

Thanks for Nothing: Expressing Gratitude Invites Exploitation by Competitors

Jeremy A. Yip, Ph.D.
Cindy Chan, Ph.D.

Kelly Kiyeon Lee, Ph.D.
Alison Wood Brooks, Ph.D.

Working Paper 18-081



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Jeremy A. Yip, Ph.D.
Georgetown University

Kelly Kiyeon Lee, Ph.D.
Georgetown University

Cindy Chan, Ph.D.
University of Toronto

Alison Wood Brooks, Ph.D.
Harvard Business School

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RUNNING HEAD: Gratitude Invites Exploitation

Thanks for Nothing:

Expressing Gratitude Invites Exploitation by Competitors

Jeremy A. Yip, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Management
McDonough School of Business
Georgetown University
Email: jeremy.yip@georgetown.edu

Kelly Kiyeon Lee, Ph.D.
Visiting Assistant Professor of Marketing
McDonough School of Business
Georgetown University
Email: kl874@georgetown.edu

Cindy Chan, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Marketing
Rotman School of Management
University of Toronto, Scarborough
Email: cindy.chan@rotman.utoronto.ca

Alison Wood Brooks, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Negotiations, Organizations, & Markets
Harvard Business School
Harvard University
Email: awbrooks@hbs.edu

Abstract

Previous research has revealed that expressing gratitude motivates prosocial behavior in cooperative relationships. However, expressing gratitude in competitive interactions may operate differently. Across five studies, we demonstrate that individuals interacting with grateful counterparts become more likely to engage in selfish behavior during competitive interactions. In Studies 1a and 1b, participants who interacted with counterparts expressing gratitude were more likely to make aggressive offers in distributive negotiations than those who interacted with counterparts expressing neutral emotion. In Study 2, we find that inferences of the tendency to forgive mediates the relationship between gratitude expression and selfish behavior. In Study 3, we contrast expressions of gratitude with another positive-valence emotion: excitement. We show that expressing gratitude promotes self-interested behavior compared to expressing excitement or neutral emotion. In Study 4, we find that gratitude expression triggers self-serving deception. Taken together, our findings suggest that expressing gratitude can be costly in competitive interactions: people infer that grateful counterparts are forgiving and, therefore, they are more likely to exploit their counterparts for selfish gain.

Keywords: gratitude; forgiveness; negotiations; ethics; emotion

Thanks for Nothing:

Expressing Gratitude Invites Exploitation by Competitors

Coined as the “negotiator’s dilemma”, individuals encounter a tension between collaborating with their counterparts to expand available resources and pursuing their self-interest to claim resources for themselves (Chou, Halevy, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2017; Finkel & Hall, 2018; Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015; Kennedy & Anderson, 2017; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014; Tsay, Shu, & Bazerman, 2011). Because this tension is often difficult to navigate, the experience and expression of emotions pervade negotiations and group interactions (Akinola, Page-Gould, Mehta, & Lu, 2016; Filipowicz, Barsade, & Melwani, 2011; Halevy, 2017; Van Kleef, 2009; Wang et al., 2011).

One emotion that is particularly relevant to social exchanges is gratitude (Algoe, Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, Williams, & Dickens, 2010). Gratitude is a positive emotion that people experience when they receive something of value from another person (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001), and that people express to signal their intent to reciprocate a favor (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Gratitude is essential for establishing and building social relationships, and negotiators are likely to display gratitude during the course of their negotiations, such as expressing gratitude when they receive a concession from a counterpart or expressing generalized gratitude about what they value in their career or lives.

Considerable research has focused on the benefits of gratitude (Ma, Tunney, & Ferguson, 2017). For example, gratitude has been linked with prosocial behavior (McCullough et al., 2001), social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010), trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), personal responsibility (Chow & Lowery, 2010), and high-quality relationships (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010).

Interestingly, the potential negative consequences of gratitude have received limited attention. This is a surprising omission because gratitude is often expressed in social interactions (Algoe, Kurtz, & Hilaire, 2016) and selfish preferences and behavior frequently occur in negotiations and competitive interactions (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Sah & Loewenstein, 2015; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010). In this investigation, we examine whether expressing gratitude promotes selfish, exploitive behavior in competitive domains.

Self-Interested Behavior in Negotiations

Negotiations are characterized as mixed-motive interactions in which individuals must decide when to focus on their self-interested outcomes and when to focus on joint outcomes with their counterparts (Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; Gino & Moore, 2008; O'Connor & Carnevale, 1997). Social norms of competition are salient in negotiations, and people are often more motivated to claim value for themselves (Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000; Thompson, Wang, & Gunia, 2010). In particular, when negotiating distributive issues, one party's outcome is negatively correlated with another party's outcome, and individuals can develop a stronger preference for self-interested outcomes (Allred, Mallozzi, Matsui, & Raia, 1997; Diekmann, Samuels, Ross, & Bazerman, 1997). However, negotiators must balance their concerns for personal gain with mutual benefit because exclusively pursuing their self-interest can lead to impasses (Schweinsberg, Ku, Wang, & Pillutla, 2012).

We focus our investigation on self-interested behavior. In Western culture, individuals often act in accordance with their own interests to pursue personal material gains or emotional benefits (Barasch, Levine, Berman, & Small, 2014; Dana et al., 2006; Newman & Cain, 2014; Tinsley, 2001; Zlatev & Miller, 2016). In competitive interactions such as social dilemmas and distributive negotiations, pursuing self-interest often comes at the expense of others' outcomes.

One common form of self-interested behavior is self-serving deception, which advantages the liar at the expense of the target (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014; Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010).

Previous work has revealed that people tend to overestimate the emotional benefits of desired rewards and become excessively focused on personal outcomes, which promotes selfish and unethical behavior (Noval, 2016).

Many interpersonal factors influence self-interested behavior, including trust (Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008), identity (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013), perspective-taking (Pierce, Kilduff, Galinsky, & Sivanathan, 2013), power (Pitesa & Thau, 2013), the presence of a second advisor (Sah & Loewenstein, 2015), and - most relevant to the current work - emotion (Gino & Pierce, 2009; Kouchaki & Desai, 2015).

The interpersonal effect of emotional expressions on bargaining behavior builds on the emotions-as-social-information (EASI) model (Van Kleef, 2009; Van Kleef, Homan, & Cheshin, 2012). According to the EASI model, emotional expressions act as a carrier of information about the expressers' traits (Knutson, 1996), motives (Van Kleef, 2009), and anticipated future behaviors (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Discrete emotions thus provide distinct information about the expresser and can trigger different behavioral responses by the perceiver (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004).

