


Benefits of Expressing Gratitude: Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Changes One's View of the Relationship

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Abstract

This research was conducted to examine the hypothesis that expressing gratitude to a relationship partner enhances one's perception of the relationship's communal strength. In Study 1 ($N = 137$), a cross-sectional survey, expressing gratitude to a relationship partner was positively associated with the expresser's perception of the communal strength of the relationship. In Study 2 ($N = 218$), expressing gratitude predicted increases in the expresser's perceptions of the communal strength of the relationship across time. In Study 3 ($N = 75$), participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition, in which they expressed gratitude to a friend, or to one of three control conditions, in which they thought grateful thoughts about a friend, thought about daily activities, or had positive interactions with a friend. At the end of the study, perceived communal strength was higher among participants in the expression-of-gratitude condition than among those in all three control conditions. We discuss the theoretical and applied implications of these findings and suggest directions for future research.

Keywords

gratitude, communal strength

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Research on gratitude has been burgeoning. Gratitude has been defined as an emotion or state resulting from an awareness and appreciation of that which is valuable and meaningful to oneself (Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, in press). Recent research has demonstrated that feeling grateful enhances physical health (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), promotes positive reframing of negative situations (Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, in press), increases life satisfaction (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009), and enhances comfort in voicing relationship concerns (Lambert & Fincham, 2010b).

Few people would argue with the proposition that it is a good idea to express gratitude for a relationship partner's supportive behaviors. Indeed, virtually every etiquette book advocates writing thank-you notes for gifts received or, at the very least, expressing verbal thanks. From an early age, children are urged to express thanks for courtesies extended to them. Doing so presumably conveys to benefactors that their efforts have been noticed and are appreciated, and presumably encourages them to act in a similar fashion in the future. Thus, not surprisingly, people report that expressing gratitude is important to the quality of their relationships (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Billingsley, Lim, Caron, Harris, & Canada, 2005;

Greeff & Le Roux, 1999; Sharlin, 1996). Empirical evidence does show that expressing gratitude is positively linked with relationship satisfaction (Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & Lee, 2005). Also, expressions of gratitude have been linked to lowered perceptions of unfairness in household labor (Hawkins, Marshall, & Meiners, 1995; Klumb, Hoppmann, & Staats, 2006). Perhaps James (1890/1981) was correct in stating, "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated" (p. 313).

Yet several of these observations suggest that primarily the recipient of expressed gratitude will benefit from the expression of gratitude. Might people who express gratitude also benefit from so doing? We suspected they would and conducted three tests of that hypothesis. More specifically, we thought that the simple act of expressing gratitude to a partner would increase the expresser's perception that the relationship is characterized by high communal strength.

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What Is Communal Strength?

A communal relationship is one in which an individual feels a sense of responsibility for meeting the needs of the partner, and in which benefits are given noncontingently in response to the partner's needs (Clark & Mills, 1979, in press). *Communal strength* refers to the degree of felt responsibility for a partner's welfare (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). People's motivation to respond noncontingently to a partner's needs differs greatly across different acquaintances, friends, and family members. For example, most people would have higher motivation to meet the needs of a close family member than to meet the needs of a casual friend, even though both kinship and friendship are communal relationships. In this example, the communal relationship with the close family member has a higher degree of communal strength than the communal relationship with the friend.

Mills et al. (2004) discussed three ways to conceptualize communal strength. First, communal strength can be conceptualized as referring to how much personal sacrifice or cost an individual is willing to incur to benefit the partner. Second, communal strength can be conceptualized as referring to how much distress or guilt a person would feel if unable to meet the partner's needs. The third conceptualization focuses on the person's hierarchy of communal relationships. People often have many communal relationships; a few are strong (a romantic partner, a close family member), a large number are moderate (close friends, more distant relatives), and an even greater number are weak (casual acquaintances and strangers). Where a partner falls within an individual's hierarchy of communal strength should predict whether or not this individual meets this partner's needs before other people's needs. The objective of the studies reported here was to examine how expressing gratitude to a relationship partner may enhance the expresser's perception of the relationship's communal strength.

