

THE INFLUENCE OF GESTURES OF APPRECIATION ON GRATITUDE AND HELPING: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY VARIABLE RECIPROCITY NORMS

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The current investigation explored cultural variability in perceived gratitude and the relational consequences associated with expressions of gratitude after receiving help. We examined responses to expressions of gratitude among two populations shown to rely on contrasting norms of reciprocity (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2014): European Americans, who tend to rely on exchange norms; and Indians, who tend to rely on communal norms ($N = 123$). We found that expressive gestures given in response to a benefit increased perceptions of gratitude and likelihood of helping a second time among European Americans, but not Indians. The results highlight the importance of these expressive gestures in motivating helping behavior within exchange-based (but not communal-based) systems of reciprocity. Results also illustrate cultural variability in the meaning and function of expressive gestures of appreciation.

Key words: Culture; Gratitude; Reciprocity; Exchange norms; Helping behavior.

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Reciprocity is a universal feature of social life, with norms of reciprocity playing an essential role in guiding the ways in which individuals give and receive benefits (Gouldner, 1960). Two types of qualitatively distinct norms of reciprocity have been differentiated in the literature: exchange norms and communal norms (Clark & Aragon, 2014). Exchange norms of reciprocity involve reciprocation within a short-term time frame and the keeping track of benefits given and received (Clark & Aragon, 2014). In contrast, communal norms of reciprocity are based on individuals being responsive to the other's needs, as and when they arise, and thus may not involve reciprocation within a short-term time frame (Clark & Aragon, 2014).

Communal norms are seen as having the potential to engender closeness and commitment in interpersonal relationships in ways that exchange norms do not (Mills & Clark, 1994). In the case of communal norms, the giving of benefits involves uncertainty and risk as individuals may help a person without knowing if or when they will receive help from this person in the future. The act of being responsive to the needs of the giver reduces this uncertainty and builds trust in the relationship. In contrast, theorists assume that exchange norms do not enhance trust and social solidarity (e.g., Algie, 2012; Clark & Mills, 2012). The expectations of short-term returns that are associated with exchange norms thus leave no opportunity for uncertainty reduction since such behavior is undertaken in compliance with rigid expectations of return rather than as an expression of the benefactor's good will and genuine feelings (Mills & Clark, 1994).

Recent theory and research, however, points to the existence of a form of exchange, termed reciprocal exchange (Molm, Schaefer, & Collett, 2007; Molm, Whitham, & Melamed, 2012) that is more flexible in nature than the form of exchange taken into account in work on communal norms (e.g., Clark & Mills, 1993, 2012) and thus has the potential to enhance trust and social solidarity (Molm et al., 2007). In the case of reciprocal exchange norms, no prior agreement (implicit or explicit) exists about the terms of any return and benefits given are not expected to be comparable to the benefits received. This then creates uncertainty and risk as the giver of benefits does not know when, how, or if any benefit given will be reciprocated. The act of reciprocation then eases this uncertainty, thereby creating trust and social solidarity. Additionally, as it is not expected that benefits returned be comparable to benefits received, the beneficiary is free to make personalized forms of reciprocation. Thus, in the case of reciprocal exchange, individuals may reciprocate in ways that symbolically communicate their appreciation (e.g., sending flowers, buying gifts, taking a friend out to dinner, doing something nice/special for the giver) thus expressing good will and genuine feelings.

Recent research has uncovered that European American adults, unlike Indian adults, display a greater tendency to rely on reciprocal exchange as compared with communal norms in everyday friend relationships (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2014). Whereas European Americans more frequently make spontaneous short-term gestures of appreciation (such as buying lunch, sending flowers, gifts, etc.) in response to receiving help from their friends and explain these gestures in terms of reciprocity (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2014), Indians more frequently respond to their friends' needs as and when they arise and do not associate expressive gestures of appreciation with reciprocity (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al., 2014).

While research has shown that expressive gestures function as a return for a past help when individuals rely on exchange norms (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al. 2014), it is unclear whether these gestures actually increase perceptions of gratitude, and if these expressive gestures may have positive relational consequences among individuals relying on norms other than reciprocal exchange norms, such as communal norms.

In general, expressions of gratitude have been shown to increase future prosocial behavior (Grant & Gino, 2010; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) and strengthen the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary (Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010). However, the degree to which such expressions effectively convey gratitude and subsequently strengthen relationship bonds likely varies depending on the extent to which they align with the social norms emphasized by both the benefactor and the beneficiary. It seems plausible, therefore, that expressive gestures will increase perceptions of gratitude and lead to positive relational consequences among individuals emphasizing reciprocal exchange norms, such as European Americans, who stress the importance of short-term reciprocations, but not among individuals relying on communal norms, such as Indians, who do not stress the importance of short-term reciprocations.