In negotiations, individuals make strategic inferences based on their counterparts' emotional expressions, and these inferences inform their negotiation behavior (Van Kleef, 2009). Indeed, a substantial body of literature has revealed that emotional expressions can influence the tendency to exploit and compete, or to comply and cooperate in negotiations (Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Van Kleef et al., 2004). Expressions of anger have received the most scholarly attention (Cañadas, Lupiáñez, Kawakami, Niedenthal, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2016; Van Kleef et

al., 2004), and prior work has established a link between expressions of anger and self-interested preferences in competitive situations (Adam & Brett, 2015; Geddes & Callister, 2007; Van Kleef et al., 2012). For example, negotiators are more likely to choose selfish alternatives such as punishment, deception, or retribution when interacting with an angry counterpart compared to interacting with a neutral counterpart (Adam & Brett, 2015; Van Kleef et al., 2010; Wang, Northcraft, & Van Kleef, 2012).

Expressions of extreme happiness (Barasch, Levine, & Schweitzer, 2016; Van Kleef et al., 2004) and guilt (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006) have also been found to evoke competitive behavior. In contrast, several studies have identified how expressions of sadness (Sinaceur, Kopelman, Vasiljevic, & Haag, 2015), disappointment (Van Kleef et al., 2006), and anxiety (Van Kleef et al., 2006), can facilitate compliance and cooperative behaviors. We add to this literature by investigating gratitude expressions. Little is known about the effects of *expressing* gratitude, an inherently interpersonal emotion, in competitive contexts such as distributive negotiations, economic exchanges, and social dilemmas.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a discrete positive emotion that is commonly expressed in social exchanges (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Emmons, 2013; Hu & Kaplan, 2015). It is typically triggered by and directed toward another person. In particular, gratitude is characterized by positive valence and other-person control (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). When individuals have benefitted from another party's actions by receiving favors, help, gifts, or kindness, they often express gratitude (Grant & Gino, 2010; McCullough et al., 2001).

Our conceptualization of gratitude is aligned with Fehr, Fulmer, Awtrey, and Miller (2016)'s theory that gratitude can be distinguished from other positive emotions, because

gratitude is triggered by another person's benevolence, arises from a direct benefit to the self, and promotes prosocial tendencies. Gratitude can operate as an emotional state or as an generalized emotional trait (Grant & Gino, 2010; Ma et al., 2017). That is, while gratitude can be elicited by specific events, some individuals exhibit a stable tendency to express gratitude reliably across social interactions.

Several studies have identified the positive consequences of gratitude in social interactions. For example, gratitude promotes relationship satisfaction (Algoe, 2012), prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), commitment to relationship partners (Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Lambert & Fincham, 2011), social worth (Grant & Gino, 2010), and cooperation (DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, & Williams, 2010). Collectively, existing work has demonstrated that gratitude facilitates collaboration and social bonding.

Prior research has focused on the relational benefits of gratitude in cooperative interactions and relationships. However, no research has directly investigated the effects of expressing gratitude between individuals in competitive interactions. This is an important omission because negotiations commonly entail social norms of competition, and expressions of gratitude may have important consequences for individuals with competing interests.

Expressions of Gratitude Trigger Selfish Behavior

We explore whether expressions of gratitude trigger self-interested behavior. In social exchanges, individuals pay attention to social signals that communicate their counterparts' motives to cooperate or compete (Adams, Zou, Inesi, & Pillutla, 2015; Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015). One important social signal is emotional expression (Ames & Johar, 2009; Barasch et al., 2016; Kopelman, Rosette, & Thompson, 2006). Negotiators not only pay attention to emotional expressions, but also assess the perceived appropriateness of the emotional expression in relation

to prevailing social norms (Adam, Shirako, & Maddux, 2010; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007; van Kleef, Wanders, Stamkou, & Homan, 2015). According to the EASI model, the perceived appropriateness of emotional expressions can exert a significant influence over behavior in negotiations (Van Kleef, 2009).

Building on previous research about emotion expectancy violations (Geddes & Callister, 2007), we postulate that expressions of gratitude might violate social norms and display rules that commonly govern competitive interactions, and this norm-violation may invite exploitation. Whereas expressing gratitude is appropriate in cooperative interactions and leads to positive outcomes, we predict that negotiators are likely to respond selfishly and opportunistically to gratitude expressed in competitive deal-making situations.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who interact with grateful counterparts are more likely to engage in selfish behavior, compared to those who interact with neutral counterparts.

Emotional expressions provide insight into the cognitive appraisals and motives that commonly accompany the emotional experience (Ames & Johar, 2009; Barasch et al., 2016). We extend the EASI model and identify a strategic inference that individuals frequently make about their opponents based on their expressions of gratitude. Prior research has found that in cooperative relationships, people make inferences about the communal strength of the relationship when they interact with a partner who expresses gratitude (Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010; Williams & Bartlett, 2015). Based on gratitude expressions, individuals infer that their partner is more caring about the welfare of others.

We advance scientific understanding of the inferences made about gratitude expressions by investigating whether individuals view grateful counterparts as particularly forgiving. Although existing work has shown that people who express gratitude are more likely to exhibit

prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, & Williams, 2010; Ma et al., 2017) and concern for others (Williams & Bartlett, 2015), we know little about how expressions of gratitude may act as a social signal of willingness to forgive in the future.

Forgiveness is defined as the prosocial willingness to cancel a debt or accept a transgression in order to restore a relationship (Adams & Inesi, 2016; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough, 2008). Building on existing research, we adopt an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness (Bies, Barclay, Tripp, & Aquino, 2016; McCullough et al., 1998; Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005). When people express forgiveness, they communicate a willingness to move past conflict, accept an imbalance in resources, and repair the relationship (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004). However, recent research has revealed that in the absence of wrongdoing, individuals can respond negatively to expressed forgiveness (Adams et al., 2015).

We postulate that negotiators are particularly likely to infer that their grateful counterparts have a tendency to forgive selfish behavior. That is, we establish a link between expressions of gratitude and inferences about the willingness to forgive. We expect that strategic inferences of forgiveness can explain the effect of gratitude expressions on self-interested behavior.

Hypothesis 2: Inferences of forgiveness mediate the relationship between gratitude expressions and selfish behavior.

We further extend our understanding about the link between expressions of gratitude and selfish behavior by contrasting the effects of gratitude with another positive-valence emotion, excitement. Although gratitude and excitement are both positive in valence, they are distinct from each other along appraisal dimensions (George & Dane, 2016; Wiltermuth & Tiedens,

2011). Excitement is characterized by appraisals of high anticipatory arousal and uncertainty (Brooks, 2014), and, unlike gratitude, excitement is not associated with an appraisal of other-person control. In contrast, gratitude is characterized by an assessment of a positive situation and perceiving another person to be responsible. Therefore, we expect that expressions of gratitude exert a unique influence on self-interested behavior that cannot be solely accounted for by positive valence.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals who interact with grateful counterparts are more likely to act in a self-interested manner, relative to those who interact with neutral counterparts or excited counterparts.

