

Social Cognitive Processing of Gratitude Expressions

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Introduction

Gratitude is a positive emotion that motivates prosocial behavior and strengthens social relationships. Past research shows expressing gratitude can increase others' intentions to affiliate and improve people's perceptions of an expressor as interpersonally warm and friendly (Williams & Bartlett, 2015). However, there is limited research regarding *how* expressions of gratitude are initially processed during first impressions.

This study explores how people process grateful vs neutral individuals. We predicted that individuals would perceive targets expressing gratitude more positively and would remember them more accurately and selectively than neutral targets. These findings might suggest that gratitude contributes to stronger and more favorable first impressions.

- **H1:** Participants will have greater recall for details about grateful targets compared to neutral targets.
- **H2:** Participants will form significantly more positive explicit *and* implicit positive evaluations of grateful targets compared to neutral targets.
- **H3:** Participants will show a significantly stronger preference for grateful targets over neutral targets as potential study interaction partners.

Methods

Participants

- $N=95$ Sona participants ($M=19.03$ years, $SD=0.95$) 82% female, 18% male. 54% White, 17% Hispanic, 8% Black, 4% Asian, 17% Other or mixed race

Materials/Measures

- Measures and tasks administered via a Qualtrics Survey
 - Participants read bios from four other ostensible "students" (targets)
 - Participants completed the **Affect Misattribution Procedure** (AMP; Payne et al., 2005)
 - Participants completed an **active recall task** (Gardner et al., 2005)
 - Participants evaluated their liking for targets and self-reported their preferences for targets as a study partner
- Participants completed several individual difference measures:
 - Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003)
 - The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002)
 - UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)
 - Need to Belong Scale (NTBS; Leary et al., 2001)
 - Dominance-Prestige scales (Cheng et al., 2010)

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Results

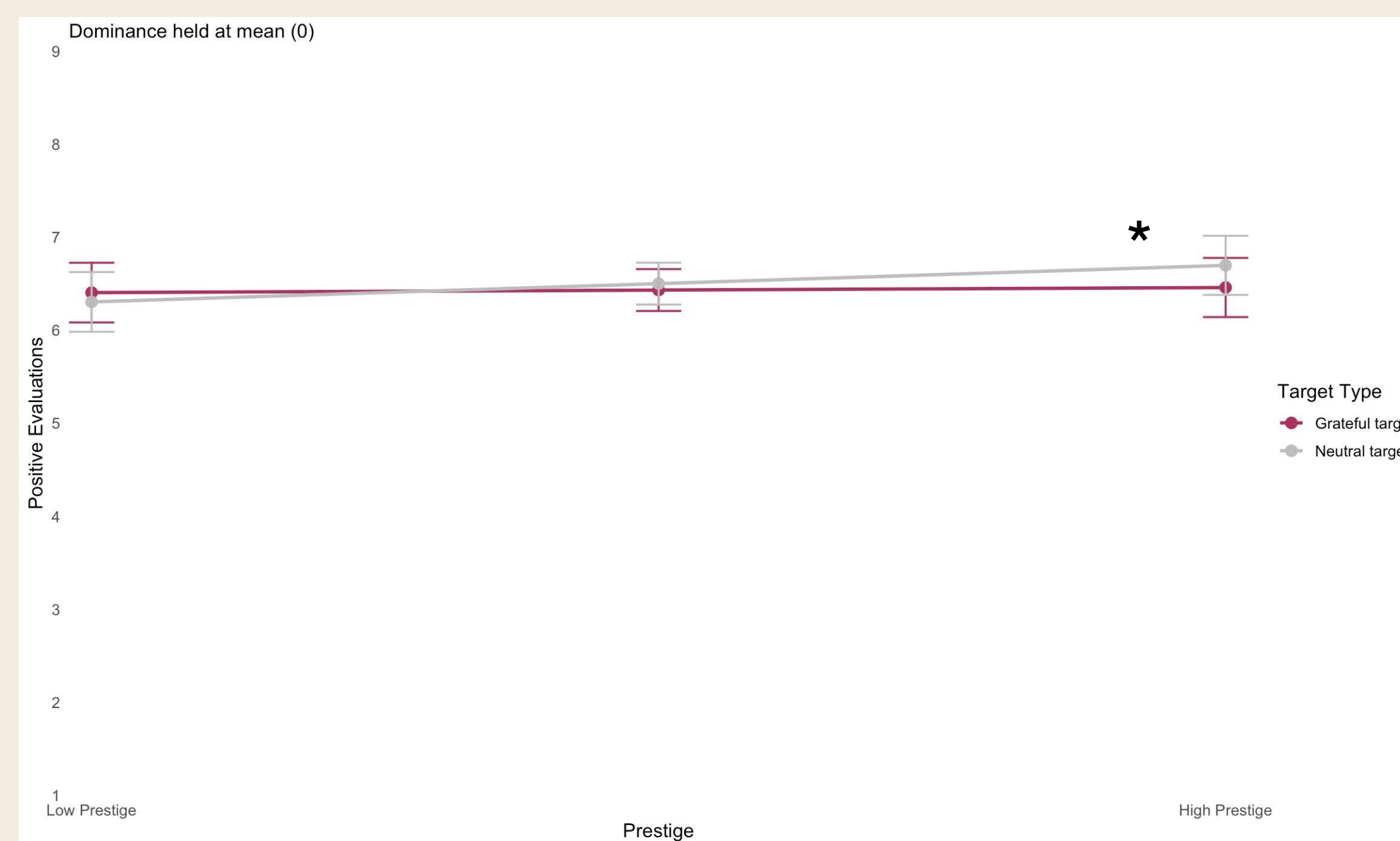
Table 1
Inter-Correlations Among Main Individual Difference Variables and Target Liking

