Will Grateful Persons Certainly Reciprocate?

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that a person who receives help would feel grateful and pay back the gratitude. However, is gratitude always repaid? The present study is conducted by interviewing 20 participants to investigate their gratitude experiences and see whether gratitude is always be repaid. It is found that although the experiences of gratitude are different, there is definitely an object to be grateful for. Moreover, of all the 20 interviewee’s gratitude experiences, 14 interviewee’s gratitude experiences are not repaid. And for the cases of not being repaid, we conclude that there are two kinds of obstacles affecting the acts of repaying gratitude.

Keywords: gratitude, gratitude object, repaying behavior

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND MOTIVES

In the modern society, everything changes so rapidly, and people are indifferent to one another. Thus, however, it is necessary to connect positive interactions among people and to build or maintain relationships. At present, studies have shown gratitude is a topic worth advocating. Gratitude brings well-beings and benefits to individuals. Taking helping behaviors for example, gratitude has positive effects on others. Moreover, gratitude can cause positive effects on one’s organization. Taking shopping behaviors for example, it will increase customers’ repurchase intention and positive comments. As a consequence, if gratitude can be effectively utilized in the society and managerial systems, it can increase social harmony and organizational performance (Ting, 2016).

For a long time, gratitude has always been regarded as a virtue which can make people live better. I believe that, in the past experience, you and I have been told to know how to be grateful. And to be able to know that, we have to keep in mind who had ever helped us, and we shall be able to repay those gratitude. Baumgarten Tramer (1938) explored how children and adolescents expressed their gratitude. In her study, she defined four types of repaying behaviors, including “verbal gratefulness”, “concrete gratitude”, “connective gratitude” and “finalistic gratefulness”. In most cultural contexts, gratitude and verbal expressions are basic and expected responses (Emmons & Shelton, 2002). However, there is a literature gap since these studies have not explained whether gratitude would definitely be repaid. Gratitude must be expressed through people’s behaviors, so that the expressions of emotions can be completed. Thus, in terms of gratitude, a person’s behavioral performance is a key element (Emmons, 2008).

Are being grateful and repaying gratitude the same thing? Previous studies have made a distinction between “trait gratitude” and “state gratitude” (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, Linley & Joseph, 2008). Trait gratitude refers to an individual’s feelings about gratitude, which differs among individuals. However, state gratitude is an emotional response, which is produced by external stimuli and is a product of cognitive assessment. Moreover, it is often accompanied with extrinsic behavior of reciprocity in return to the specific object who had benefited him or her. Gratitude is the critical connection between acceptance
and giving. It is not only a response to the good receiving, but also a driving force for future repaying actions (Froh, Bono & Emmons, 2010). “Is gratitude always repaid?” Previous research has not clarified this yet. At present, it still remains unknown.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Is gratitude always repaid? It is an exploratory research question. Thus, we adopted the interview method to conduct the study. First, we selected the adult interviewees who still retain their memory of the gratitude experiences. Then, we invited them to the interview, and 20 subjects had eventually accepted. We continuously proceeded to ask the interviewees to describe their gratitude experiences according to their memory. Based on the interviewees’ accounts, we determined whether the gratitude would always be repaid, and if not, why not? The 20 interviewees were aged from 21 to 59 years old, lived in Taiwan, and came from a wide variety of backgrounds, including a flower farmer, a part-time student, a university faculty member, a manufacturing worker, a housewife, a cram school teacher, an elementary teacher, a restaurant owner, a gym employee, a clerk, a bank teller, an engineer, a freelancer, and a boss of car maintenance factory…etc. and twelve of them were female and eight were male.

**RESULTS**

According to the interview results, it was found that not every grateful interviewee could repay gratitude to the objects they felt grateful for. Ten of the twenty interviewees had mentioned the experiences of not being able to repay, which indicated that people got a favor or help from others, felt grateful, but they didn’t always repay gratitude. Fourteen of the interviewees stated that they failed to repay the favor for some reasons. The followings are their accounts:

**Beneficiary Factors**

1. **Insufficient capacity at the time**

   *I want to thank my seniors. When I just came to the company, the seniors gave me trainings, bestowing all knowledge upon me so that I could survive and do well in the company. I was very grateful for them, but I had no way to repay the gratitude. In fact, I didn’t have very excellent working performance and ability. Thus, I left the company (in Taipei) after I got married. And then I moved back to Tainan City to take care of my children and being a housewife. I had no chance to repay my seniors.* (Benefits from seniors)

