

**2012 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowships Proposal for
Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management**

Gratitude, Guilt, and Gift-Giving

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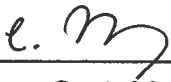
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Descriptive Summary

Gratitude is an emotion that may be particularly important for cultivating close relationships. Gratitude motivates cooperation and prosocial acts, and is proposed to have evolved to help detect and remediate welfare imbalances between relationship partners. For example, an individual who notices that a friend provides social support during difficult times (e.g., in response to work-related stress or romantic difficulties) may feel grateful for the social support. That gratitude may, in turn, motivate the individual to provide social support in return, as is typical in communally oriented relationships.

Many of the functional benefits of gratitude are shared with another emotion that is seemingly less positive: guilt. An individual who notices that a friend provides social support during difficult times could also feel guilty for being a burden to the friend, instead of or in addition to feeling grateful. This guilt, like the gratitude, may then motivate the individual to provide social support to the friend in return. But the guilt-motivated support may originate from a sense of obligation, as it typical in exchange-oriented relationships. Gratitude and guilt are thus two emotions that can arise from similar conditions—a perceived imbalance of resources exchanged in a relationship—and that can produce superficially similar behaviors. Despite these similarities, the underlying feelings and relationship construals associated with gratitude and guilt may result in distinctly different social connections.

In this research, we examine how gratitude and guilt are expressed through the interpersonally connecting act of gift giving, and what the consequences are of gratitude- versus guilt-motivated gifts in close relationships. We have collected pilot data in five field and laboratory studies.

Study 1 demonstrated that feelings of gratitude and guilt can arise from the same situation of social inequity. People tend to feel grateful or guilty when there is a disparity in how much each relationship partner has contributed to the relationship; however, gratitude and guilt differentially arise based on whether one focuses more on one partner going beyond expectations or on one partner falling short of expectations. Gratitude was more strongly associated with a focus on the other's generosity; guilt was more strongly associated with a focus on one's own shortcomings.

Study 2 was a two-part study that examined the impact of expressing gratitude and guilt following a situation of social inequity. In part one, participants were focused either on their roommate's generosity (grateful condition) or on their own shortcomings (guilty condition) in a given scenario. Participants then created a notecard for their roommate. Guilty participants reported a greater improvement than grateful participants in how close they would feel to their roommate as a result of giving the notecard. In part two, participants read the same scenario and imagined themselves in the recipient role. Participants who received a notecard made by a

grateful participant from part one reported they would feel closer to their roommate, compared to participants who received a notecard made by a guilty participant from part one.

Study 3 examined gift-giving in the context of Father's Day. In a two-part study, fathers who received a gift from a child who felt grateful reported greater feelings of connection to their child following Father's Day. Receiving a gift from a child who felt guilty did not lead to this boost in connection.

Study 4 examined natural variability in perceived gratitude versus guilt. Individuals who recalled a recent gift they had received reported feeling more connected to the giver when the gift was perceived to be motivated by gratitude. Recipients felt less connected to the giver when the gift was perceived to be motivated by guilt. The perceived thoughtfulness mediated these effects.

Study 5 found that friends and family members who exchanged holiday gifts were relatively accurate in estimating how grateful and guilty their gift exchange partner felt, as well as how much thought was put into their gift. This study highlights the ecological validity of giving gifts motivated by feelings of gratitude and guilt.

We have thus far obtained pilot data suggesting that gifts that are motivated by gratitude are more socially connecting than those motivated by guilt. In replicating and extending these studies, we will more precisely examine how gratitude and guilt influences the selection of different gifts, and whether those emotions can influence the interpersonal actions surrounding the exchange of gifts. We will also seek to demonstrate more precisely the gift attributes that signal underlying motives of gratitude versus guilt. We will examine how these emotions may differentially arise in exchange and communally oriented relationships. Finally, we will include various control conditions to help tease apart the role of gratitude and guilt from overall valence.

This research will advance the understanding of gratitude and guilt in social interactions. Our preliminary research indicates that gratitude has substantial power to socially connect people. Our approach is particularly important in the study of gratitude and guilt given the inherent social nature of the emotion. This research also highlights the similarities and differences between gratitude and guilt, which are typically studied independently despite their similar functions and their potential to arise in the same situation and relationship. Finally, this research reveals the benefits of practicing gratitude in close relationships.