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Review

Some things aren't better left unsaid: Interpersonal barriers to gratitude expression and prosocial engagement

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Abstract

Gratitude promotes well-being, but people may not express it even when they feel it. A core aspect of rational behavior is that people make decisions based on the expected value of their actions. While acting on expectations may be rational, the choices one makes may not be optimal if those expectations are misguided. Because people underestimate the benefit and overestimate the cost of expressing gratitude, miscalibrated predictions can create a misplaced barrier to gratitude expression. These mistaken beliefs about interpersonal interactions stem partly from a perspective-based asymmetry between actors and targets. The propensity to undervalue one's positive impact on others may reflect a broader tendency that undermines prosociality in daily life — to the detriment of one's own, and others', well-being.

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During a visit to the United States, the spiritual leader the Dalai Lama met with U.S. political leaders and shared a simple but elegant message: "Be kind whenever possible; it is always possible" [1]. Despite countless opportunities to be kind in daily life — and reap the well-being benefits that follow — much of everyday life is not spent engaging in this sort of prosocial behavior. Recent research on gratitude and other forms of prosocial engagement suggests that psychological barriers can stand in the way of behaviors such as giving thanks. Nevertheless, prosociality improves both one's own happiness and that of others. People, therefore, may not be other-oriented *enough*. Human beings would be wise to engage in prosocial acts more often.

Myriad benefits of gratitude

The feeling of gratitude is typically thought of as a prosocial emotion as it facilitates connections with others. Theorizing about the evolutionary roots of thankfulness suggests that feeling grateful can serve to promote social cohesion through reciprocal altruism: Feeling fortunate about one's circumstances, often as a result of some help someone else has provided to them, can motivate people to repay those who they appreciate or to pay forward benefits to others around them [2]. Sometimes people express gratitude in response to prosocial behavior that was extended to them. Other times, gratitude may be less targeted toward a particular benefactor [3]. Moreover, gratitude expression is a prosocial act itself. Although the feeling of gratitude is oftentimes a response to prosociality, the expression of it can also be a form of prosocial behavior. One gives thanks. Indeed, gratitude can prompt further prosocial acts as well, even toward anonymous third parties [3–6].

For the better part of two decades now, behavioral scientists have made a convincing evidence-based case for the fact that expressing appreciation improves well-being. Popular books, academic presentations, and articles such as this one often contain a laundry list of the various benefits that follow from the expression of one's grateful feelings. Early experiments found that gratitude expression leaves people happier, feeling more optimistic, and reporting better health outcomes [7]. Research by Seligman et al. suggests that the positive effects of expressing gratitude can be sustained for quite some time — even up to a month later [8]. And, as noted, more recent work finds that feeling grateful can cultivate subsequent prosocial acts, such as generously giving more to a partner in an economic exchange [3–6].

Even more broadly, the empirical record makes clear that social connection is an important determinant of human happiness and health, reflecting a fundamental need to belong [9–24]. Sociality is so integral to well-being that some scholars have suggested that positive social relations are a necessary condition for happiness

[25]. Positive interactions with others are an especially strong predictor of how we feel. If one wanted to be happier today, one of the surest paths to achieving that outcome would involve connecting with others, such as through the expression of gratitude to significant people in one's life. These kinds of prosocial actions can lead to happier lives, and yet, mistaken beliefs about the outcomes of such interactions can serve as a barrier to engaging in them more often in our day-to-day lives.

Underestimating the positive impact of expressing gratitude

Given the benefits of prosocial engagement, one might reasonably wonder why people do not always take advantage of opportunities to be kind to others, despite (to paraphrase the Dalai Lama's words) this often being possible. Recent scholarship has investigated one possibility by having participants write and send a gratitude letter to another person, someone important to them who had touched their life in some way [26]. This is a common research task that, on average, tends to leave participants feeling happier after they have expressed gratitude [27]. After completing this exercise, participants also made predictions about how their recipient would feel as a result of the letter. Recipients were then contacted to report how they actually felt. This method, involving following up with both expressers and recipients, allowed for a direct comparison between expressers' anticipated reactions to their letter and recipients' actual reactions.

Less work has focused on how recipients feel after receiving gratitude letters, but Kumar and Epley found that they typically feel very positive after gratitude has been expressed to them [26]. Perhaps it seems unsurprising that being thanked feels good, but this research also finds that these recipients' letter-writers would be quite surprised indeed to find out just how good their expression of gratitude made someone else feel. Specifically, those who sent a gratitude letter were asked to predict how surprised, happy, and awkward their recipients would feel as a result of their kind act. These predictors generally underestimated the positive impact of their prosocial engagement. When recipients' real responses were compared to expressers' expectations of their reactions, letter-senders significantly underestimated how surprised recipients would be about why they were grateful, overestimated how awkward recipients would feel, and underestimated how happy recipients would feel. That is, people are miscalibrated about the value of expressing gratitude to others. Although people believe that being on the receiving end of gratitude expression will be a relatively positive experience, it is usually even more positive than one expects. Expressers also believe that recipients will feel somewhat awkward, but this experience is not especially awkward for recipients; in fact, it is significantly less awkward than expressers anticipate. The benefits of showing appreciation are greater than people suspect, and the potential costs are lower.

Wise decisions are often guided by an accurate assessment of the expected value of a given action [28]. Choices come with some combination of costs and benefits. Mistaken expectations can lower the likelihood that people choose wisely. People's preferences can be guided by overestimates of the cost and underestimates of the potential benefit of social interactions. When people underestimate the positive impact of prosocial behavior on recipients, this can create a misplaced barrier to more prosociality in daily life. Such decision-making may not be optimal as miscalibrated beliefs can keep people from engaging in behavior that would maximize their own, and others', well-being.