Overview of the Studies

In Study 1, we explored whether there is a naturally occurring relationship between expression of gratitude and perceived communal strength. We hypothesized not only that there would be a relationship between these two variables, but also that the relationship would hold even when we controlled for relationship satisfaction and social desirability. In Study 2, we tested whether expressing gratitude would predict an increase in the expresser's perceptions of the communal strength of the relationship across time, controlling for Time 1 levels of communal strength, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. In Study 3, we tested the direction and causality of this relationship by experimentally testing whether increasing the frequency and regularity of expressing gratitude to a friend influenced perceived communal strength of the relationship. We hypothesized that this manipulation would increase participants' perception of communal strength more than would having participants think grateful thoughts about the partner or interact positively with the partner.

Study 1

Given that no prior research had explored the relationship between expression of gratitude and perceived communal strength, we first sought to test for such a relationship. Fincham and Bradbury (1987) suggested that, in research on close relationships, care must be taken to ensure that relationship quality is distinguished from other constructs because spurious statistical relationships may arise from overlapping item content in the measures used to assess these constructs. Thus, we assessed and controlled for relationship satisfaction. In addition, because expressing gratitude and communal strength are both socially desirable, we controlled for the tendency to respond in a socially desirable way. We hypothesized that greater expression of gratitude would be associated with more communal strength and that this association would hold when we controlled for relationship satisfaction, social desirability, and demographic variables.

Method

Participants. In an introductory course on families and the life span, 137 participants (116 women, 21 men) completed an on-line survey for extra credit. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 37, with a median of 19. Participants reported about a relationship with either a romantic partner or a close friend.

Measures. We assessed expression of gratitude with the three-item Expression of Gratitude in Relationships scale (Lambert & Fincham, 2010a; e.g., "I express my gratitude for the things that my partner/friend does for me"; $\alpha = .94$). To assess communal strength, we used a 10-item measure developed by Mills et al. (2004; e.g., "How happy do you feel when doing something that helps your partner/best friend?" $\alpha = .87$). The survey also included a 10-item short form of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). Reliability was not computed for this measure because it more closely resembles an index than a scale. We assessed relationship satisfaction using Funk and Rogge's (2007) four-item measure (e.g., "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner/friend?" $\alpha = .95$).

We also thought it would be important to control for other variables that might predict perceived communal strength. These variables included sex (1 = male, 2 = female), age, relationship status (1 = romantic relationship, 2 = best friend), and relationship length (from 1, less than 2 months, to 7, more than 3 years).

Results

First, we calculated a zero-order correlation between gratitude expression and communal strength and found them to be strongly correlated, $r(135) = .52$. Next, a hierarchical regression equation was computed to examine whether expression of gratitude accounted for variance in perceived communal strength of the relationship over and beyond the effects of relationship satisfaction, social desirability, sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length. All control variables were entered on the

first step, and expression of gratitude was entered on the second step. As expected, higher scores for expression of gratitude significantly predicted higher scores for perception of communal strength ($\beta = .53, p < .01$) after controlling for relationship satisfaction, social desirability, sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length. None of the control variables were significant predictors of communal strength, and there were no interactions between gratitude expression and any of these other variables.

Discussion

Our hypothesis was confirmed. We found a link between expression of gratitude and communal strength, over and beyond any effects of relationship satisfaction and social desirability. However, the data from this study were cross-sectional. The results are consistent with and therefore support our hypothesis. In our next two studies, we sought to confirm the link between expression of gratitude and the expresser's felt communal strength and also to provide more convincing evidence for a potential causal link. First, by collecting longitudinal data, we were able to determine whether expressed gratitude predicts the expresser's subsequent perception of the relationship's communal strength (controlling for earlier perceived communal strength). Second, conducting a true experiment allowed us to determine whether a manipulation of expressed gratitude would influence the expresser's felt communal strength toward the target.

Study 2: Longitudinal Evidence

Method

Participants and procedure. This study included 218 undergraduates (171 women, 47 men), who participated for partial course credit. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 33, with a median of 19. They completed the measures at the beginning of the academic semester and then again 6 weeks later; the instructions indicated that they should answer all questions with reference to their romantic partner or the partner in their most important interpersonal relationship.

