

More Than Merely Positive:

The Immediate Affective and Motivational Consequences of Gratitude

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Abstract

Although gratitude is typically conceptualized as a positive emotion, it may also induce socially-oriented negative feelings, such as indebtedness and guilt. Given its mixed emotional experience, we argue that gratitude motivates people to improve themselves in important life domains. Two single time point studies tested the immediate emotional and motivational effects of expressing gratitude. We recruited employees ($N = 224$) from French companies in Study 1 and students ($N = 1,026$) from U.S. high schools in Study 2. Participants in both studies were randomly assigned to either write gratitude letters to benefactors or outline their weekly activities (control).

Expressing gratitude led to a mixed emotional experience (e.g., greater elevation and indebtedness) for both employees and students, relative to controls. Students also felt more motivated and capable of improving themselves, as well as conveyed stronger intentions to muster effort towards self-improvement endeavors. (141 words)

Keywords: gratitude, emotion, motivation, self-improvement, well-being, positive activity intervention