CURRENT INVESTIGATION

The current research explores the influence of expressive gestures of appreciation on perceptions of gratitude and relational outcomes across two cultural groups emphasizing different reciprocity norms: European Americans and Indians. Participants in both cultures responded to a brief vignette portraying an individual who receives help from his friend. We manipulated whether or not the recipient of help makes an expressive gesture of appreciation (i.e., treating the friend to dinner) after receiving this help.

Based on past research (Goyal & Miller, 2017; Miller et al 2014), we expected European Americans and Indians to differ in their reciprocity norms, and thus differ in the desirable timing of a return (short-term and non-need-based vs. long-term and need-based), and degree of unease if unable to provide a short-term return. Specifically, we hypothesized (H1a) that European Americans would rely on exchange norms and thus expect a short-term and non-need-based return, and that the inability to do so would create considerable unease. In contrast, we predicted (H1b) that Indians would rely on communal norms of reciprocity and thus there would be greater emphasis on responding to a long-term need with a more relaxed view of timing, and less unease if unable to make a return.

We also expected that expressive gestures of appreciation would enhance ratings of gratitude and lead to more positive relational consequences for European Americans, but not Indians, due to their differential emphasis on exchange and communal norms, respectively. Within systems of reciprocal exchange, expressive gestures signal to the benefactor that the beneficiary is willing to appropriately reciprocate. Thus, the expressive gestures not only increase gratitude but also relationship quality, as they serve as short-term reciprocations within systems of exchange. However, in a system of mutual need-based responsiveness (i.e., communal systems), such gestures do not influence perceptions of gratitude or relationship quality as social solidarity is built in via need-based responsiveness. Therefore, we hypothesized (H2) that European Americans (and not Indians) would rate the beneficiary as feeling more gratitude in the condition in which the beneficiary makes an expressive gesture than in the condition in which no expressive gesture was made. We also hypothesized (H3) that European Americans (and not Indians) would rate a higher likelihood of the benefactor helping the beneficiary again in the condition in which the beneficiary makes an expressive gesture as compared to the condition in which no expressive gesture was made. Finally, we hypothesized (H4) that the effect of expressive gestures on future helping would be explained by gratitude. However, we expected this mediation to be moderated by culture, with gratitude explaining the relationship between expressive gestures and future helping for European Americans, but not Indians.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in both countries were recruited online via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The European American sample was composed of 61 individuals (34 males, 27 females) born in the United States, with both parents born in the United States, and who all identified as European American. The overall Indian sample was composed of 62 people (36 males, 26 females), who were born in India, and whose parents were born in India. No cultural differences were observed in the average age of participants ($p = .084$; the USA = 35.08, $SD = 10.68$; India = 32.13, $SD = 7.97$). Materials were presented in English and all participants indicated that they were fluent in the language.

Procedure and Materials

Participants read a vignette describing a helping situation occurring between two friends. The vignette was presented in two parts. The first part (presented below) was read by all participants and described the nature of the helping behavior:

Alan and Bill are friends. One weekend, Alan has a plane ticket booked to travel to another city in order to attend a professional event. However, the flight is unexpectedly cancelled. Alan does not own a car, and so he asks Bill if he will drive him to the location of the event. Even though it will mean driving several hours overnight both ways, Bill agrees to help Alan.

After reading the first part of the vignette, participants answered a series of questions assessing their initial perceptions of the beneficiary's gratitude as well as their endorsement of either exchange or communal reciprocity norms. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions, which each provided a possible continuation of the story above.

In the expressive gesture condition, the story continued in the following manner:

The next day after Bill drives Alan, Alan decides to surprise Bill by taking him out to his favorite restaurant. The two have a great evening together.

In the no expressive gesture condition, the story continued in the following manner:

Alan verbally says "thanks" to Bill, but does not do or say anything special for him at the time.