In addition to promoting self-interested economic behavior, we expect that gratitude expressions may invite the use of self-interested deception. The quintessential form of unethical behavior is self-serving deception. Self-serving deception is characterized by lies that advantage the liar at the expense of the target (Gaspar, Levine, & Schweitzer, 2015; Gunia, Wang, Huang, Wang, & Murnighan, 2012; Moore & Gino, 2013; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Zhong, 2011).

When making ethical decisions, individuals weigh the benefits of pursuing self-interest against the potential harm to others. Interpersonal factors can influence this cost-benefit calculus of deceiving others. For example, Yip and Schweitzer (2016) found that lower levels of empathy are associated with higher rates of deception.

We expect that negotiators are more likely to use deception to take advantage of counterparts who express gratitude compared to those who express neutral emotion. When individuals have the opportunity to lie in competitive interactions, they are more likely to exploit their grateful counterparts, because their grateful counterparts may be more likely to forgive.

Related work has suggested a link between naiveté and exploitation (Barasch et al., 2016), and between trust and unethical behavior (Yip & Schweitzer, 2015). Therefore, we predict that gratitude expressions invite unethical behavior.

Hypothesis 4: Individuals who interact with grateful counterparts are more likely to engage in unethical behavior, compared to those who interact with neutral counterparts.

Overview of Current Research

Across five studies, we explore the link between gratitude and self-interested behavior. By examining the relationship between displaying gratitude and selfish behavior, we highlight how expressing gratitude has the potential to backfire in competitive interactions. In Studies 1a and 1b, we demonstrate that when counterparts express gratitude, individuals become more likely to make selfish offers in distributive negotiations than when counterparts express neutral emotion. To explain why gratitude influences selfish behavior, we build on the EASI model, which suggests that people draw inferences about the motives, traits, and future behaviors of their counterparts based on their emotional expressions. In Study 2, we show that inferences about the expressers' tendency to forgive mediate the relationship between gratitude expressions and selfish behavior. In Study 3, we contrast the influence of gratitude with excitement on self-interested behavior. We find that expressions of gratitude exert a unique effect on selfish behavior that is distinct from expressions of excitement. Finally, in Study 4, we demonstrate that grateful expressions trigger deception. Taken together, our findings highlight the negative consequences of expressing gratitude in competitive interactions by showing that grateful expressions increase vulnerability to opportunistic exploitation.

Study 1: Expressing Gratitude Invites Exploitation

In Studies 1a and 1b, we investigate how expressing gratitude influences self-interested behavior in a competitive interaction.

Study 1a: Backpack Negotiation

Method

Participants. We recruited 277 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. All participants were located in the United States and had achieved a requester approval rating of 97% or greater. Of the 277 participants, 15 failed our comprehension question. The final sample included 262 participants ($M_{age} = 34.98$ years, $SD_{age} = 12.15$ years; 43.9% female).

Procedure. In this study, participants negotiated the purchase price of a backpack. We told participants that they would be randomly assigned to the role of Buyer or Seller. However, in practice, all participants were assigned to role of Buyer and a computer program simulated the role of the confederate Seller. Buyers were asked to make an initial offer for the purchase of a backpack. We provided information about the zone of possible agreement by indicating that the price for the backpack should be within the range of \$50 to \$150.

Participants were required to pass a comprehension check, which asked them to identify the upper bound and lower bound of the zone of possible agreement. Participants who failed the comprehension check were not allowed to proceed with the study. After successfully completing the comprehension check, the Buyers were paired with confederate Sellers.

We recommended participants to make an initial offer of \$60, and all participants followed this guidance. We constrained the initial offer because it provides a more realistic and direct test of grateful expressions on negotiation outcomes.

We randomly assigned the Buyers to one of two conditions: Gratitude Expression or Neutral Expression. We manipulated the Seller's emotional reaction to the participants' first

offer. The Seller either sent a gratitude message ("thanks for your offer of \$60!!! this is really great...i appreciate this") or a neutral message ("got your offer of \$60...here's my counteroffer"). In both conditions, the Seller indicated a counteroffer of \$110.

As Buyers, the participants chose one of the following options: (1) make a counteroffer or (2) accept the counteroffer. We instructed participants that, in addition to the standard participation fee of \$1.00, the three participants who reached the best deal (i.e., procured the backpack for the lowest purchase price) in their session would be rewarded with a \$0.25 bonus payment. Participants then completed an expressed emotion manipulation check before we informed them that the Seller accepted their offer. Finally, participants answered demographic questions, were debriefed, and were paid.

Measures.

Manipulation check. After responding to the confederate's counteroffer, participants rated the extent to which their counterpart expressed gratitude and appreciation on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) ($\alpha=.95$).

Negotiation Outcome. Our main dependent measure was the price of the counteroffer made by the participants. Of the 262 participants, only 6 participants chose to accept the offer. For participant Buyers, lower counteroffer prices reflected greater self-interest.

Results and Discussion

Our manipulation of expressed gratitude during the negotiation was successful. Participants in the Gratitude Expression condition indicated that their partner expressed higher levels of gratitude ($M=5.61$, $SD=1.44$) than did participants in the Neutral condition ($M=2.91$, $SD=1.65$), $t(260)=-14.14$, $p<.001$, $d=-1.74$.

We found a main effect of gratitude expression on counteroffer amounts. Participants who received the grateful message made more selfish counteroffers ($M=\$70.96$, $SD=7.31$) than did participants who received the neutral message ($M=\$73.42$, $SD=6.78$), $t(254)=2.79$, $p=.006$, $d=0.35$ (see Figure 1).¹ This study provides initial evidence that receiving an expression of gratitude invites more selfish and aggressive offers in negotiations.

Study 1b: Rental Property Negotiation

In Study 1b, we sought to replicate the effect of gratitude expressions on aggressive offers using a different negotiation context. In addition to a different negotiation, we also provided negotiators with an option to choose an impasse to assess the link between gratitude expressions and successful (or failed) deal-making.

Method

Participants. We recruited 278 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. All participants were located in the United States and had achieved a requester approval rating of 97% or greater. Of the 278 participants, 23 failed the comprehension question and were not allowed to complete the study. The final sample included 255 participants ($M_{age}=32.79$, $SD=11.22$ years; 39.6% female).