Measures. We used the same measures from Study 1; communal strength was measured at Time 1 ($\alpha = .87$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .90$), and the following variables were measured at Time 1: expression of gratitude ($\alpha = .83$), social desirability, relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = .93$), sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length.

Results and discussion

We used hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether Time 1 gratitude expression predicted a participant's later perceived communal strength, controlling for that person's Time 1 perceived communal strength, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. On the first step, we entered the control

variables (all from Time 1) of perceived communal strength, relationship satisfaction, social desirability, sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length. On the second step, we entered Time 1 gratitude-expression scores. As predicted, higher gratitude expression at Time 1 was associated with higher communal-strength scores 6 weeks later, controlling for Time 1 communal strength, relationship satisfaction, social desirability, sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length ($\beta = 0.13, p < .01$; see Table 1).

Our hypothesis again was supported. Going beyond the previously established correlation between expression of gratitude and communal strength, these findings provide important support for a time-order relationship between these variables. They suggest that increased expression of gratitude predicts later increased perceptions of communal strength, after controlling for initial communal strength.

However, these longitudinal data are still correlational. Perhaps variables such as being especially attracted to a partner or especially committed to the relationship predict both expressing more gratitude toward the partner and working hard over time to establish a strong communal relationship. To firmly establish that expressing gratitude leads to greater perceived communal strength of a relationship, we needed to follow a true experimental design. We did this in Study 3.

Study 3

In the third study, we randomly assigned participants to an experimental condition or to one of three control conditions. Participants in the experimental condition were instructed to increase their expressions of gratitude to a partner (and report on their efforts and success twice a week) for a 3-week period. The most straightforward control condition involved a "neutral" control of paying particular attention to daily activities and reporting on them twice a week. Yet we wished to examine the effects of expressing gratitude specifically and therefore also wanted to control for merely thinking positive thoughts and, indeed, merely thinking about one's gratitude

Table 1. Summary of the Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Time 2 Perception of Communal Strength in Study 2

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE b</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Step 1				
Time 1 communal strength	0.60	0.06	0.52	.00
Sex	0.21	0.17	0.07	.22
Age	0.04	0.04	0.05	.33
Relationship status	-0.01	0.16	-0.01	.94
Relationship length	0.01	0.03	0.03	.66
Relationship satisfaction	0.14	0.07	0.11	.05
Social desirability	0.72	0.35	0.11	.04
Step 2				
Time 1 expression of gratitude	0.10	0.05	0.13	.05

Note. $N = 218$. $R^2 = .42$ for Step 1 ($p < .01$); $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Step 2 ($p < .05$).

toward a partner. Therefore, we included two additional control conditions: One involved paying particular attention to memories of positive events in the relationship and bringing these up in conversation with a partner twice a week, and the other involved paying careful attention to events that made one feel grateful to the partner, but not expressing feelings of gratitude (and reporting on these efforts twice a week). We predicted that participants' perceptions of communal strength would be increased more by increasing expressions of gratitude than by attending to daily activities, discussing positive events in the relationship, or thinking about gratitude toward the partner.

Method

Participants. Ninety-seven participants enrolled in an introductory course on family development completed the study's Time 1 measures. However, in our final analysis, we included only those 75 undergraduates (60 women, 15 men) who both completed all relevant measures at both the start and conclusion of the study and indicated (on a measure described later) that they had taken the study seriously. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23, with a median of 19.

Procedure. After participants completed relevant measures (Time 1), they began their assigned activity. They completed this activity twice a week for 3 weeks and reported on it using an on-line journal. We sent them a link every Monday and Thursday morning and instructed them to write about the completion of their assigned activity. As previously mentioned, there were four conditions, which focused on (a) expression of gratitude, (b) daily activities (neutral), (c) thoughts of gratitude, and (d) expression of positive memories. Participants in all conditions reported on a relationship with a close friend. The average length of the relationship was 2.45 years. Participants were instructed to engage in an assigned activity with their friend and to answer all relationship questions with this specific person in mind.

The *expression-of-gratitude* condition ($n = 19$) was the experimental condition and was designed to increase the frequency of participants' expression of gratitude. Participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

For the next 3 weeks I would like you to focus on trying to go the extra mile to express gratitude to your friend. Between now and Thursday, please do something you wouldn't normally do to express this gratitude verbally or through writing (e.g., perhaps write an e-mail, a kind note, tell him/her how much you appreciate something specific that he/she does). Make sure to record or remember what you did so that you can report about it on Thursday.

