

## The norm of reciprocity as an internalized social norm: Returning favors even when no one finds out

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We examined whether individuals return favors even when the initial favor giver will never know of their behavior. A confederate gave undergraduate participants in one condition an unexpected bottle of water, whereas other participants received no favor. Later the confederate asked participants to take a survey home with them and return it to a specified place during a specified time 2 or 3 days later. Half the participants believed the confederate herself would be present to receive the survey, and half were told to return the survey to a drop-off box. Participants who received a favor were more likely to return the survey than those who received no favor. Moreover, this reciprocity effect was found regardless of whether the requester would know of the participant's behavior. The results lend support to an internalized social norm explanation for the reciprocity effect.

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Most adults readily agree when a co-worker who helped them move last month asks for some assistance with his or her own move this coming weekend. People typically make a point to send birthday presents to those who remembered their birthday. And most of us have no problem buying lunch for a friend who picked up the tab the last time we shared a meal. In each of these examples, individuals are following the norm of reciprocity. The reciprocity norm is a social rule that maintains, among other things, that people should return favors and other acts of kindness (Gouldner, 1960). Adherence to this rule allows for smooth and fair social exchanges.

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However, the norm can also be exploited by those who seek to gain an unfair advantage. Numerous studies find the reciprocity norm often plays a role in compliance to requests (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Specifically, requesters can trigger the norm by performing a small, often unsolicited, favor. If this tactic is successful, the recipient is more likely to agree to a subsequent, often larger, request from the favor-giver than is someone who received no favor.

Most experimental tests of the reciprocity norm have relied on a procedure developed by Regan (1971). Participants in that investigation worked on an art evaluation task in the same room as a confederate posing as another participant. In one condition the confederate left the room during a break and returned with a soft drink for himself as well as one for the real participant. In another condition the confederate left the room but returned with no soft drinks. Later the confederate asked the participant if he would like to purchase some raffle tickets. Consistent with the reciprocity norm, participants purchased more tickets when they had first received a favor from the requester than when they had received no favor. Moreover, the tendency to return favors did not depend on whether the confederate was seen as pleasant or unpleasant.

This reciprocity effect has been replicated in several subsequent investigations (Burger, Ehrlichman, Raymond, Ishikawa, & Sandoval, 2006; Burger, Horita, Kinoshita, Roberts, & Vera, 1997; Whatley, Webster, Smith, & Rhodes, 1999). Moreover, real-world examples of the reciprocity effect abound (Cialdini, 2001; Levine, 2003). Free gifts, “no obligation” demonstrations, free tastings, and the like are common experiences for the average consumer, who often finds it difficult not to return the favor by buying the product.

But why do people adhere to this social rule that tells them to return favors? Researchers have identified two explanations. First, individuals may return favors out of a concern for what the other person will think of them. According to this self-presentation account the reciprocity norm is widely understood, and people who violate the norm may be seen as ungrateful or as “free-loaders” (Cialdini, 2001). Moreover, people enjoy the rewards that come from showing others that they return favors. Giving a birthday present to someone who recently remembered your birthday is particularly satisfying when the gift is delivered in person.

The second explanation for returning favors points to internal standards of behavior (Perugini, Gallucci, Presaghi, & Ercolani, 2003). The widespread acceptance of the reciprocity norm may lead individuals to adopt the rule as a personal standard for evaluating their own behavior. According to this internalized social norm account, people feel good about themselves when they “do the right thing” and return favors. They may also chastise themselves when they fail to live up to the reciprocity rule. We should note that the two explanations for the reciprocity effect are not mutually

exclusive. People may return favors because of both self-presentation concerns and internalized standards.

The present experiment was designed to expand our understanding of the motives underlying the reciprocity effect. In particular, we wanted to know whether people would reciprocate a favor even in a situation in which no one would know whether the favor was returned. Put another way, we were asking whether internalized social norms are powerful enough to generate a reciprocity effect in the absence of self-presentation motives. Only one study to date provides data relevant to this question. Whatley et al. (1999) asked participants to make per-mile charity run pledges after receiving or not receiving a favor from the requester. Half the participants were instructed to put their name and contact information on the pledge card, and half did not receive this instruction. Presumably the identified participants were to be contacted later by the requester who would inform them of the amount they were to pay. The researchers found evidence for both self-presentation motives and internalized standards. That is, participants were more likely to donate money when they put their names on the pledge card, as predicted from the self-presentation explanation. However, consistent with the notion of internalized norms, participants also were more likely to donate money when they had first received a favor whether or not they gave their name.