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Grateful target liking	6.43	1.15	–							
2. Neutral targets liking	6.50	1.13	0.80**	–						
3. Agreeableness	5.31	1.06	0.31**	0.16	–					
4. GQ-6	5.63	0.47	0.17†	0.18	0.29	–				
5. Loneliness	1.63	0.56	-0.02	-0.03	-0.05	-0.30**	–			
6. Need to Belong	3.34	0.64	0.12	0.19†	0.28**	0.08	0.16	–		
7. Prestige	5.37	0.86	0.01	0.15	0.10	0.23*	-0.36**	0.50	–	
8. Dominance	2.73	0.92	-0.26*	-0.25*	-0.34**	-0.30**	0.02	-0.08	0.09	–

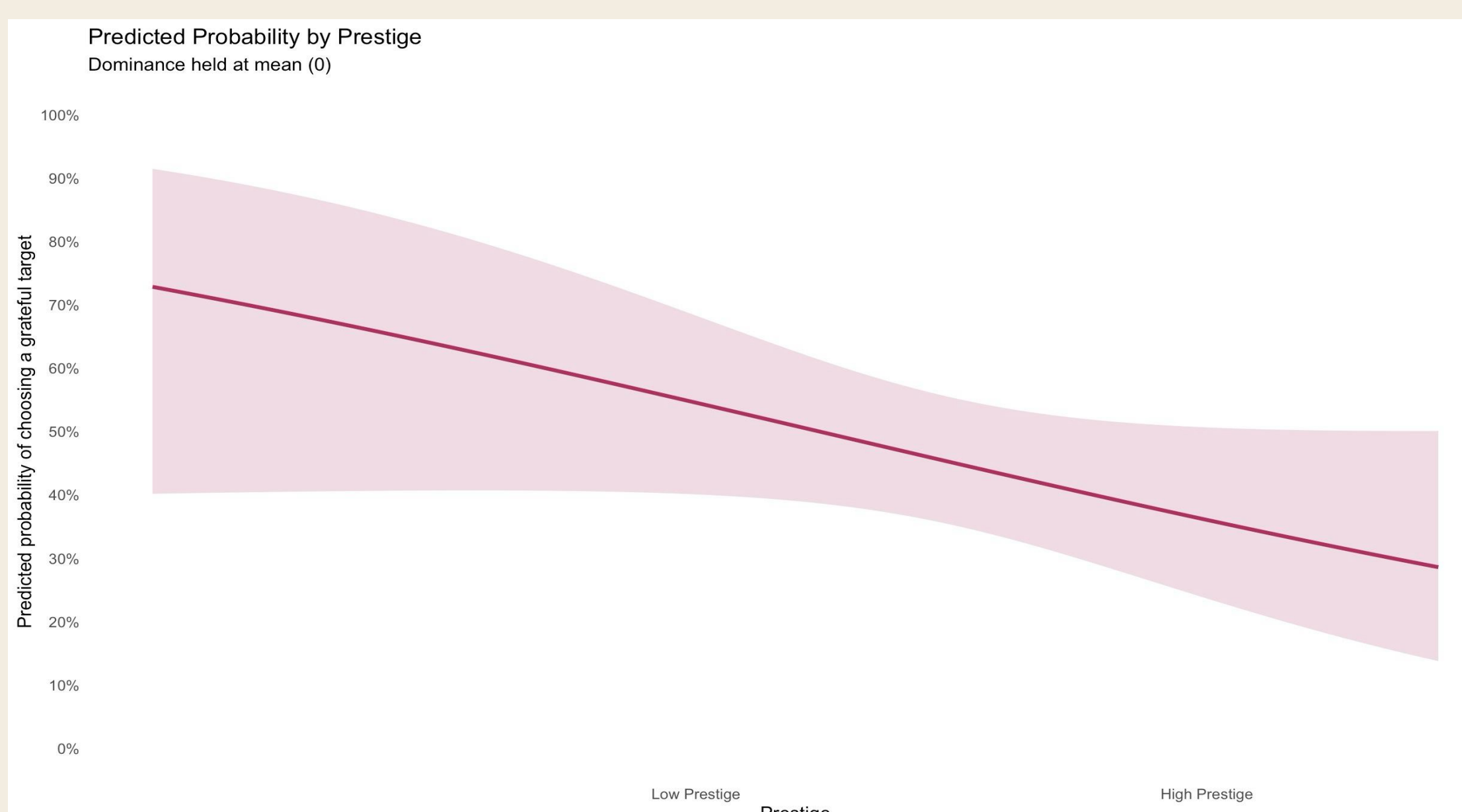
Note. GQ-6 measures dispositional tendencies toward expressing and experiencing gratitude.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$ (trend)

Evaluations of Target Type across Levels of Prestige



Probability of Choosing a Grateful Target over a Neutral One Predicted by Prestige