The *neutral* (daily-activities) condition ($n = 17$) was designed to provide a neutral comparison for the other

conditions, as well as to rule out the unlikely possibility that simply engaging in a 3-week study could affect any of the dependent variables. Participants in this condition were given the following instructions:

For the next 3 weeks I would like you to focus on trying to go the extra mile to think about your daily activities. Between now and Thursday, please think about something that happened to you and make sure to record or remember what you did so that you can report about it on Thursday.

The *thoughts-of-gratitude* condition ($n = 20$) was designed to rule out the possibility that simply thinking appreciative thoughts about a friend, rather than the behavior of actually expressing gratitude to him or her, could drive any posttest differences in the dependent variables. Participants in this condition were given the following instructions:

For the next 3 weeks I would like you to focus on trying to go the extra mile to think about things that you appreciate about your friend. Between now and Thursday, please think about something you appreciate about your friend. Make sure to record or remember what you thought so you can report about it on Thursday.

The *positive-interaction* condition ($n = 19$) was designed to help rule out the alternative hypothesis that being assigned to have positive interactions with a friend would lead to posttest differences in the dependent variables. Participants in this condition were given the following instructions:

For the next 3 weeks I would like you to focus on thinking of positive memories you've had with your friend. Between now and Thursday, please think about a pleasant memory with this friend and bring it up with him/her in person, by phone, or by e-mail. Make sure to record or remember what you did so that you can report about it on Thursday.

Participants in all conditions were asked to report on their assigned activity twice per week (i.e., on Monday and Thursday) for 3 weeks. Thus, we had a record of whether or not they completed the activity. After completion of the sixth entry, participants completed another round of self-report measures (Time 2).

Measures. We again measured communal strength with the 10-item measure developed by Mills et al. (2004; $\alpha = .82$ at Time 1 and $.84$ at Time 2). To filter out participants who did not fully participate in the study, we asked all participants how often they had participated in their assigned activity and rated them as never, rarely, occasionally, fairly frequently, or always doing so. We excluded data from 4 participants who indicated they never or rarely took their assigned activity seriously.

We again measured Time 1 relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = .92$), sex, age, relationship status, social desirability, and relationship length. There were no differences between conditions on any of these variables (all F 's < 1 , n.s.), so we did not include them in the analysis.

Results

Nineteen participants who completed all measures at Time 1 dropped out by Time 2. Time 1 communal strength did not differ between participants who were included in analyses and those who were excluded because they did not complete all measures or failed to participate in their assigned activity, $t(95) = 0.41$, n.s.

An analysis of covariance controlling for Time 1 communal strength revealed a significant main effect of condition on Time 2 communal strength, $F(3, 70) = 4.07$, $p = .01$. Planned comparisons revealed that Time 2 communal strength was higher for participants in the expression-of-gratitude condition ($M = 7.89$, $SD = 1.03$) than for those in the thoughts-of-gratitude condition ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 70) = 4.07$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.34$; the neutral condition ($M = 7.39$, $SD = 1.05$), $F(1, 70) = 3.96$, $p = .05$, $d = 0.48$; and the positive-interaction condition ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 1.56$), $F(1, 70) = 12.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$ (see Table 2).

Discussion

As hypothesized, increasing the regularity and frequency of expressing gratitude enhanced participants' perception of the communal strength of their relationship with their friend. Given that participants were randomly assigned to conditions and that we controlled for Time 1 communal-strength scores, the significant increase in perception of communal strength in the expression-of-gratitude condition is attributable to the intervention.

General Discussion

This research focused on whether openly expressing gratitude to a friend or romantic partner leads to increased perceived communal strength of the relationship in the expresser's eyes. In three studies, we demonstrated—cross-sectionally, longitudinally, and experimentally—a relationship between expressing gratitude and perception of communal strength. In

Study 1, self-report of having expressed gratitude was associated with greater perceived communal strength of the relationship. In Study 2, expressing gratitude predicted increases in the perceived communal strength of the relationship across time, after controlling for Time 1 communal strength, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. In Study 3, we obtained experimental support for the hypothesis that expressing gratitude to a partner increases the perceived communal strength of that relationship.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the study is our exclusive use of college student samples, which restricts the generalizability of these findings to more diverse populations. In addition, we used a general measure of social desirability in these studies, and a relationship-specific measure of social desirability may be more appropriate for such studies in the future (e.g., Edmonds, 1967).

