Don't I Owe You? the Discrepancy Between Expected and Experienced Gratitude

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This research examines discrepancies between expected and experienced gratitude. We propose that beneficiaries feel more gratitude to helpers before help is delivered (when the helpers are still instrumental) than after. In contrast, helpers feel they are owed more after they have finished their assistance than before. We document this discrepancy in real, ongoing interpersonal helping interactions among students working on academic tasks (study 1), “business partners” in an economic exchange game (study 2), and “coworkers” completing projects (study 3). We discuss implications of these results for reward programs, product and personnel evaluations, bonus distributions, and interpersonal conflict.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Philosophers, religious leaders, and parents scolding young children have long extolled the virtues of gratitude. Psychologists point to intrapersonal benefits of gratitude such as improved well-being (Emmons and McCullough 2003) and to interpersonal benefits such as prosocial action and reciprocation (McCullough et al. 2001), and savvy marketing campaigns use rewards or free gifts to induce gratitude, thus generating loyalty and reciprocation (Cialdini 2001).

In this research we ask, when, over the course of a helpful encounter, do beneficiaries feel the strongest gratitude toward their helpers and when do the helpers expect the most gratitude in return? Specifically, we explore whether gratitude increases or decreases after help is provided.

We assume a motivational perspective to address this question. Helpers provide assistance to people in the midst of goal pursuit, and in doing so initiate helping goals of their own. From this perspective, gratitude may serve a functional role: to keep people on track while pursuing goals and to help them disengage from completed goals. The specific dynamics likely depend on one’s role in the helping interaction.

We propose that receivers of help (beneficiaries) experience gratitude more strongly toward a person who is currently instrumental (i.e., when the beneficiaries have an active goal for which the other person is a viable means). This suggests that experienced gratitude will be higher before help is provided than after.

This dynamic of experienced gratitude would reflect a functional use of resources from the beneficiary’s perspective. Gratitude is an interpersonal cost because it comes with aversive feelings of indebtedness and dependence (Greenberg and Westcott 1983). Recipients are therefore motivated to invest in helpers only as long as they are instrumental to current goals. Our proposal that gratitude fluctuates with goal activation is based on decades of work demonstrating that active goals increase the accessibility and evaluation of goal-related constructs, relative to goal-irrelevant constructs (for reviews, Fishbach and Ferguson 2007; Kruglanski 1996).

In contrast, we propose that helpers will expect more gratitude after providing help than before. For helpers, gratitude is the benefit they receive from pursuing a helping goal. By conditioning expected gratitude on task completion, helpers motivate themselves to continue helping. This analysis thus makes opposite predictions about the effects of goal pursuit on experienced versus expected gratitude. Whereas experienced gratitude should be strongest before help is finished, expected gratitude should be strongest afterwards.

Experiment 1 examined students’ gratitude for academic help, using a 2(goal: active vs. completed) x 2(gratitude judgment: experienced vs. expected) mixed design. We approached undergraduates during the last week of the autumn academic term. They reflected on their experience working with a particular student in one of their current classes. We manipulated their perceived role in this instrumental relationship, casting them as beneficiaries by asking about help received, or as helpers by asking about help provided. Beneficiaries indicated experienced gratitude and helpers indicated expected gratitude. They repeated these evaluations at the beginning of the following academic term.

An ANOVA of gratitude ratings yielded the expected goal x judgment interaction. As expected, beneficiaries felt more gratitude in the autumn (for help in a class with a rapidly approaching exam) than in the winter (for help in a class finished last term). Although we predicted that helpers’ ratings of expected gratitude would be higher in the winter than in the fall, we found no difference. Nonetheless, the predicted mismatch between experienced and expected gratitude emerged.

Experiment 2 examined gratitude in an economic-exchange game that modeled a business partnership. The experiment used a 2(instrumental: yes vs. no) x 2(gratitude judgment: experienced vs. expected) between-participants design. We endowed one participant, the investor, with $1. He “invested” by sending it to the other player, the dictator, who “produced a return” of $5. The dictator then faced a profit-sharing decision. She could keep as much as she wanted and give the rest. Thus, the dictator was instrumental to the investor’s money-making goal. Both participants made gratitude judgments either immediately before the dictator’s decision (instrumental condition) or immediately after (but before the decision was revealed; non-instrumental condition).

An ANOVA yielded the expected instrumentality x judgment interaction. Although dictators expected to be appreciated more after their decision than before, investors actually appreciated them more before than after the decision. Consistent with the proposed motivational account, we thus found support for the prediction that people would appreciate another person less right after (rather than before) that person decided to share some money with them.

In experiment 3, pairs of participants worked on an administrative task. We used a 2(goal: active vs. completed) x 2(gratitude judgment: experienced vs. expected) mixed design. A captain (beneficiary) and an assistant (helper) worked toward a monetary performance bonus in a task requiring joint contributions. Captains and assistants first made gratitude judgments during a break in the team task (active goal condition) and then again a few minutes later, after the task (completed goal condition).

An ANOVA revealed the expected goal x judgment interaction. Captains said they owed their assistants more during the administrative task than after. Assistants felt they were owed more after they finished helping than before.

Across three experiments, we find mismatches in expected and experienced gratitude. Beneficiaries felt more gratitude before rather than after help was delivered, but helpers expected more gratitude after rather than before they delivered that help. We believe this is consistent with a motivational account of gratitude whereby beneficiaries invest in their helpers more strongly when they are instrumental to current goals and helpers use expected gratitude as motivation to complete the task.

Marketers should take these goal-based evaluations into account when analyzing consumer feedback on goods and services. Our results suggest, for example, that consumers’ purchasing intentions might be higher in response to an awaited-reward than to a delivered-reward. We believe these results also have important implications for potential conflict in social interactions. Without understanding the divergent role of motivation in “I owe you” versus “you owe me,” people may exhibit inopportune timing when asking for favors or counting on grateful goodwill.

REFERENCES