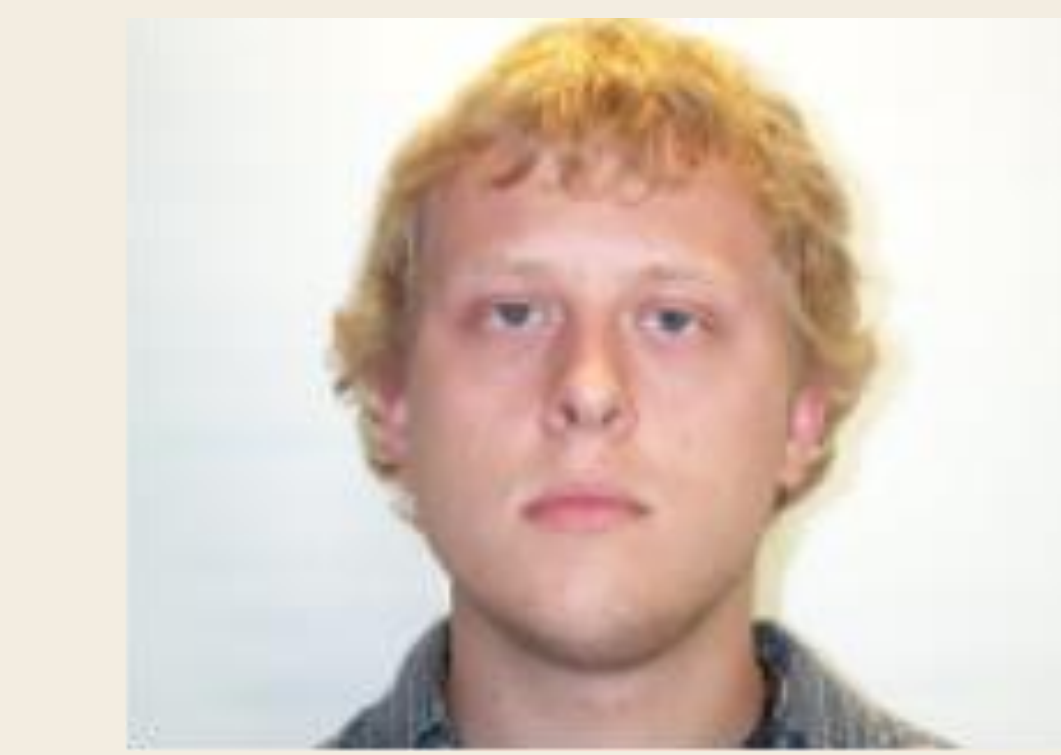
Example Target Stimuli



Grateful Stimulus

Hey! I'm really grateful to get the opportunity to do this study with you. I'm a first year student planning to major in psychology and maybe minor in something else. I just moved here to start school, which is exciting, but it's been a bit overwhelming trying to settle in. For example, the people on the floor of my dorm can also be pretty loud, so sometimes I can have trouble sleeping and focusing on homework. I'm just doing my best to get acclimated to the and I'm grateful I get along really well with my roommate. Over the summer, I spent a lot of time with my friends, mostly just relaxing and even taking a few short trips together. Those experiences were so special and I appreciate having them before starting school. That said, transitioning from that freedom to a structured college schedule is definitely an adjustment. There's a lot I'm looking forward to, but I also know there will be challenges along the way. This coming year, I'm hoping to make new friendships and meaningful memories. I feel incredibly lucky starting this new chapter here, even when I know it won't always be easy. I'm trying to be thankful for the little things.

Neutral Stimulus



Hey! It's really nice to meet you and maybe do this study together. This is actually the first study I'm completing in the subject pool. I am not sure what goes into these but I thought the study description sounded super cool on the website. I'm hoping this experience will allow me to learn more about research and help me in deciding if I want to major in psych. I know there's a lot I still have to figure out, and I'm trying to stay open minded! Right now I am mostly focusing on my classes. I'm taking a good amount of credits, but I might drop a class (if I still can) so I have more free time outside of school. I found it kind of tricky to make my schedule at first if I am being honest. So far, I'm enjoying my classes, settling into my routine, and finding a nice balance. I love spending time on campus, like grabbing coffee, studying outside, or going on walks. Although, I have to admit, because I just moved here, I am not used to the heat, it's brutal! I really like the people I've already met, so I hope we will get closer as time goes on. Maybe it's too early to tell. I'm just figuring it all out as I go.

(Minear & Park, 2004)

Discussion

- Participants did not selectively recall more details about grateful versus neutral targets.
- Participants did not form significantly more explicit or implicit positive evaluations of grateful versus neutral targets. In some cases, participants high in agreeableness and prestige actually liked neutral targets more.
- High-prestige participants were less likely to choose the grateful target as a study partner as compared to a neutral target.

Addressing limitations and future considerations:

- Present gratitude in a more natural context.
- Examine how genuine versus ingenuine gratitude is perceived.
- Investigate why participants higher in prestige preferred neutral targets.

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