

Research reveals autonomous individuals dislike gratitude and explores connection to interpersonal relationships

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When you receive a gift from someone, do you have feelings of gratitude? Or do you feel obliged and burdened to reciprocate the gesture? Not everyone experiences gratitude in response to the generosity of others, according to new psychology research in the journal *Cognition and Emotion*.

What could temper [gratitude](#) for some people? One answer could have to do with autonomous personal style, one's sense of independence and self-reliance.

In one of the first published results examining [autonomy](#) in relation to gratitude, American University associate psychology professor Anthony Ahrens and his graduate students report on three studies that involved more than 500 participants. They used a self-report measure to determine levels of autonomy. Across the studies, individuals higher in autonomy (not wanting to depend on others or be depended on) experienced less gratitude, and they also valued gratitude less.

"There's nothing wrong with self-reliance and valuing autonomy. The concern is, to what extent could that interfere with the processes that bind people together?" Ahrens said.

Gratitude = relationship glue

Gratitude has been widely studied in psychology, and researchers are finding evidence for its many benefits. It helps to build relationships. It's been associated with physical and mental well-being. In Ahrens' research, autonomy was characterized by responses to questions about topics such as how much respondents liked to rely on others for help or to have others depend on them.

In the first study, participants reacted to receiving a hypothetical gift or favor, with the more

autonomous individuals feeling less positive about receiving a hypothetical gift from a friend. In the second study, the results reaffirmed higher autonomous individuals' relative dislike of gratitude. The researchers went a step further in the third study to gain more insight into whether autonomy could interfere with compassion. Just as hypothesized, more autonomous individuals were more focused on presenting themselves well and less so on supporting others in relationships.

"Relationship quality could suffer without expressions of gratitude. A person who is more autonomous might misinterpret a well-meaning gesture by her partner. A compassionate action could be seen as intrusive instead of supportive," Ahrens said. "Other research has shown autonomy could lead to an aversion to any form of reliance on others, making individuals vulnerable to depression."

Next steps

Ahrens theorizes that people who value independence to a high degree dislike gratitude and think it could make them weak. The next steps in the research will be to explore certain cultural messages related to autonomy.

"Contemporary American culture emphasizes autonomy," Ahrens said. "It's possible cultural messages lead people to value autonomy and less so gratitude. Examining how autonomy and gratitude interact in the interpersonal realm will hopefully lend insight into how best to cultivate the positive experiences of shared connection, healthy independence, and increased emotional well-being."

Provided by American University

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