Why people are miscalibrated

Of course, behavioral researchers are often particularly interested in the psychological mechanism underlying these mispredictions. These miscalibrated expectations can partly be explained by egocentric bias in social judgment, such that people rely to some extent on their own perspective when predicting the mental states of others [29–32]. People tend to underestimate the positive value of expressing gratitude in part because of a perspective-based asymmetry in evaluations of competence versus warmth between actors and targets [26,33–37]. For potential actors, concerns about competence can be an impediment to expressing gratitude. In other words, prospective letter-writers may be inordinately concerned with choosing words that are "just right" or composing an articulate letter. To be sure, such thoughts appear to be what come to mind first for expressers when deciding whether or not to write a gratitude letter [26]. These initial thoughts about "getting it right" can prevent one from doing it at all. As Voltaire suggested long ago, perfection can indeed be the enemy of good [38].

While expressers, as actors or agents, might tend to focus on matters of competence when considering their own interpersonal behavior, recipients likely care much more about issues such as warmth, sincerity, and positive intent. Established research suggests that actors are more likely to interpret their own interpersonal behavior in terms of competence, while observers are more likely to interpret those same actions in terms of the actor's warmth [33–37]. Although expressers could be overly focused on *how* they express gratitude, what may matter most to recipients is that gratitude is expressed at all. Kumar and Epley found that expressers underestimate both how competent they will be rated by recipients and how warm they will be rated, but miscalibration is significantly larger for competence than for warmth

[26]. Trepidation about one's ability to compose a well-written expression of gratitude could be an unwarranted barrier to expressing it more often. Such an asymmetry in attention paid to competence rather than warmth could create misguided expectations across a wide set of prosocial interactions.

Extensions, generalizability, and directions for further research

Such effects may generalize to various prosocial actions a person could engage in, suggesting that doing good not only feels good [39] but also leaves recipients feeling surprisingly good. Those who engage in prosocial behavior may believe they are engaging in acts that are relatively "small," or of little value to others, but this other-oriented engagement may often actually be considerably "bigger" for recipients than they predict. What might seem like not much at all can be more meaningful than one anticipates. Mistaken expectations may thus produce an unwarranted barrier to prosociality in people's everyday lives.

Contemporary demonstrations make clear that people commonly do not fully understand the magnitude of the impact their prosocial engagement has. For instance, people also undervalue the positive impact of giving compliments to others [40,41]. As in the case of gratitude expression, participants in such studies also seem to be unduly focused on what it is that is being given rather than the fact that one is giving in the first place. Relatedly, although spending money on others results in more happiness than spending on oneself, consumers predict they will be happier when engaging in personal spending than when engaging in prosocial spending [39]. In addition to systematically underestimating the positive impact of prosocial engagement on others, people also appear to underappreciate the positive impact of prosocial engagement on oneself. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal mispredictions can contribute to less prosociality than would be optimal for maximizing well-being.

Other recent examples of similar misunderstandings involve choices regarding how to connect with others. When people mistakenly anticipate an awkward interaction, they can sometimes make decisions to express warmth through less intimate communication media [42]. Miscalibrated beliefs also often prevent deeper self-disclosure, affecting what people choose to talk about in conversation [43,44]. Similar results may well be found for other prosocial actions, such as random acts of kindness [45]. Such effects are also reflected in the broader phenomenon of reluctance to engage in social behavior [11]. The mismanagement of one's interpersonal relationships as a result of the perspective-based differences that stem from egocentric bias appears to be quite common.

Although this tendency is widespread across a range of prosocial actions, one might wonder how to think about these findings when considering the same sort of prosocial act as a behavior is repeated over time. It is possible that people habituate to the positive consequences of prosocial engagement [46]. However, recent research examining frequent compliments suggests that although expressers *believe* recipients will adapt to multiple compliments, such adaptation does not always occur for these prosocial acts, in part because each prosocial act is somewhat unique [47]. Moreover, prosocial acts more generally are relatively resistant to hedonic adaptation [48].

When describing an effect as "general," one must also take into account cross-cultural considerations. The findings discussed here have largely recruited samples from the United States, and it is unknown whether these results would emerge when sampling from other cultures. For example, there may be cultural differences in whether gratitude is viewed more as appreciation or indebtedness. Notably, however, prosocial behavior seems to have positive consequences for people across the globe [49]. Culture may also have a greater influence on people's predictions than on actual reactions to prosocial actions in reality. Much like how personality is better related to one's expectations than to one's experiences [50,51], cultural differences may loom larger with respect to *beliefs* about prosocial engagement than when it comes to the positive benefits that follow. It is up to future work to answer such open questions and determine just how generalizable these effects are, but it is possible that miscalibrated expectations about the outcomes of social interactions can be a barrier to a great many prosocial behaviors.

Conclusions

The findings discussed above reflect a broad tendency to undervalue prosociality. That is, givers systematically underestimate the value of prosocial acts on others. Participants in scientific studies indicate that they wish they expressed gratitude more often [26], and the research discussed in this article provides an explanation for why they sometimes may not. Misguided predictions can lead individuals to hold back, making them less likely to engage in kind acts.

The year before the Dalai Lama uttered his famous words described at the beginning of this piece, American author and MacArthur Fellow George Saunders delivered a convocation speech at Syracuse University. In it, he said, "What I regret most in my life are *failures of kindness*" [52]. As the Dalai Lama eloquently articulates, opportunities are often right in front of individuals' noses — but, as the work described here suggests, we fail to take advantage of them in part because of the psychological tendency to underestimate the impact our

prosocial acts have on others. Saunders' concluding advice to the graduating class he was addressing was thus to "*err in the direction of kindness*" [52]. Indeed, scientific research makes clear that people would be wise to do so; both they, and the recipients of their other-oriented acts, would likely be happier as a result.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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