   *My children had to attend the Buddhist scripture classes, and the teachers are very serious about teaching my children to read the classics. I was very grateful for those who had paid out the places and volunteered to teach the Bible studies. However, at that period of time, the lecture hall would need to be expanded, which needed everyone’s donations. I was not in very good financial situation then, so I didn’t give money as paying back their gratitude.* (Benefits from Teacher)

2. **Having no time at the time.**

   *At present, there is a person who I felt grateful for, but I haven’t repaid the gratitude. That is the principal of my elementary school. When I was taking an interview for college, he helped me write a recommendation letter. There was one thing that I always remember. When he had wanted someone to help him with the language plans, he asked me to help. But at that time I failed to help him because I was so busy then. After that, I always felt that I owed him. And now, he had already retired from the elementary school.* (Benefits from supervisor)
I have a friend who took care of me. We usually hanged out together and had fun. I run a maintenance factory for career, and he always has his car repaired and maintained in my maintenance factory. Recently, I know he has enrolled in the election of the city councilors, and has been busy with the election business, which definitely needs many people’s help. I really want to help, but I really don’t have time. I have to run the maintenance factory and take care of my mother because she is sick. Until now, I haven’t repaid the gratitude because I don’t have time. But if I have time, I will pay it back definitely. (Benefits from friend)

3. No contact information at that time

One day while I went downtown, I fell into the ditch. When I was in the ditch, many people had seen me, but they just passed by without lending me a hand. People just went by, and nobody had stopped to help. Eventually, there was a middle-aged man, a stranger, who went by and saw me. That was the only one who happened to pass by. He helped me out and pulled up my scooter together with me. After he helped with the scooter, he just left and I hadn’t had the chance to figure out who he was and to ask about his phone numbers. If there is a chance to meet him again, no matter what difficulties he is suffering, I would do my best to help him. After that, I didn’t meet him again. (Benefits from stranger)

Once upon a time, my family and I traveled overseas in Europe. We didn’t get the seat tickets, so there were not seats reserved for us. When we got on the train, we saw some seats available, and we just took the seats without thinking. However, when we got to our destination, we found out that the foreigners who had the tickets to the seats were standing nearby. They knew their seats were occupied by us, but just gave their seats to us. Because we were in such a rush to get off the train then, we had no chance to carry on a conversation with them, but just smiled and nodded. We really thanked them for giving us the seats because we brought two children and luggage with us. Thanks to the seat, without the seats, we couldn’t imagine how we can get through the train journey. That is my gratitude experience of not being able to pay back because there was no contact information, and we got no way to thank them. (Benefits from stranger)

When I was riding a motorcycle, the stranger reminded me that the scarf was too long and it might be swirled into the wheel. I was very grateful to him, because without his reminder, I might have had an accident. I felt sorry for not having a way of contact, and I couldn’t even say “thank you.” (Benefits from stranger)

4. I haven’t thought of any way to repay

My children’s teachers are very caring for the children. I am very grateful for them, but I don’t know how to repay them. If that is a female teacher, I would send homemade lotus seeds to her, while if that is a male teacher, I would have no idea. Besides, some teachers have religious beliefs and would invite us to attend their parties. However, we already have our own religious beliefs and cannot participate their parties and repay their favors. (Benefits from teacher)

Once time I was on the way to carry hot-sour soup, the soup was slipped. People who went past were just looking and left. Only the neighbor came to help me and clean for me. If that neighbor needs any help, I would definitely help her out, but not help her with money. (Benefits from neighbor)

The employees are very serious at work. I am very grateful to them. I don’t know how to repaying them. If they need help, I will help them as much as possible. (Benefits from employees)

5. The interviewee didn’t repay aggressively

A couple years ago, I saw an injured cat on the road and took that cat to see a doctor. I raised money to save that cat. The neighbor donated 1,000 NT Dollars and a can of food to help the injured cat. When people were donating money, I told the donators that they could obtain a hand-made card if they donated. However, I haven’t had the courage to ring the doorbell to give the card to the neighbor who had donated. (Benefits from neighbor)
I am very grateful to my teacher. Thanks to her help and encouragement, I could enter the first-minded high school and attend the national university. Now, when I look back the past, I am really grateful to my junior high school teacher. Even though our school was a school with a lower progression rate, my teacher still taught me with great efforts. All my good performances and achievements were due to the junior high school teacher. Although my classmates had had class reunion, I didn’t participated in it. As a consequence, there was no way for me to repay the teacher. (Benefits from teacher)