Although Whatley et al.'s findings are consistent with the notion that people reciprocate favors even in the absence of self-presentation motives, we should be cautious about drawing conclusions from this study. In all conditions, the requester was not present when the experimenter handed the written request to the participant. Participants put their pledge cards in sealed envelopes, which the experimenter took supposedly to mail to the charitable agency. Although donating participants who gave their name expected to receive information in the future about the donation amount, there was no condition in which participants thought they would ever see the requester again. Consequently, it seems unlikely that participants anticipated the requester's gratitude or the requester's disapproval as a result of donating or not donating. In other words, it is not clear whether self-presentation motives would have been operating in any of these conditions.

We used a variation of the Regan procedure to examine the effects of self-presentation concerns and internalized social norms separately. We had a confederate either perform or not perform a favor for participants and at some later point make a request to those participants. Half the participants were told they could return the favor only in the presence of the requester, whereas the other half were told they could only return the favor anonymously. If internalized social norms are responsible at least in part for the reciprocity effect, then we would expect people to return favors even when they do so anonymously. On the other hand, if people return favors

only when their behavior is known by others, it would suggest that self-presentation motives are largely responsible for the reciprocity effect.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 120 undergraduates, 25 men and 95 women, participated in the study in exchange for class credit.

### Procedures

Participants arrived at the lab room one at a time. About 1 minute later a female confederate posing as another participant arrived. A female experimenter explained that the study was designed to examine the relationship between personality and “cognitive perceptual skills,” and that participants would complete a task measuring their cognitive perceptual skills followed by a personality test. The skills task was in reality a bogus activity included to enhance the cover story. Participants placed an eye patch over one eye and were given a sheet of paper containing six rows of random letters in progressively smaller font. They were given 2 minutes to cross out as many *a*, *g*, and *k* letters as they could find. After collecting the task sheets the experimenter looked through her papers and announced that she had run out of personality tests. She explained that she would have to leave for about 5 minutes to make some photocopies. A few seconds after the experimenter left the room the confederate said she would use the break to go to the bathroom and also left the room.

Participants had been randomly assigned to either the favor condition or the no-favor condition. In the favor condition the confederate returned a few minutes later with two bottles of water. She explained that she had passed a Biology Club meeting just as it was ending and that club members had offered her a leftover bottle of water. The confederate handed one of the bottles to the participants and said, “Here. I got one for you, too.” All participants accepted the water. In the no-favor condition the confederate returned with no bottles of water.

At that point the experimenter re-entered the room and passed out the personality test. She told participants that the test was the last step in the study and that they could just leave their completed tests face down on the table when finished. The experimenter once again left the room. The confederate paced herself so that she appeared to complete the test more quickly than the participant. After turning her test over, the confederate asked the participant if the participant could do her a favor. The confederate then pulled a two-page form labeled “Popular Culture Survey” and an envelope from her backpack. She said:

If you don't mind, could you fill out this survey for me? I'm doing research with one of the psychology professors, and I need to find some people to complete this survey. Could you complete this and drop it off in the department office on the second floor of this building? I've listed the times on the envelope when you can return the survey. If you're not interested, feel free to throw it away. I'll leave it here for you.

Participants had been randomly assigned to either the anonymous condition or the non-anonymous condition. In the anonymous condition the confederate added that she would not be in the department office during the times indicated for returning the survey, but that the survey could be returned in a clearly labeled drop-off box. In the non-anonymous conditions the confederate added that she would be in the department office during the indicated times to collect the surveys.

The confederate then set the survey and envelope on the table next to the participant and left. The times indicated on the envelope for returning the survey were two 2-hour blocks 2 and 3 days after the day of the experiment. The survey contained 12 questions asking about preferences in music, television shows, Internet sites, etc. and took approximately 5 minutes to complete. In both the anonymous and non-anonymous conditions participants who came to the department office to return their surveys found a drop-off box with instructions for the participant to simply leave the completed form in the box. The survey forms had been secretly coded to identify the condition of participants who returned the survey.