Reciprocity norms. Prior to the experimental manipulation, we included questions assessing the endorsement of reciprocal exchange or communal reciprocity norms, which we modeled after those used by Miller et al. (2014), and Goyal and Miller (2017). In order to tap a general norm of reciprocity, we asked whether Alan would feel better if he does something in response to Bill's help (*Yes/No*). In order to tap endorsement of exchange versus communal exchange norms, participants who responded that Alan should do something in response were asked how Alan should respond. Responses were coded for the presence of references to exchange-based returns and communal responsiveness. Exchange-based returns included non-need-based returns such as references to gifts, gestures, or monetary compensation meant as a return for the help received, such as buying the benefactor dinner or giving him a small present. References to communal responsiveness were responses that mentioned helping the benefactor only when/if he encounters a future need. These categories were mutually exclusive. Responses were independently coded for reliability by a second coder, who was blind to the study hypotheses, and high inter-rater reliability was achieved ($k = .95$).

In order to further assess reciprocity norms, participants also responded to questions about the expected timing of a return. Participants thus reported whether they considered it appropriate to wait for three months, six months, or several years (*Yes/No*) to do something in response to Alan's help. Participants who reported that Alan should provide some type of return also rated how much unease he would feel if he was not able to provide the suggested return (from 1 = *no unease* to 4 = *considerable unease*).

Perceived gratitude. We measured gratitude at two points in the study. There was a baseline measure, which was obtained after the first part of the vignette and prior to the manipulation in order to get participants' initial perceptions of whether or not the help received elicited gratitude. We also assessed gratitude a second time following the experimental manipulation. In the case of both Time 1 and Time 2, we asked participants to rate how much gratitude, if any, they thought that Alan felt in response to Bill's assistance using a scale ranging from 0 = *no gratitude* to 6 = *extreme gratitude*. In order to assess the degree to which an expressive gesture increased or decreased gratitude relative to participants' initial assessments, we computed a difference score between Time 1 and Time 2 gratitude as the primary measure of gratitude.

Likelihood of future help. In order to assess the relational consequences of expressive gestures of gratitude, we asked participants' how likely it is that Bill would help Alan again (1 = *not at all likely* to 5 = *completely likely*).

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effect of gender on the dependent variables, so it was excluded from further analyses. Unless specified otherwise, we analyzed all continuous data using between-subjects ANOVA, and categorical data using Chi-square.

Reciprocity norms. The majority of participants (98.6%) in both cultures responded that Alan would feel better if he did something in return for the help that he received from Bill. However, participants' open-ended responses about how to respond differed cross-culturally in ways that reflected the predicted differences in reciprocity norms. In line with a more exchange-based norm of reciprocity (Hypothesis 1a), European American participants were more likely (91.7%) than Indian participants (30.5%) to make reference to exchange-based returns such as an expressive gesture, $\chi^2(1) = 46.92, p < .001$. Indian participants (54.2%), on the other hand, were more likely than European American participants (6.7%) to say that the beneficiary only needs to be responsive to the needs of the benefactor in the future, $\chi^2(1) = 31.90, p < .001$ (Hypothesis 1b).

Indian responses frequently emphasized not only responding to the friend's future needs, but also downplayed the reciprocal nature of this responsiveness. This can be seen in the following response given by an Indian participant: "Alan should help Bill when he needs help, actually not in return for the help Bill did. In friendship actually there is no return for help. Alan can help Bill in any case."

Responses given by European American participants, on the other hand, more frequently made reference to the importance of conveying gratitude through the use of expressive gestures, as illustrated in the following example: "I'd say to take him for a nice night out. Maybe go out to a casino and get dinner, some drinks and play some games on Alan. Just something different to express his gratitude."

With regard to the timing of reciprocation, Indians more frequently than European Americans reported that it was okay to delay giving a return for three months, $\chi^2(1) = 10.08, p < .01$; six months, $\chi^2(1) = 4.48, p < .05$; or even several years, $\chi^2(1) = 4.51, p < .05$. Additionally, European Americans felt significantly more unease than Indian participants if they were unable to respond to help, assuming there was no need present, $F(1, 119) = 7.43, p < .01, \eta^2 = .060$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics for nature, timing, and unease associated with return across countries

| Appropriate type of return (percentage of participants endorsing each category) | | | |
|---|---------------|-----|-------------|
| | United States | | India |
| Exchange-based | 91.7% | *** | 30.5% |
| Need-based | 6.7% | *** | 54.2% |
| Appropriate timing of return (percentage saying that it is okay to wait) | | | |
| | United States | | India |
| Three months | 50.0% | ** | 78.0% |
| Six months | 33.3% | * | 52.5% |
| Several years | 18.5% | * | 35.6% |
| Unease if unable to return help (mean with standard deviation in parentheses) | | | |
| | United States | | India |
| Degree of unease | 2.88 (0.88) | | 2.41 (1.02) |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Perceptions of gratitude. European American and Indian participants did not differ in their perceptions of Alan's gratitude in response to the initial helping behavior (i.e., prior to the experimental manipulation), $p = .41$. This suggested that the helping act was seen as eliciting gratitude to the same degree in both cultures. Due to this observed nonsignificant difference we calculated a gratitude difference score to assess whether gratitude increased or decreased in response to an expressive gesture. Higher scores indicate that gratitude increased after the protagonist made an expressive gesture.