Procedure. We used a different distributive negotiation than in Study 1a by asking participants to negotiate the rent of an apartment. We told participants that they would be assigned to the role of either Renter or Landlord. In practice, we assigned all participants to the role of Landlord and the computer program simulated the role of confederate Renter. As Landlords, participants initiated the negotiation of the rent for a studio apartment in Chicago. We

¹ We excluded 6 participants who accepted the initial offer in our main analysis. If we include the participants who accepted the initial offer in our analysis, the results are nearly identical: $t(260)=2.77$, $p=.006$, $d=0.34$.

provided information about the zone of possible agreement by indicating that the rent should be within the range of \$1,000 to \$2,000. Participants had to pass a comprehension check to proceed with the rest of the study.

We paired participant Landlords with confederate Renters. We instructed participants Landlords to make an initial offer of \$1,800, and all participants followed this instruction.

We randomly assigned them to one of two conditions: Gratitude Expression or Neutral Expression. In the Gratitude Expression condition, the confederate Renter sent the following message along with his/her counteroffer: “thanks for your offer of \$1800!!! this is really great... i appreciate this.” In the Neutral condition, the confederate Renter sent the following message: “got your offer for \$1800... here’s my counteroffer.” In both conditions, the confederate Renter indicated a counteroffer of \$1,200.

As Landlords, the participants then chose one of the following options: (1) make a counteroffer, (2) exit the negotiation, or (3) accept the offer. We instructed participants that, in addition to the standard participation fee of \$1.00, the three participants who reached the best deal in their session (i.e., procured the highest rental rate) would receive a \$0.25 bonus payment. Participants then completed a manipulation check, were informed that the Renter accepted their counteroffer, and answered demographic questions before we debriefed and paid them.

Measures.

Manipulation check. After responding to the confederate’s counteroffer, participants rated the extent to which their counterpart expressed gratitude and appreciation on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) ($\alpha=.97$).

Negotiation Outcome. We recorded whether participants chose to make a counteroffer, accept their counterpart’s offer, or exit the negotiation. For participants who chose to make a

counteroffer, we assessed the amount of the counteroffer. Because all participants were assigned the role of Landlord, higher rental rates reflected greater self-interest.

Results and Discussion

Our experimental manipulation was successful. Participants in the Gratitude Expression condition rated their partner as expressing higher levels of gratitude ($M=5.38$, $SD=1.56$) than did participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=2.77$, $SD=1.67$), $t(253)=-12.87$, $p<.001$, $d=-1.62$.

Among 255 participants, 7 participants chose to exit the negotiation, 9 participants accepted the offer of \$1,200, and 239 participants chose to make a counteroffer. A chi-square analysis revealed that there was no effect of the gratitude manipulation on participants' choice among the three options to make a counteroffer, exit, or accept, $\chi^2(2, N=255)=1.08$, $p=.582$, $\Phi=.07$.

Importantly, we replicated the results linking gratitude expressions to selfish counteroffers. We found that participants in the Gratitude Expression condition made more selfish counteroffers ($M=\$1,657.81$, $SD=87.23$) than did participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=\$1,631.10$, $SD=110.10$), $t(237)=-2.08$, $p=.039$, $d=-0.27$ (see Figure 2).²

This study provides further evidence that when interacting with a grateful counterpart, negotiators are more likely to make aggressive offers than when interacting with a neutral counterpart. We also found that gratitude expressions did not influence negotiators' decision to immediately accept an offer or exit the negotiation.

² We excluded 9 participants who accepted the initial offer in our main analysis. If we include the participants who accepted the initial offer in our analysis, the results are very similar, $t(246)=-2.20$, $p=.029$, $d=-0.28$.

Study 2: Inferences of Forgiveness Mediate the Effect

In Study 2, drawing on the EASI model, we explore the interpersonal inference that underlies the relationship between gratitude expressions and self-interested, exploitative behavior. We hypothesize that individuals who interact with grateful counterparts are more likely to infer that their counterparts are particularly forgiving, which encourages exploitative behavior. In Study 2, we conceptually replicate our findings from Studies 1a and 1b by employing a different experimental manipulation of gratitude and a different negotiation task, the ultimatum game.

Method

Participants. We recruited 132 participants from a Northeastern university to participate in our study. Participants received a \$10 show-up fee and had a chance to win a \$25 bonus based on their decisions in the study. Of the 132 participants, 25 failed the comprehension check, making them ineligible to complete the study. The final sample included 107 participants ($M_{age}=23.99$, $SD=7.96$ years; 42.1% female).

Procedure. We instructed participants that they would be randomly matched with another participant. We told participants that in this game, there would be two players: the Red Player and the Blue Player. Red would start with 11 tokens and could choose to offer between 0 to 11 tokens to Blue. Blue could accept or reject the offer made by Red. If Blue accepts the offer, Blue would get the number of tokens offered, and Red would keep the remaining tokens. If Blue rejects the offer, neither Red nor Blue would receive any tokens. We further told them that each token would be exchanged for a ticket in a bonus lottery with a \$25 payout. Thus, the more tickets they earned, the greater their chances of winning \$25.

Before participating in the game, participants were required to pass a comprehension check comprised of eight questions designed to test their understanding of the game rules (see Appendix A for the comprehension check questions).

After passing the comprehension check, we asked each participant to enter his/her initials and write two sentences that described himself/herself as a person. We told participants that their profile would be shown to their counterpart and their counterpart's profile would be shown to them. Participants in the Neutral Expression condition were paired with a counterpart who described himself/herself with these sentences: 1) "I am a calm person," 2) "I don't get emotional about things." In contrast, participants in the Gratitude Expression condition were paired with a counterpart who described himself/herself with these sentences: 1) "I am a grateful person," 2) "I am thankful for all of the people in my life."

Next, although they believed that they would be randomly assigned to the role of Red Player or Blue Player, all participants were assigned to role of Red Player and were asked to allocate some portion of their 11 tokens to the Blue Player.

After making an allocation decision, participants completed a measure of the inferred forgiveness of their counterpart, a manipulation check, demographic questions, and then were debriefed.

Measures.

Manipulation check. Participants rated the extent to which their partner expressed gratitude and appreciation on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) ($\alpha=.99$).

Inferences of forgiveness. Participants rated the extent to which their counterpart appeared forgiving and tolerant on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) ($\alpha=.88$).

Forgiving and tolerant are synonyms in the Google dictionary, and we obtained high levels of reliability.

Ultimatum offer. We recorded the number of tokens that participants offered to their partner as our main dependent variable. We interpreted ultimatum offers such that lower offers reflected more self-interested behavior.

Results and Discussion

As expected, participants in the Gratitude Expression condition rated their counterpart as expressing higher levels of gratitude ($M=5.94$, $SD=1.48$) than did participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=2.66$, $SD=1.54$), $t(105)=-11.22$, $p<.001$, $d=-2.17$.