Although our research focused on documenting that expressing gratitude does increase the perceived communal strength of a relationship, future research should examine potential mechanisms for this effect. Why should expressing gratitude to a partner increase the *expresser's* perceptions of the relationship's communal strength? We propose a three-component answer. First, expressing gratitude constitutes a communication not only to the partner, but to the self as well. Through self-perception (Bem, 1967, 1972) or dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957), taking this action ought to convince expressers that they welcomed the partner's supportive action. In turn, this ought to convince expressers that they desire or have a communal relationship with the partner.

Second, the act of expressing gratitude can be seen as a responsive action directed toward the partner—an action indicating that one cares enough about the partner to reassure the partner that his or her actions were appreciated, appropriate, and desired. Again, through self-perception or dissonance reduction, being responsive to a partner should convince expressers that they have communal feelings toward the partner.

Finally, expressing gratitude is likely to have an actual impact on the partner. Conveying to the partner that his or her actions were appreciated and valued ought to encourage additional and possibly larger or more costly supportive acts on the partner's part. In this way, the actual communal strength of the relationship ought to be enhanced, and this effect also may be perceived and reciprocated by the participant.

In sum, we reiterate our beliefs that gratitude is a social emotion that serves important functions in relationships when it is expressed. Expression of gratitude signals to the target that his or her communal actions were both useful to and desired by the expresser. Thus, it validates the target's actions and encourages the target to repeat or even enhance efforts to be responsive to the partner; such efforts, in turn, should please the partner (increasing relationship satisfaction) and enhance the communal strength of

Table 2. Communal Strength at Time 1 and Time 2 in Study 3

Condition	Time 1		Time 2	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Expression of gratitude ($n = 19$)	6.69	1.40	7.89	1.03
Thoughts of gratitude ($n = 20$)	7.06	1.06	7.48	1.39
Neutral ($n = 17$)	6.94	0.75	7.39	1.05
Positive interaction ($n = 19$)	7.07	1.35	7.00	1.56

the relationship. The present work supports our theorizing that expressing gratitude to a partner serves an important communication function for the expresser as well. The very act of expressing gratitude signals to the expresser (through self-perception) that he or she both recognizes the target's responsiveness and welcomes that responsiveness. Given that expressing gratitude conveys one's desire for such support and willingness to receive it, such expressions should also increase a sense of dependency on the relationship, which may trigger thoughts of trusting the partner and even dissonance-reduction processes, which themselves may enhance a sense of communal strength. It may also be the case that expressing gratitude increases the expresser's perceived communal strength through a more interpersonal route. That is, expressing gratitude may make the partner feel good, encourage the partner's further communal actions, and thereby increase the extent to which the expresser views the relationship as communal. We will be conducting research to investigate these proposed mediators in the future.

Conclusion

It is worthwhile to step back from the data and take a broader perspective on expressions of gratitude. What we have done is to establish a link between expressing gratitude to a partner and feeling increased communal strength in the relationship. Moreover, we have provided clean evidence that expressing gratitude can cause increased perception of communal strength. This evidence supports our initial hypothesis regarding the effect of expression of gratitude on the expresser, but it remains important to establish which (if any) of our proposed mechanisms mediate the effect.

On a practical level, regardless of what the mediating mechanisms are, we have provided additional documentation that expressing gratitude, an easily modifiable behavior, can strengthen a close relationship. Some past research suggests that it may do so by increasing the relationship satisfaction of the recipient; the current research suggests it may do so by increasing the expresser's felt communal strength. Thus, therapists may well want to suggest this behavior, perhaps along with other behaviors with documented beneficial effects on relationships (e.g., sharing good news: Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; sharing exciting activities: Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000), to clients who seek ways to improve their relationships. Individuals not in therapy may be well advised to follow the same suggestion.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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