A 2 (Culture) \times 2 (Condition) ANOVA on the gratitude difference score revealed significant overall effects of: culture, $F(1, 119) = 7.24, p < .01, \eta^2 = .057$; condition, $F(1, 119) = 27.93, p < .001, \eta^2 = .190$; as well as a significant interaction between culture and condition, $F(1, 119) = 9.59, p < .01, \eta^2 = .075$ (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). As predicted (Hypothesis 2), Bonferroni-adjusted simple effects revealed that European Americans attributed more gratitude to the protagonist in the expressive gesture condition as compared with the no expressive gesture condition, $F(1, 119) = 34.88, p < .001, d = 1.35$. Among Indians, however, perceived gratitude did not differ between conditions ($M_{diff} = 0.70, p = .12, d = 0.04$). Additionally, European Americans perceived less gratitude than Indians in the no expressive gesture condition, $F(1, 119) = 16.87, p < .001, d = 0.94$. However, no cultural difference occurred in the expressive gesture condition ($M_{diff} = 0.13, p = .78, d = 0.08$).

TABLE 2
Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) for gratitude difference and likelihood of future help

| | Gratitude (Time 2 – Time 1) | | Likelihood of future help | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Expressive gesture | No expressive gesture | Expressive gesture | No expressive gesture |
| United States | –0.59 (2.01) _a | –3.27 (1.21) _b | 4.31 (0.78) _a | 2.83 (1.27) _b |
| India | –0.72 (1.50) _a | –1.42 (1.97) _a | 4.48 (0.57) _a | 4.03 (0.88) _a |

Note. Differences in subscript letters indicate significant differences between the two means, $p < .001$.

Likelihood of future help. A 2 (Culture) \times 2 (Condition) ANOVA on the perceived likelihood that the benefactor would help the beneficiary again in the future, revealed significant effects of: culture, $F(1,119) = 17.68, p < .001, \eta^2 = .129$; condition, $F(1,119) = 35.20, p < .001, \eta^2 = .228$; as well as a significant Culture \times Condition interaction, $F(1,119) = 9.99, p = .002, \eta^2 = .077$ (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). In assessing condition differences, Bonferroni-adjusted simple effects revealed that European Americans rated the beneficiary as more likely to receive help again in the expressive gesture condition as compared with the no expressive gesture condition (Hypothesis 3), $F(1, 119) = 41.06, p < .001, d = 1.41$. We did not observe condition differences among Indians ($M_{diff} = 0.45, p = .052, d = 0.60$). In looking at cultural differences, we found that European Americans rated the benefactor as less likely to help again than did Indians in the no expressive gesture condition, $F(1, 119) = 27.33, p < .001, d = 1.10$, but not in the expressive gesture condition ($M_{diff} = 0.17, p = .46, d = 0.25$).

In order to test whether difference in gratitude (between Time 1 and Time 2) explained the relationship between expressive gestures and likelihood of helping, and whether this mediation was moderated by culture, we ran a mediation analysis using Preacher and Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (2004; Model 8). This model, which included condition (coded as no expressive gesture = 0, expressive gesture = 1) as the predictor, gratitude difference as the mediator, and culture (coded as United States = 0, India = 1)

as the moderator, explained a significant amount of variance in likelihood of future helping, $R^2 = .40$, $F(4,118) = 19.81$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1 for model). As expected (Hypothesis 4), this analysis (with 5,000 bootstrap samples) revealed a significant indirect effect, $b = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.68] for European Americans (see Table 3 for regression coefficients). When gratitude was present in the model as a mediator, the direct effect of condition on likelihood of future helping behavior remained significant, $b = 1.05$, 95% CI [0.56, 1.55], $p < .001$, indicating that gratitude partially mediated the relationship between condition and the likelihood of helping behavior among European Americans. The indirect effect, however, was not significant among Indian participants, $b = 0.11$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.31]. Additionally, the difference between the conditional indirect effects was also significant, $index = -3.19$, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.09], indicating that mediation was moderated by culture.