Benefactor Factors
1. Because the benefactor refuses the rewards

I thank my friend. We know each other in the running activities. Not long ago, I told my friend that I was suffering from the sleep problems. He suggested a book about meditation. I took his advice to read the book and learned to sit still and meditate. That was very helpful for me, so I was very grateful for him and wanted to repay him. However, he refused my repaying. He just wanted me to help those who were in the same situation like me. (Benefits from friend)

I am grateful to my colleague. We usually work together cooperatively. Sometimes, I have to take a temporary leave, and he has to take care of my responsibilities all by himself, which adds work load to him. I am so thankful for my colleague, so I intended to treat him meals and drinks. But he always turned me on. He said this was nothing but good cooperation between colleagues. He was always willing to help. (Benefits from colleagues)

I was grateful for the school seniors(school brothers and sisters) because they introduced the part-time job opportunities. Without them, I couldn’t work as a teacher teaching the students. However, because we had chosen different classes, I seldom had chances to meet them. I wanted to invite the senior students to dinner, but they refused. I really didn’t know how to repay them. (Benefits from senior students).

2. Because the benefactor has passed away

In my childhood, my family and I had no place to live in due to a severe flood. I lived with my grandfather because my family wasn’t not good in economic status. My grandfather always helped, and I was very grateful for him. When my grandfather was getting old and sent to the long-term nursing care center, I felt frustrates and sad. Now my grandfather has passed away, and there is no way to repay his kindness. (Benefits from family member)

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

According to the interview results, in 20 interviewees, 14 people’s gratitude experiences were not paying back. The study can be determined that gratitude is not necessarily repaid. The reason why it is not paid back is basically because some obstacles hinder the repaying act. These obstacles can be summarized into the following two categories:

1. The obstacles stemming from recipients themselves
   (1) No ability, no opportunity
   (2) No time
   (3) Not knowing the benefactor
   (4) Hesitating how to return
   (5) No aggressive attitude to repay
2. Obstacles from benefactors
   (1) The rejection of the benefactor
   (2) The benefactor has passed away

   The findings of this study not only answer the question of whether gratitude will always be repaid, but also what the obstacles are.

   There are a lot of studies about the benefits of gratitude. Gratefulness helps to enhance personal sense of well-being. In terms of an organization, gratitude helps to generate repurchase intentions, appraise and long-term performance benefits. Gratitude will increase people’s occurrence of altruistic behaviors. It is an important factor in establishing and maintaining social relationships and is beneficial to individuals, organizations and society (Ting, 2017). In previous research, some of gratitude's benefits belong to the act of caused by gratitude. However, in this study find there are some obstacles that hinder the act of repaying before the appearance of repaying, therefore, with the results of this study, understanding the obstacles which hinder the act of repaying, and excluding these obstacles will help boost the gratitude repaying behaviors.

   The scope of this study is established within state gratitude, rather than trait gratitude. All the interviewees described their gratitude experiences, and they all mentioned the object of their gratitude. This fully verified Ting's study, in which gratitude is necessary to have an object.

   This present study is a cross-sectional study, and it can’t specify whether the unrepaid gratitude would be paid back one day. Perhaps time will be an important factor. If we can use longitudinal research, long-term follow-up, and the results of gratitude finally can or can't be repaid, which will complement the process of gratitude.

   In the past, scholars only proposed the gratitude course in three sections, feeling the gratitude, being grateful and repaying gratitude. However, the study indicates that one might go through only the first two stages, but not the last stage, to repay the gratitude, and in this study, the influential obstacles for repaying gratitude were our important findings of this study. And the findings can provide some help in gratitude-related practical applications. It can help to exclude the obstacles of influence, and let people display their repaying behaviors in time.

   However, is there any connection between repaying obstacles and the roles of beneficiary and benefactors? For example, is the obstacle of repaying gratitude to relatives and friends the same as which to strangers? If a person got help without repaying gratitude, would it influence the inter-relationship between the beneficiary and the benefactor? Is the obstacle of repaying behavior related to the roles of benefactor and the beneficiary? For example, is the help between friends and relatives the same as the barriers to getting help from strangers? Does the repaying act affect the interpersonal relationship of the beneficiary and the benefactors? The obstacle factors that cannot repaying are from the benefactors, or from the beneficiary. Does it lead to the alienation or concern of the relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary? These are the possible topics for further studies.

   REFERENCES