Consistent with our previous findings, we found that participants in the Gratitude Expression condition made more selfish offers ($M=4.91$, $SD=1.46$) than participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=5.47$, $SD=1.07$), $t(105)=2.28$, $p=.025$, $d=0.44$ (see Figure 3).

As predicted, participants in the Gratitude Expression condition inferred their counterparts as being more forgiving ($M=5.30$, $SD=1.31$) than participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=4.52$, $SD=1.46$), $t(105)=-2.90$, $p=.004$, $d=-0.56$. We assessed whether inferences of forgiveness mediated the relationship between expressed gratitude and selfish offers. We employed the indirect bootstrapping technique, and we performed 10,000 bootstrap resamples using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) SPSS macro. Our analysis revealed that grateful expressions had an indirect effect on selfish offers through inferences of forgiveness ($b=-.14$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = $-.38$, $-.02$). Because the bias-corrected 95% confidence interval did not include zero, we concluded that perceived forgiveness mediates the effect of expressed gratitude on selfish offers.

In Study 2, we found that negotiators are more likely to infer that their counterparts are forgiving when interacting with grateful counterparts than when interacting with neutral counterparts. Furthermore, we demonstrate that inferences of forgiveness mediate the relationship between grateful expressions and selfish behavior. Expressing gratitude signals to opponents that they are more forgiving and, as a result, opponents are more likely to engage in exploitative behavior.

Study 3: The Unique Effect of Gratitude Expression

In Study 3, we contrast the effect of gratitude with the effect of another positive-valence emotion: excitement. Both gratitude and excitement are characterized by positive valence, but they differ along cognitive appraisal dimensions (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Excitement is a positive emotion distinguished by high arousal, uncertainty, and a low sense of control. People often experience excitement when they make positive appraisals about a future event. Prior work has revealed that excitement can boost motivation and performance (Brooks, 2014). Surprisingly, there is a dearth of research exploring the interpersonal effects of excitement.

We do not expect positive valence alone to trigger selfish behavior. Instead, we expect expressions of gratitude to uniquely invite selfish behavior, because gratitude originates from an interpersonal exchange and provides a social signal of forgiveness. In contrast, expressions of excitement are not directly attributable to the social exchange or relationship. As a result, excitement is less likely to encourage self-interested, exploitive behavior. Taken together, we hypothesized that gratitude expressions promote selfish behavior compared to excitement expressions and neutral expressions.

Method

Participants. We recruited 199 participants from a Northeastern university to participate in our study. Participants received a \$10 show-up fee and had a chance to win \$25 bonus money based on their decisions in the study. Of the 199 participants, 38 failed the comprehension question and were ineligible to complete the study. The final sample included 161 participants ($M_{age}=27.16$, $SD=10.13$ years; 41% female).

Procedure. We followed a similar procedure as in Study 2. However, there was one important difference. In addition to the Gratitude and Neutral Expression conditions, we added a third condition: Excitement Expression. Participants in the Neutral Expression condition read the following two sentences about their confederate partner: 1) “I am a calm person,” 2) “I don’t get emotional about things.” Participants in the Gratitude Expression condition read the following about their confederate partner: 1) “I am a grateful person,” 2) “I am thankful for all of the people in my life.” Participants in the Excitement Expression condition read the following about their confederate partner: 1) “I am an enthusiastic person,” 2) “I get excited about the week ahead.”

Measures.

Manipulation check. Participants rated the extent to which their partner expressed different emotions on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Our neutral emotion items included indifference and neutral ($\alpha=.89$). Our gratitude items included gratitude and appreciation ($\alpha=.99$). Our excitement items included excited and enthusiasm ($\alpha=.98$).

Ultimatum offer. As in Study 2, we counted the number of tokens that participants offered to their partner as our main dependent variable. We interpreted lower ultimatum offers as more self-interested behavior.

Results and Discussion

Our experimental manipulation was successful. Participants in the Gratitude Expression condition reported that their counterpart expressed higher levels of gratitude ($M=5.67$, $SD=1.71$) than did participants in the Excitement Expression condition ($M=2.72$, $SD=1.71$) or the Neutral Expression condition ($M=2.20$, $SD=1.41$), $F(2, 158)=73.97$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.48$. Similarly, participants in the Excitement Expression condition reported that their counterpart expressed higher levels of excitement ($M=5.13$, $SD=1.99$) than did participants in the Gratitude Expression condition ($M=3.60$, $SD=1.72$) or Neutral Expression condition ($M=1.94$, $SD=1.20$), $F(2, 158)=48.68$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.38$. We report planned comparisons for the perceptions of emotional expressions in Table 1.

Supporting our prediction, we found a main effect of emotion expression, $F(2, 158)=3.26$, $p=.041$, $\eta^2=.04$. As expected, participants in the Gratitude Expression condition made more selfish offers in the ultimatum game ($M=4.93$, $SD=1.67$) than did those in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=5.47$, $SD=1.10$), $t(109)=2.02$, $p=.046$, $d=0.38$, and those in the Excitement Expression condition ($M=5.52$, $SD=1.17$), $t(104)=-2.09$, $p=.039$, $d=-0.41$. We did not find a significant difference in ultimatum offers between the Neutral Expression and Excitement Expression conditions, $t(103)=-.21$, $p=.831$, $d=-0.04$ (see Figure 4).

These findings replicate the main effect that gratitude expressions elicit selfish behavior and deter generosity. By comparing gratitude and excitement, we demonstrate that the influence of gratitude on interpersonal outcomes does not merely reflect the influence of a positive-valence emotional expression.

Study 4: Expressing Gratitude Invites Selfish Deception

In Study 4, we extend the effect of expressing gratitude on selfish behavior to a distinct but related behavioral domain: deception. When interacting with grateful counterparts,

individuals may not only engage in more self-interested allocation behavior, but they may also become more motivated to deceive others for personal gain. The quintessential form of unethical behavior is self-serving deception, which involves lies that benefit the self at the expense of others. In this study, we explore whether individuals who encounter gratitude expressions become more likely to exploit opportunities to cheat than individual who encounter neutral expressions.

Method

Participants. We recruited 200 participants from a Northeastern university to participate in a study for pay ($M_{age}=20.20$, $SD=2.31$ years; 66% female). Participants received a \$10 show-up fee and had a chance to win bonus pay based on their decisions in the study. All participants passed the comprehension question and were allowed to complete the study.

Procedure. We told participants that they would be paired with another participant throughout this study. First, participants read instructions about a task called the Interaction Task, which was a modified version of the Deception Game (Gneezy, 2005; Yip & Schweitzer, 2016; Zhong, 2011). In this task, we assigned participants to the role of the Sender and we paired them with a confederate Receiver.

