

Gratitude and financial virtue

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Professor DeSteno studies human emotion and behavior at Northeastern. Photo by Craig Bailey

(PhysOrg.com) -- Study by Northeastern psychologist finds feelings of gratitude prompt people to share their financial resources.

When it comes to money, the more grateful we are, the more likely we are to give on behalf of the greater good, according to new research conducted by Northeastern University associate professor of psychology David DeSteno.

The study, funded by the National Science Foundation, found that grateful people act virtuously by giving financially—and not just to the people who caused them to feel grateful in the first place.

A long-standing view has held that individuals tend to act out of self-interest and a drive for personal profit. Under this thinking, a financial decision that favors the greater good requires individuals to “tame” their emotions.

DeSteno argues, conversely, that emotions actually equip individuals to make decisions that foster long-term communal financial gain, even over immediate self-interest.

In the first part of his experiment, 85 participants undertook an arduous task. Once it was done, half of the participants were told that, because of a computer glitch, they had to perform the task a second time. At that point, a “volunteer” (actually one of the study’s researchers) seemed to fix the computer, meaning the task did not have to be repeated and creating a sense of gratitude among the individuals in that group. The other half of the participants—the control group—did not experience the computer glitch.

For the second part of the experiment, both groups played a game in which individuals chose an amount of money they would give to another. The rules of the game deliberately pitted self-interest against communal interest—maximizing individual profit would have to come at the expense of maximizing shared profit.

Study results showed that participants who felt grateful in the wake of the computer “help” gave away 25 percent more [money](#) than those in the control group, leading to a greater shared profit.

In addition, they did so regardless of whether they had ever met the people with whom they were playing the game, indicating that their giving was not a simple function of liking or feeling a debt toward others.

“It shows that gratitude shapes decisions toward communal profit, or the social good, even at our immediate expense,” says DeSteno. “We are fair and generous with others not because we think we should be, but because we feel an impulse in our gut that, in the long term, leads to greater stability in social networks.

“In essence,” he says, “[gratitude](#) leads to virtue in financial decisions. It makes you pay it forward.”

An article describing DeSteno’s research will be published in an upcoming issue of the journal *Emotion*.

Provided by Northeastern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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