Greed, Not Generosity, More Likely to Be ‘Paid Forward’

Paying it forward -- a popular expression for extending generosity to others after someone has been generous to you -- is a heartwarming concept, but it is less common than repaying greed with greed, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

“The idea of paying it forward is this cascade of goodwill will turn into a utopia with everyone helping everyone,” said lead researcher Kurt Gray, PhD. “Unfortunately, greed or looking out for ourselves is more powerful than true acts of generosity.”

The study, published online in APA’s Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, is the first systematic investigation of paying forward generosity, equality or greed, according to the authors.

“The bulk of the scientific research on this concept has focused on good behavior, and we wondered what would happen when you looked at the entire gamut of human behaviors,” said Gray, an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, who conducted the study with researchers at Harvard University.

In five experiments involving money or work, participants who received an act of generosity didn’t pay generosity forward any more than those who had been treated equally. But participants who had been the victims of greed were more likely to pay greed forward to a future recipient, creating a negative chain reaction. Women and men showed the same levels of generosity and greed in the study.

In one experiment, researchers recruited 100 people from subway stations and tourist areas in Cambridge, Mass., to play an economic game. They told participants that someone had split $6 with them and then gave them an envelope that contained the entire $6 for a generous split, $3 for an equal split, or nothing for a greedy split. The participants then received an additional $6 that they could split in another envelope with a future recipient, essentially paying it forward.

Receiving a generous split didn’t prompt any greater generosity than receiving equal treatment, but people who received nothing in the first envelope were more likely to put little or nothing in the second envelope, depriving future recipients because of the greed they had experienced. The average amount paid forward by participants who received a greedy split was $1.32, well below an equal split of $3.

The results confirmed the researchers’ hypothesis that greed would prevail because negative stimuli have more powerful effects on thoughts and actions than positive stimuli. Focusing on the negative may cause unhappiness, but it makes sense as an evolutionary survival skill, Gray said. “If there is a tiger nearby, you really have to take notice or you’ll get eaten,” he said. “If there is a beautiful sunset or delicious food, it’s not a life-or-death situation.”

The study also examined whether people would have similar reactions involving work rather than money. In one online experiment, researchers told 60 participants that four tasks needed to be completed, including two easy word association games and two boring, repetitive tasks that involved circling vowels in dense Italian text. They explained to the participants that someone had already split the work with them, leaving them the two fun tasks in a generous split, one fun task and one boring task in an equal split, or both boring tasks in a greedy split. The participants then had to complete those tasks and split an additional four tasks with a future recipient. The results were the same, with greed being paid forward more than generosity.

“We all like to think that being generous will influence others to treat someone nicely, but it doesn’t automatically create a chain of goodwill,” said Gray. “To create chains of positive behavior, people should focus less on performing random acts of generosity and more on treating others equally -- while refraining from random acts of greed.”

Article: “Paying It Forward: Generalized Reciprocity and the Limits of Generosity,” Kurt Gray, PhD, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Adrian F. Ward, MA; and Michael I. Norton, PhD, Harvard University; Journal of Experimental Psychology: General; online Dec. 17, 2012.