We provided the Sender with information about two payment options. In OPTION A, the Sender earns \$0.75 and the Receiver earns \$0.50. In OPTION B, the Sender earns \$0.50 and the Receiver earns \$0.75. We told the Sender that the Receiver would know that two options exist, but would not have information about the payoffs for each option. The Receiver would choose an option after receiving advice from the Sender. Every participant had to pass a comprehension check. All participants passed the comprehension check and thus were allowed to proceed with the study.

After passing the comprehension check, we told participants that they could communicate with their partner on an instant messaging platform. We instructed participants to reveal information about what they are like as a person, but not to reveal information about the Interactive Task. Participants interacted with a confederate partner who sent them three messages. The first message sent by the confederate was the same across conditions. The second and third messages varied between the Gratitude Expression and the Neutral Expression conditions.

In the Gratitude Expression condition, participants received the following messages: (1) “hi there - it looks like we have to describe ourselves” (2) “i would describe myself as a grateful person. i’m thankful for all of the people and successes i encounter” (3) “i’m the type of person who appreciates the small things in life”

In the Neutral Expression condition, participants received the following messages: (1) “hi there - it looks like we have to describe ourselves” (2) “i would describe myself as a calm person. i’m not that emotional” (3) “i’m the type of person who is cool-headed about things in life.”

After receiving either the grateful or neutral messages, participants completed the Interaction Task by making a decision to send either an honest or deceptive message to the Receiver. The Sender chose to send one of two pre-worded messages to the Receiver: a lie (“OPTION A will earn the Receiver more money than OPTION B”) or the truth (“OPTION B will earn the Receiver more money than OPTION A”). We informed the Sender that the identities of the Sender and Receiver would be kept confidential, and that the money participants earned would be paid to each participant at the end of session privately in cash. If participants

chose to send a deceptive message, they were informed that they would receive \$0.75. If participants chose to send an honest message, they were informed that they would receive \$0.50.

Participants completed a manipulation check and answered demographic questions. At the end of the study, participants were debriefed and paid.

Measures.

Manipulation check. Participants rated the extent to which their partner expressed gratitude and appreciation on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) ($\alpha=.97$).

Deception. We recorded whether participants chose to send a self-interested deceptive message (scored as 1) or a truthful message (scored as 0).

Results and Discussion

Our experimental manipulation was effective. Participants in the Gratitude Expression condition reported higher levels of expressed gratitude ($M=5.97$, $SD=1.38$) than did participants in the Neutral Expression condition ($M=2.05$, $SD=1.29$), $t(198)=-20.73$, $p<.001$, $d=-2.93$.

As predicted, participants in the Gratitude Expression condition were more likely to deceive their counterparts (80%) than were those in the Neutral Expression condition (66%), $\chi^2(1, N=200) = 4.71$, $p=.030$, $\Phi=.15$ (see Figure 5).

In this study, we find that when individuals encounter grateful people compared to neutral people, they are more likely to capitalize on an opportunity to lie for personal gain. Building on our previous findings, compared to expressions of neutral emotion, expressions of gratitude increase exploitative behavior - in this case, selfish deception. Specifically, gratitude

expressions elicit selfish behavior by motivating people to engage in deceptive behavior to earn more money for themselves (and decrease payoffs for their grateful counterpart).

General Discussion

Across five studies that employed different emotional expression manipulations and different measures of self-interest, we observe a consistent pattern of results: expressing gratitude in competitive interactions can have adverse economic consequences. Individuals who interacted with counterparts expressing gratitude were more likely to pursue their self-interest than those who interacted with counterparts expressing neutral emotion. We uncovered a psychological mechanism underlying the relationship between gratitude expressions and selfish behavior: inferences of forgiveness. When counterparts express gratitude, individuals infer that their counterparts will be particularly forgiving, which in turn motivates selfish behavior.

We contrasted the effect of gratitude with the effect of excitement and found that grateful expressions have a unique influence on selfish behavior that is not merely explained by positive valence. Finally, we found that the selfish behavior triggered by gratitude expressions extends to a related domain: deception. Individuals interacting with appreciative counterparts were particularly likely to engage in deceptive behavior to make more money for themselves.

Theoretical Contributions

Our findings make several fundamental theoretical contributions. First, to our knowledge, these are the first empirical findings to identify negative outcomes associated with gratitude. Previous work has demonstrated that gratitude facilitates positive social outcomes such as prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Walker, Kumar, & Gilovich, 2016), greater life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), stronger relationships (Algoe et al., 2010), and improved organizational functioning (Fehr et al., 2016). However, existing research has focused

on gratitude expressed in cooperative relationships and interactions. Our research explores gratitude in competitive contexts. We extend scientific understanding about the interpersonal consequences of gratitude by challenging the prevailing assumption that gratitude promotes prosociality. Our findings reveal a dark side of gratitude: expressing appreciation invites self-interested, exploitative behavior by competitors.

Second, we illuminate an important strategic inference that people make when they perceive emotional expressions. People infer that counterparts who express gratitude will be more forgiving of exploitation compared to counterparts who express neutral emotion. Identifying the inference that accompanies gratitude expressions is important for understanding why individuals become disinhibited by their concern for others to act selfishly. We build on emerging research that has shown that interpersonal forgiveness can have the unintended consequence of damaging relationships (Adams et al., 2015).

Third, we establish a link between gratitude and deception. Namely, an expression of gratitude—a kind and positive interpersonal emotion—leads recipients to become more likely to lie for personal profit. This association is insidious but significant. Especially from a prescriptive standpoint, it would be helpful to advise negotiators to think carefully before expressing gratitude toward their counterparts.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest straightforward practical implications for expressers of gratitude. First, individuals would benefit from thinking more deliberately and strategically about expressing gratitude. Even when they feel grateful (e.g., for concessions from a counterpart), it may not benefit individuals to express their gratitude while a competitive interaction or negotiation is underway. Perhaps the optimal approach to avoid the downside risks of expressing

gratitude (e.g., exploitation) while capitalizing on the benefits (e.g., social closeness) is to wait until a deal has been reached before saying “thank you.”

Second, the divergence in outcomes between expressing gratitude in cooperative versus competitive situations suggests risky norm adherence. People may become accustomed to the benefits of gratitude in cooperative situations and carry their habits of saying “thank you” and expressing gratitude into competitive situations, thereby unknowingly harming their own economic outcomes and interests.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our findings are qualified by some limitations that suggest fruitful avenues for future research. First, we relied on a computer-mediated procedure for increased experimental control. Though our methodology allowed us to make causal claims about the role of gratitude expressions on behavior in competitive contexts, future research could explore how gratitude expressions operate during face-to-face interactions between real negotiators. It is possible that people express gratitude, not just with words, but also with gestures and facial expressions, and that even micro-expressions of emotion invite exploitation as well.