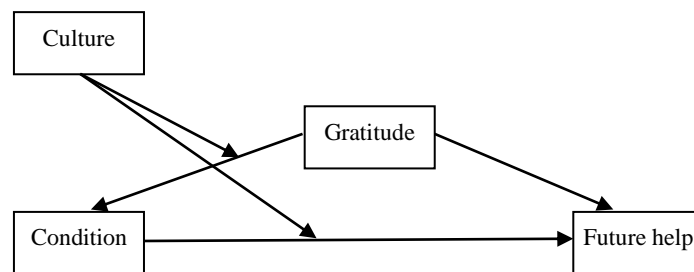


FIGURE 1

Mediation conceptual model: The indirect effect in mediation is moderated by culture.

TABLE 3
Mediation regression coefficients; culture as moderator

| | Coefficient (SE) | 95% CI |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Outcome: Gratitude | | |
| Condition | 2.68* (0.45) | [1.78, 3.58] |
| Culture | 1.85* (0.45) | [0.96, 2.74] |
| Interaction (Culture × Condition) | -1.98* (0.64) | [-3.25, -0.72] |
| Outcome: Likelihood of help | | |
| Condition | 1.05* (0.25) | [0.56, 1.55] |
| Gratitude | 0.16* (0.04) | [0.07, 0.25] |
| Culture | 0.90* (0.23) | [0.44, 1.37] |
| Interaction (Culture × Condition) | -0.71* (0.32) | [-1.35, -0.07] |
| Indirect effects (European Americans) | 0.43* (0.13) | [0.16, 0.68] |
| Indirect effects (Indians) | 0.11 (0.09) | [-0.04, 0.31] |

Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results provide support for the hypotheses regarding cultural variability in the influence of expressive gestures on perceived gratitude and helping behavior. This was seen in the tendencies of European American participants (but not Indian participants) to rate higher gratitude and higher likelihood of helping in the expressive gesture as compared with the no expressive gesture condition. Additionally, gratitude partially mediated the relationship between expressive gestures and future helping behavior for European Americans, but not Indians, indicating that this mediation was moderated by culture.

In line with past research, we also found that European American participants endorsed exchange norms and Indian participants endorsed communal reciprocity norms. This was seen in the tendency for European Americans to view a timely return for a help received to be appropriate means of reciprocation. Indians, on the other hand, emphasized need-based responsiveness, carried out within an open-ended time frame.

The results of the current study highlight the importance of expressive gestures within cultures emphasizing reciprocal exchange norms. These gestures seem to serve a dual function as a means through which beneficiaries can both express gratitude and reciprocate appropriately. Expressive gestures, and the sentiments of gratitude and appreciation that they convey, thus seem to be a key mechanism through which exchange norms motivate social support and helping behavior in close relationships. Such gestures, however, do not appear to serve the same function in cultural contexts operating under communal norms of reciprocity, such as India.

The current results also challenge claims about the exclusive relationship between gratitude and communal norms (and not exchange norms). While influential theoretical frameworks, such as the find-remind-and-bind theory of gratitude, have associated the emotion of gratitude with communal norms between relationship partners (Algoe, 2012), the current study suggests that expressions of gratitude, and the positive consequences associated with them, are highly compatible with norms of reciprocal exchange.

These findings present an important contribution to work on gratitude through demonstrating cultural variability in the appropriate means of its expression. We propose that expressions of gratitude are inextricably tied to local norms of reciprocity, and in order to effectively and appropriately convey appreciation one must align expressions with these norms. Such a demonstration of variability in gratitude expression not only theoretically broadens prior work on gratitude, which has been undertaken predominantly among Western populations, but also has implications for gratitude expressions in everyday relationships through highlighting the largely ignored role that social norms play in structuring the effective communication of gratitude. These findings have practical implications regarding how individuals living in multicultural societies can effectively navigate these contrasting norms and the meanings associated with them in ways that could potentially facilitate societal integration. The current findings may also be instructive in an international business context, as conflicting expectations regarding appropriate means of gratitude expression may lead to misunderstanding between parties.

While the current findings provide an important cultural perspective on the relationship between reciprocity and gratitude, some limitations exist. For instance, we presented the same vignette to participants in both countries. Though this was motivated by a desire to maximize comparability in the stimulus, there is the possibility that some aspects of the vignette, such as the names of the characters (i.e., Bill and Alan) were less familiar in the Indian setting and thus may have potential led to greater identification among the European American sample. In future research, presenting a stimulus that takes into greater consideration local norms in an Indian setting could serve to enrich this line of research.

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