Gratitude and Costly Third Party Punishment

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Abstract

Previous research on the emotion gratitude has shown that it leads people to value the future more than they otherwise would, taking decisions in the ‘long-term’ instead of the ‘short-term’ (Henrich et al. 2006). Costs to third-party punishment can be conceptualized as initiating a short-term cost for long-term benefit of a world in which social norms are enforced. Bringing together these findings, we demonstrate that feeling grateful leads to greater short-term cost of punishment for the long-term benefit of a world in which social norms are enforced.

Background

• Line of research on emotion: Emotions play profound roles in our evaluations, judgments, and decisions. Gratitude specifically (beyond just general positivity), has been shown to bias our thought to be more future oriented (DeSteno et al. 2010, 2014). Gratitude specifically (beyond just general positivity), has been shown to bias our thought to be more future oriented (DeSteno et al. 2010, 2014).

• Line of research on cooperation: People will pay a cost to punish unfair behavior, even when they are not personally impacted by it. This is called costly third-party punishment (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004). This work adds that feeling grateful for something done for a positive long-term reason. In addition, this work provides further evidence for the long term benefit of altruism and punishment (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004). This work adds that feeling grateful for something done for a positive long-term reason. In addition, this work provides further evidence for the long term benefit of altruism and punishment (Fehr & Fischbacher 2004).

• Gratitude makes us more likely to do things that involve a short term cost for a long term gain, a scheme that costly third party punishment follows.

• We hypothesize that grateful people will engage in more costly third party punishment than neutral or happy people.

Approach

N = 96, Northeastern undergraduates participating for course credit and monetary incentive.

• The experiment involved a deception, participants thought they were completing two separate studies – one on memory, one on financial decision making.

• “Memory Study” was actually a real-time emotion induction. The emotion is incidental to the coming decision.

• Participants wrote about a time they were grateful, happy, or a normal day (neutral condition) for 5 minutes.

• After the emotion induction, participants played in the third party punishment game.

Methodology

Participants were randomly divided into conditions: happy, neutral, and grateful. Gratitude was induced for 4-5 minutes, after which participants were told that they were going to play a game. In this game, they could allocate money to a person who made a payment split with the other player. If participants chose to allocate money, they were told they would lose a corresponding amount. The amount was tripled for unfair behavior.

• 1. Player 1 chooses a split of 100% for himself and 0% for Player 2.
• 2. Player 3 can choose to spend 1, 2, or 3 tokens to punish Player 1. This makes punishment a costly affair.
• 3. When Player 3 chooses to punish, Player 1 loses the amount times 3 from his endowment. Player 3 loses the amount of time 2 from the amount he keeps and did not split with player 2.

This is called costly third party punishment.

• As predicted, there is a significant main effect of emotion, where grateful people punish more than happy or neutral people. This holds for all of the different dictator splits, and can be seen when looking at the collapsed averages as well.

• First, the emotion manipulation was successful. For our main measures, there are 2 important takeaways:

  1. There is a downward linear trend in third party punishment as player 1 makes fairer splits.
  2. As predicted, there is a significant main effect of emotion, where grateful people punish more than happy or neutral people, and happy and neutral people don’t significantly differ. This holds for all of the different dictator splits, and can be seen when looking at the collapsed averages as well.

Results

Costly Third Party Punishment Preferences: Linear Trends

Costly Third Party Punishment Preferences: Averages

Public Policy

• There is a movement underway to incorporate behavioral science into public policy.

• Emotions will unquestionably be a part of this movement.

• Ex: gratitude increased self reported medical adherence and well being following acute coronary syndrome (Millstein et al. 2016).

• If emotions are going to be leveraged in policy that impacts the public, it’s imperative that we understand all the effects an emotion has on behavior.

Impact

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