Gratitude and Nonconscious Mimicry Behavior

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One of the challenges people face throughout their lifetimes is successfully creating social bonds. Past research supports the idea that gratitude is an emotion that helps to motivate the formation and maintenance of social bonds. However, research has not addressed gratitude’s nonconscious effects on people’s motivations to affiliate. One nonverbal behavior that assists in bonding is nonconscious mimicry—the mirroring of another person’s motor movements. The current research investigated gratitude’s influence on nonconscious mimicry.

In two studies, we examined if people experiencing gratitude would be more motivated to bond, and if this would present in increased nonconscious mimicry. In both studies, participants interacted with one confederate, who either fixed their computer—inducing gratitude—or maintained a neutral relationship. Then, participants had a conversation with a second confederate. In Study 1, this confederate had a natural conversation with the participant, which was videorecorded and coded for different nonverbal behaviors. Although we did not find the predicted mimicry results, we did find that affiliative behaviors were associated with liking of the confederate, and that gratitude predicted these behaviors.

In Study 2, we used the same paradigm but trained the second confederate to engage in constant foot shaking; video recordings were then coded for this behavior. Results demonstrated that participants in the gratitude condition mimicked the confederate’s behavior significantly more frequently and for longer durations than those in a neutral condition. Taken together, these findings indicate gratitude can help to nonconsciously motivate and achieve affiliation goals.