## RESULTS

The number and percentage of participants who complied with the request are shown in Table 1. A loglinear analysis revealed a significant main effect for the favor variable,  $\chi^2(1, N=120)=10.14, p=.001, \phi=.29$ . Participants who received a favor from the confederate (28.3%) complied more often than those who received no favor (5.0%). Thus we replicated the basic reciprocity effect. However, as can be seen in the table, the reciprocity effect was not affected by the anonymity variable,  $\chi^2(1, N=120)=0.54, p=.46$ .

TABLE 1  
Percent of participants complying with request

|          | <i>Non-anonymous</i> | <i>Anonymous</i> |
|----------|----------------------|------------------|
| Favor    | 26.7<br>(8/30)       | 30.0<br>(9/30)   |
| No Favor | 0.0<br>(0/30)        | 10.0<br>(3/30)   |

Participants who anticipated that the confederate would learn of their response (13.3%) did not comply at a significantly different rate than participants who believed their response would be anonymous (20.0%). Moreover, adding the interaction effect to the analysis did not increase the amount of variance accounted for (Entropy measure=.124 without interaction; Entropy measure=.128 with interaction). In short, the decision to reciprocate the favor was not dependent on whether the requester or anyone else would learn of the participant's good deed.

## DISCUSSION

As in previous studies, our participants were more likely to agree to a request when they had earlier received a favor from the requester. This reciprocity effect was found regardless of whether the requester would ever know about the participant's behavior. The results suggest that internalized social norms play a large role in the decision to return favors. Returning an act of kindness can generate a sense of self-satisfaction, and failing to return a favor may lead to self-criticism. These internal standards apparently were sufficiently motivating to lead our participants to complete and return the survey.

Interestingly, we found no evidence that self-presentation motives contributed to the decision to return the favor. Our findings should not be interpreted to mean that self-presentation concerns play no role in reciprocity decisions. On the contrary, given the well-documented effects of self-presentation on a number of behaviors it seems likely that concern for what others think often contributes to decisions about performing favors. One reason why we did not find self-presentation effects in this study may have been that we took advantage of only half of the self-presentation concerns potentially operating in reciprocity situations. That is, our non-anonymous participants anticipated the opportunity to experience the experimenter's gratitude and praise by returning the favor. But because non-anonymous participants who did nothing would never see the confederate again, there was no incentive to return the favor as a way to avoid the confederate's disapproval. This observation raises the interesting possibility that the fear of disapproval may be a stronger motive to return favors than the pleasure one gets from approval.

Previous researchers have found that putting individuals in a positive mood sometimes increases helping behavior (Isen, Shalke, Clark, & Karp, 1978). We cannot rule out the possibility that participants in our study returned the requester's favor in part because receiving a bottle of water put them in a positive mood. However, we can make two arguments against this interpretation. First, participants were asked to take the survey home with them and return it 2 or 3 days later. It is unlikely that any mood change resulting from a free bottle of water would have lasted that long. Second,

previous investigators have ruled out a mood interpretation of the reciprocity effect by including a condition in which the favor was delivered by someone other than the requester (Burger et al., 2006; Regan, 1971). These studies find no increase in compliance in this condition relative to a control condition. Nonetheless, future investigations of the reciprocity norm need to be mindful of the possibility of mood effects. Future investigators might also develop procedures to measure and test proposed mediators of the reciprocity effect, i.e., the strength of self-presentation concerns and internalized standards.

Finally, our findings also are consistent with an evolutionary interpretation of the reciprocity norm (Wilson & Sober, 1994). That is, an inherited tendency to return favors rather than act solely on self-interest would likely help groups of people and societies survive. Like internalized social norms, this kind of inherited characteristic could operate in the absence of self-presentation concerns. At any rate, our findings demonstrate that people sometimes choose to do the right thing—in this case, doing a favor for someone who did a favor for them—without worrying about the approval or disapproval of others.

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