Second, expressing gratitude may be one tactic in a suite of interpersonal strategies that cluster together; a cluster that might be understood as “warmth,” “niceness,” or “politeness.” Future work should investigate other emotional or linguistic cues that may correlate with gratitude expressions in competitive contexts. For example, ongoing work by Jeong, Minson, Yeomans, and Gino (working paper) provides emerging evidence that converges with our findings. They find that conveying a warm and friendly interpersonal style in conversations can backfire in economic exchanges. This idea dovetails logically with our findings.

Finally, we found that people who expressed gratitude were viewed as more forgiving. This perception encouraged their competitive counterparts to behave more selfishly. However, we examined gratitude expressions and inferences of forgiveness between strangers. It is possible that people in repeated interactions who are exposed to gratitude expressions may behave less selfishly over time. We leave this question as an important avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Across five studies, we found converging evidence that, because grateful people are inferred to be more forgiving, expressing gratitude in competitive situations invites self-interested exploitation. Many interpersonal interactions include cooperative and competitive elements, and navigating the balance between selfishness and prosociality is complex. We encourage negotiators to recognize that expressing gratitude can have a dark side in competitive situations.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Planned Comparisons of Emotion Manipulation Check in Study 3 (n=161).

Emotion Condition	Expressed emotion					
	Gratitude		Excitement		Neutral	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gratitude (n=56)	5.67	1.71	3.60	1.72	2.65	1.43
Excitement (n=50)	2.72	1.71	5.13	1.99	2.23	1.39
Neutral (n=55)	2.20	1.41	1.94	1.20	4.95	1.64

Note. Participants rated to what extent their partner expressed three different emotions on scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Planned comparisons within each emotional expression condition reveal that ratings of the expressed emotion are significantly different from the ratings of other expressed emotions.

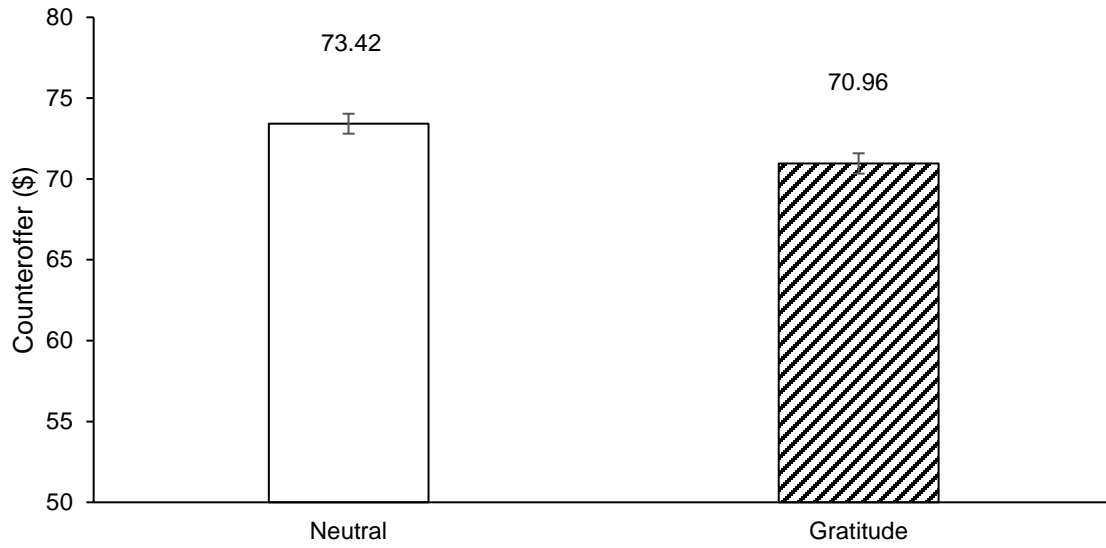


Figure 1. Study 1a demonstrates that participant buyers interacting with sellers who expressed gratitude made lower, more-selfish offers for a backpack than those interacting with sellers who expressed neutral emotion.

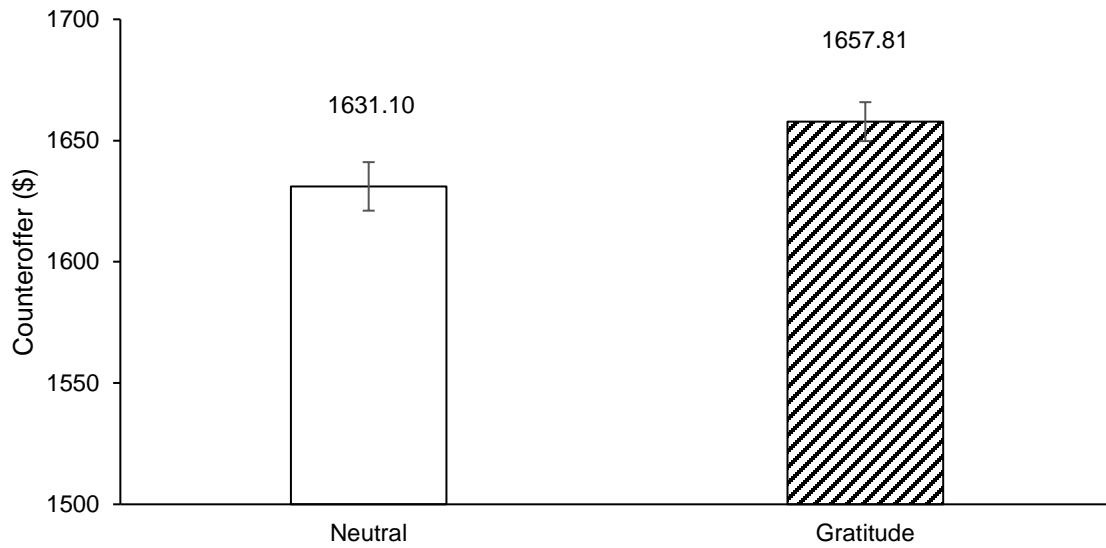


Figure 2. Study 1b demonstrates that participant landlords interacting with renters who expressed gratitude made higher, more-selfish offers for the rent than those interacting with renters who expressed neutral emotion.

