature review. First, there were several limitations in the methods of the reviewed studies. Most of the studies employed cross-sectional designs; thus, causal conclusions should not be made. Additionally, the convenience samples that were utilized in the studies make it less likely for results to be generalized to different populations, and the strong presence of Christian participants suggests that results of the reviewed studies may not generalize to religious/spiritual individuals from other faith traditions. Although there were several intervention and experimental designs utilized in the literature, the emphasis of grace in these interventions were based within a Christian context, and the interventions may not work similarly for individuals from other faith traditions. To obtain a more robust understanding of grace, it is critical that researchers explore experiences of grace outside of the Christian religious tradition and use more advanced experimental methods.

Second, the reviewed studies utilized several different measures to assess individual's experiences of, and beliefs about, grace. These measures appeared to assess

different facets of grace (Bufford et al., 2015). For example, one study indicated that the relationship between awareness of grace, measured with the Sin/Grace scale (Watson et al., 1985) and intrinsic religiosity was very high ($r = .71$). The author suggested that awareness of grace may not be distinct from intrinsic religiosity (Childress-Beatty, 2003). However, the measurement of grace has improved in recent years due to collaborative efforts made by grace researchers (Bufford et al., 2017), and it is important that future research replicate the findings outlined in this review and continue to assess the validity and reliability of more recent measures of grace.

Third, as definitions and conceptualizations of a psychological understanding of grace continue to improve and become more solidified (Emmons et al., 2017), qualitative research efforts exploring experiences and beliefs about grace could help improve the measurement of grace. Both psychological researchers and participants often used grace interchangeably with a sense of spirituality or another related virtue (e.g., forgiveness). Thus, it is worthwhile to understand how individuals think about grace to distinguish whether experiences of grace are truly different from experiencing other virtues, such as forgiveness and compassion.

Fourth, most studies focused on experiences of divine grace. As the measurement of human grace continues to improve, future research could examine how experiences of divine grace differ from experiences of human grace. Whereas these two dimensions of grace are correlated (Bufford et al., 2017) and conceptualizations of human grace often include divine grace as a prerequisite of enacted grace (Blackburn et al., 2012; Sisemore, 2016), it is likely that the experience of human grace outside of a religious/spiritual context is quite different from divine grace. The perceived requirement of divine grace in human grace processes likely contributed to a significant focus on religious (i.e., Christian) participants; however, this has created an imbalance in the research, with the need for more work focusing on human grace. Toward that end, we encourage future research to disentangle these two constructs and more fully explore human grace. For example, the perfections of divine grace outlined by Emmons et al. (2017) may reduce feelings of obligation and reciprocity to repay the *gift* of grace to the divine, whereas human grace may emphasize a higher degree of maintaining relational justice where grace is offered by both parties equally (Sells et al., 2009).

Fifth, given the exploratory nature of the reviewed quantitative studies, there is a need for research to determine whether grace demonstrates incremental validity above and beyond other related measures in predicting

human flourishing and well-being (Emmons et al., 2017). The current empirical research has yet to demonstrate, or even attempt to explore, how the experience of divine or human grace may contribute to human flourishing or well-being over and above other related virtues (e.g., gratitude, forgiveness, humility). Additionally, the most recent, and widely accepted, definition of grace purported by Emmons et al. (2017) defines grace in terms of absolutes (e.g., unconditional acceptance). Therefore, we believe it is worthwhile to determine how experiences of extending and receiving grace may vary based on the perceived obligation of the recipient of grace (i.e., how much the recipient owes the giver) and how generous the gift is (i.e., degree of perceived acceptance offered by the giver) in both human relationships and with the divine. Exploring variable experiences in the giving and receiving of grace is likely to further demonstrate how the virtue of grace is distinct, and perhaps vital, to our understanding of human flourishing. Future research in this area would also help to disentangle experiences of human grace from divine grace.

Conclusion


Although research on the psychological understanding of experiences of, and beliefs about, grace have been forthcoming for over three decades, the field is still in its beginning stages. Thus, many questions regarding the implications and effects of grace on interpersonal relationships and human flourishing remain unanswered. The measurement of grace has advanced within the past decade, and the effects of grace interventions in religious/spiritual individuals appear promising. There are many areas in which the empirical study of grace can continue to improve, beginning with understanding how individuals experience grace apart from other virtues. Additionally, efforts to understand human grace apart from divine grace remain in their infancy; the development of the DGS and RCRM provide measures that could facilitate such study. Finally, current research on grace largely examines grace within a Christian context. Thus, there is ample opportunity to explore both experiences of and beliefs about grace within other religious/spiritual traditions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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