

## Paying it Forward: A Review of the Influence of Gratitude on Prosocial Behavior

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### ABSTRACT

Gratitude is regarded as a prosocial emotion as it strengthens interpersonal connections. Touted as a moral virtue in philosophy for millennia, psychology has only made recent strides in unraveling its role in human nature. It is conceptualized as a state of recognition of an unearned benefit, bonding individuals through its appreciation. As such, it maintains the cycle of reciprocity that human cooperation is built upon, turning selfish receivers into selfless givers. Yet the full picture of gratitude and the nature of its prosocial functions remains scant in empirical literature. Future work is needed to gather evidence for the interplay of social and individual mechanisms that promote prosocial behavior in positive psychology, and explore correlates of gratitude and prosocial behavior.

**Keywords:** *Gratitude, Prosocial Behavior, Mental Health*

**G**ratitute is a feeling of thankfulness directed toward others that emerges through social exchanges between helpers and beneficiaries (Blau, 1964). It is distinguished from obligation, which is an uncomfortable state in which an individual feels indebted to return a favor (Goei et al., 2005). It has been linked to improved well-being, life satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, and reduced stress-related illnesses (Macfarlane, 2020). Several theories link gratitude to social life. The find-remind-and-bind theory, for example, posits that the positive emotion of gratitude serves the evolutionary function of strengthening a relationship with a partner (Algoe, 2012). Experiences and expressions of gratitude reinforce reciprocity among non-kin, which could benefit the individual over time and enhance the cohesiveness of groups (Stellar et al., 2017).

### Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behavior is positive interactions with others, including helping, sharing, cooperating, and comforting (Scourfield et al., 2004). It may be motivated by altruism, in which there is no expectation of reward, conformity to rules or norms, enhanced status or reputation, or personal principles such as fairness (Donald et al., 2018). Research suggests that there may be a constellation of traits, such as agreeableness and dispositional empathy, that interact with situational variables to result in a prosocial personality (Penner et al., 2005). Accommodation of personal desires to assist others promotes close relationships and

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stability, which is also associated with increased meaning in life (Van Tongeren et al., 2015).

### **Gratitude and Prosocial Behavior**

Evolutionary theories suggest that gratitude emerged to facilitate reciprocal altruism, an exchange of benefits among non-related individuals. Some propose that it promotes upstream reciprocity, in which a third party is offered an unearned benefit from a second party, who themselves were offered such a benefit from a first party. Such a distribution system has been called, “paying it forward” (McCullough et al., 2008). Novak and Roch (2007) hold that upstream reciprocity greatly enhances altruism in a population, and gratitude could evolve by natural selection using this mechanism.

The economic perspective of gratitude proposes that gratitude promotes and maintains a series of exchanges of prosocial actions, akin to an economy. In 1971, Trivers theorized that gratitude as a concept evolved to increase the likelihood of prosocial behaviors being reciprocated, resulting in reciprocal altruism. Research has identified a favor's intentionality and perceived value as important aspects of the experience of gratitude (Tsang & Martin, 2017). In an economic game, participants chose to cooperate rather than compete with former benefactors due to feelings of gratitude (Van Kleef & Lelieveld, 2021).

A series of four empirical studies sought to identify if the perception of beneficiaries and inferences regarding their mental states affected the attitudes of recipients and future interactions with the former. The authors concluded that recipients had more positive attitudes towards beneficiaries who decided to help them based on their positive affect compared to modes of cost-benefit and their roles (Ames et al., 2004).

An English study identified that those participants who exhibited higher levels of gratitude emerging from individual differences (trait gratitude) perceived offering help as more valuable, costly, and selfless than those whose gratitude was more situationally induced (state gratitude). Trait gratitude was suggested to be a prosocial trait, while state gratitude was predicted to promote reciprocity (Wood et al., 2008).

Researchers employed gratitude induction with psychology students to study the prosocial nature of gratitude. The participants were asked to allocate resources to a control group, with the controls first offering them resources either by random chance or as a deliberate favor. Participants receiving a favor experienced more gratitude and reciprocated more resources to their partners than participants who received a positive outcome by chance (Tsang, 2006). However, such behaviors are not necessarily altruistic or only benefited by egoistic motivation. Receiving praise from the partner or improving reputation were also incentives for prosocial behavior among grateful recipients, as observed in a study conducted by one of the authors to explore the same dynamic between the concepts (Tsang & Martin, 2017).

Several studies note the relationship between the two concepts across the lifespan.

A Japanese study examined the influence of developmental differences in the underlying motivation of prosocial behavior. The authors concluded that elementary children were more motivated by the concept of fairness whereas university students were more motivated by gratitude (Oguni & Otake, 2024).

A 2022 study explored the relationship between gratitude and prosocial behavior among adolescents. The results indicated that gratitude has a significant positive effect on

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prosocial behavior and the mediating role of the sense of meaning in the lives of adolescents (Zhang, 2022).

Vaish & Savell (2018) studied the development of gratitude towards prosociality in children. Five-year-old children watched two videos of benefactors offering gifts to two recipients. One benefactor displayed gratitude, whereas the other showed happiness, but not gratitude. The 5-year-olds preferred the grateful beneficiary and expected the benefactor to prefer them, and they distributed more resources to the grateful beneficiary. A review by one of the authors noted that by the ages of two and three, children begin to recognize having been the recipients of someone's goodwill, and are motivated to maintain such prosocial interaction (Vaish and Hepach, 2019).

Grant and Gino (2010) noted that communal mechanisms, which reinforced self-worth, encouraged participants in their experiments to engage in prosocial behavior more than agentic mechanisms, which reinforced their self-efficacy.