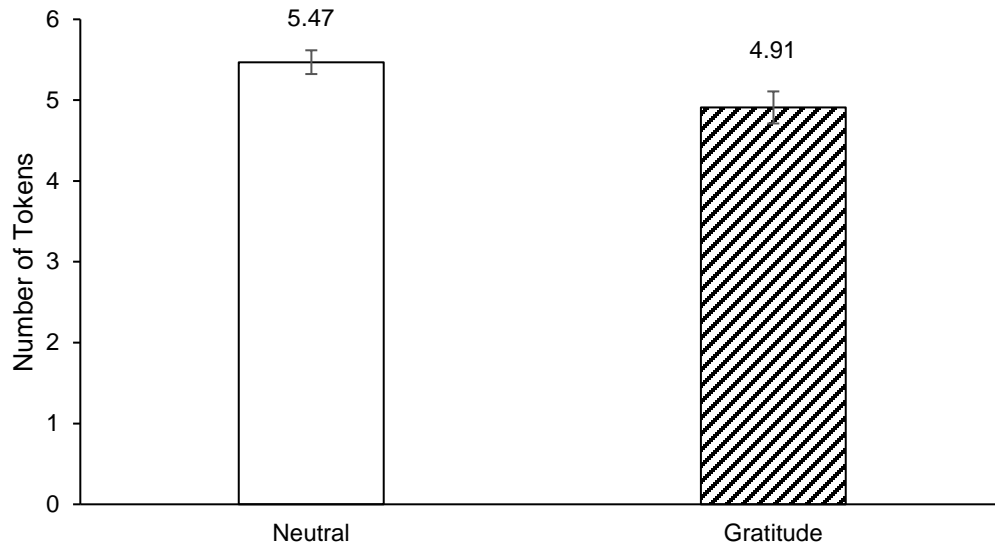


Figure 3. Study 2 demonstrates that participants who encountered grateful counterparts were more likely to make lower, more-selfish ultimatum offers than participants who encountered neutral counterparts.

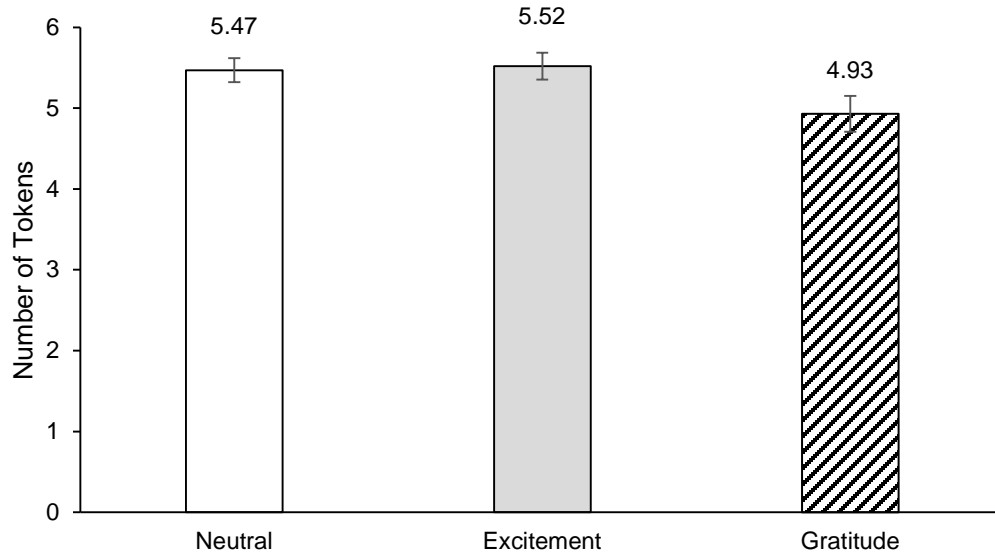


Figure 4. Study 3 demonstrates that participants who interacted with grateful counterparts were more likely to make lower, more-selfish ultimatum offers than participants who interacted with neutral counterparts or excited counterparts.

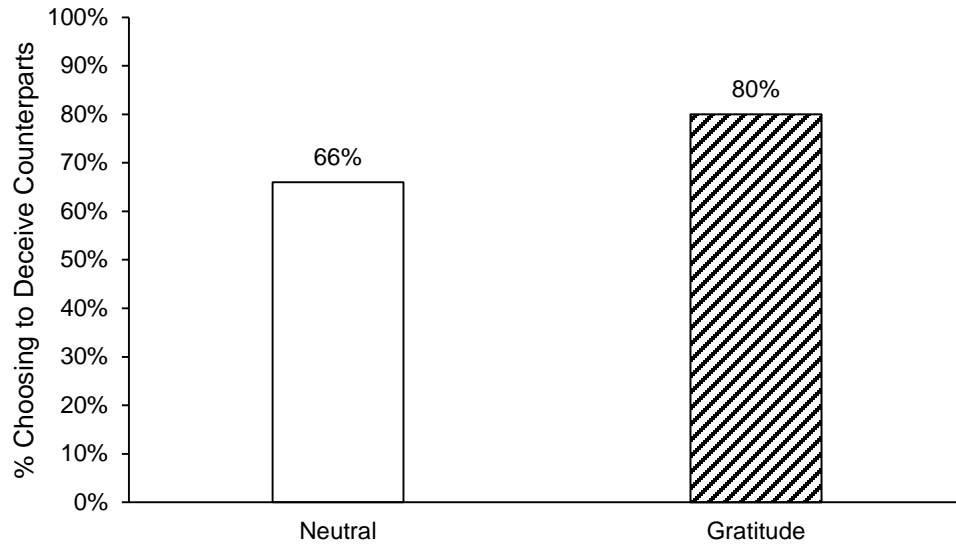


Figure 5. Study 4 demonstrates that participants in the gratitude expression condition were more likely to deceive their counterparts than were participants in the neutral expression condition.

Appendix A. Comprehension Check for Ultimatum Game in Studies 2 and 3

This is a comprehension check to ensure that everyone participating in this study understands the rules of the exercise they are about to complete. If you fail the comprehension check twice, you will not be able to complete this study.

1. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE Player 3 tokens, and the BLUE Player accepts the offer. How many tokens will the RED Player receive?
2. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE Player 3 tokens, and the BLUE Player accepts the offer. How many tokens will the BLUE Player receive?
3. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE PLAYER 4 tokens, and the BLUE PLAYER rejects the offer. How many tokens will the RED Player receive?
4. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE PLAYER 4 tokens, and the BLUE PLAYER rejects the offer. How many tokens will the BLUE PLAYER receive?
5. For the RED Player, how many lottery tickets is each token worth?
6. For the BLUE Player, how many lottery tickets is each token worth?
7. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE Player 5 tokens, and the BLUE Player accepts the offer. How many lottery tickets will the RED Player receive?
8. Suppose the RED Player offers the BLUE Player 5 tokens, and the BLUE Player accepts the offer. How many lottery tickets will the BLUE Player receive?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11