A study conducted on middle school students employed gratitude induction to observe if it would lead to positive outcomes for their well-being. During a field trip, the students were asked to record these responses to positive and negative behaviors and experiences around them, characterized by the authors as counting blessings or hassles. Students were then asked daily to indicate the degree to which they engaged in prosocial behavior and recorded their responses to aid. The results identified gratitude induction as being related to enhanced well-being and gratitude, but suggested that counting blessings may be unrelated to prosocial behavior in an early adolescent population (Froh et al., 2008).

A Thai study surveyed high school and undergraduate students to assess the role of gratitude and prosocial behavior. The results indicated that the perceived cost of the benefactor, the gain of the recipient, and the desirability of the favor offered all contributed to the prosocially motivated behavior of the students. It also noted the role of respect in perceived gratitude, as students were more appreciative towards parents and teachers, who held higher status than their friends (Wangwan, 2014).

Many studies have examined the role of gratitude in relationship-enhancing outcomes. Previous research has noted that gratitude and recognition derived from taking care of the well-being of others promote positive feelings about oneself and foster others' acceptance as well as support from others when one is in need (Caprara et al., 2012).

A randomized controlled study sought to test if social kindness and gratitude-based positive psychology activities, both self-focussed and relationship-focussed, enhanced social relationships with peers and their perceived satisfaction. The study concluded that those participants who completed relationship-focused activities, such as sending an email expressing gratitude to a colleague, significantly increased relationship satisfaction (O'Connell et al., 2015).

A 2012 study investigated how gratitude leads to relationship-building behaviors. The first experiment found evidence that gratitude fosters a desire to spend time with one's benefactor. A confederate assisted a participant in a coordination task, and the latter generally chose to spend them with the former even after task completion. The second study identified that grateful participants engaged in socially inclusive behaviors towards their benefactor, even when those actions come at a cost to themselves. Participants chose to

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forego their chances of a monetary reward in a task to deliberately offer more opportunities to the confederate (Bartlett et al., 2012).

A 2014 study examined feelings of gratitude and the importance of reciprocity in same-sex peer relations. The study concluded that levels of gratitude and expectations of reciprocity were higher towards friends than siblings, which aligned with the theory of kin altruism. Perceived closeness, however, was more strongly associated with emotional expressions of gratitude among siblings than friends (Rotkirch et al., 2014).

A study conducted in American college sororities examined the antecedents of gratitude and its implications for relationship formation. During an event of gift-giving, from older members to new sorority members, both recorded their responses collected after the week and the month following the event. Gratitude during the week predicted future relationship outcomes between the groups. Notably, the perceived thoughtfulness of the older members's gifts was a more consistent predictor of gratitude than effort. (Algoe et al., 2008).

A laboratory study tested the hypothesis that expressions of gratitude would facilitate affiliation with a hitherto unacquainted peer. In the first session, university student participants acted as mentors, sending writing samples for admission forms that would be commented upon by mentees, who were high school students. The mentees sent responses to the participants in the second session, some of them expressing gratitude whereas the control ones were neutral. The participants filled out a questionnaire assessing their perception of the warmth of the mentee. They were also offered the option of sending the mentee a welcome note and contact details if they were accepted into the university. The participants who received the note expressing gratitude rated the student as significantly higher in warmth than participants who received the control note, verifying the hypothesis. It was also notable that the mentees who did not leave their contact details all belonged to the control group (Williams et al., 2015).

A longitudinal study by Lambert and Fincham (2011) identified that expressing gratitude contributes to a positive perception of one's partner in a relationship, increasing comfort in expressing relationship concerns to them. This higher comfort was a significant component of relationship maintenance behaviors.

A Dutch study indicated that gratitude and indebtedness serve different functions in facilitating social exchange, with the former associated with seeking proximity with the benefactor, and the latter associated with the obligation to repay the benefactor. The authors proposed that while gratitude produces the outcome of building relationships, indebtedness serves to negate inequity, causing recipients to engage in reciprocity (Peng et al., 2017).

It has been speculated that gratitude influences prosocial behavior through a third variable. A Chinese college study examined the effect of gratitude among associations between various forms of empathy and prosocial behavior. The forms of empathy assessed included perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress. Gratitude was identified to play a mediating role between all four forms of empathy and prosocial behavior (Pang et al., 2022).

Previous research has identified a significant positive correlation between gratitude and some of the Big Five factors of personality, namely extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Of these, openness to experience and

conscientiousness are empirically associated with prosociality, while agreeableness is conceptually related. (Szcześniak et al., 2020)

## **CONCLUSION**

The present paper reviews the existing literature that examines the various processes through which gratitude influences prosocial behavior. Four broad outcomes were identified in this regard, namely, reciprocal altruism, lifespan development, relationship enhancement, and through mediating variables. The mechanisms underlying these outcomes are biological, psychological, as well as social. This implies that the two concepts under appraisal are seeded by both nature and nurture. The recognition of the benefits offered by sociability and the subsequent tendency to return the favor are the building blocks of human cooperation. Indeed, gratitude affects how individuals perceive each other's responsiveness in a relationship, and it also promotes the maintenance of such behaviors (Kubacka et al., 2011). Individual differences, namely empathy and personality traits, also contribute to the interplay between gratitude and prosocial behavior. More than mere quid pro quo, prosociality also induces positive emotions, setting into motion a positive feedback loop (Aknin et al., 2017). The implications of this interchange in human functioning and mental well-being are vast and are still being studied in contemporary research. Appreciating the complexity of these functions can allow individuals to make a conscious effort to brighten the lives of those around them.

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