



# Not all gifts are good: The potential practical costs of motivated gifts

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**Abstract**

People rely on support from others to accomplish mundane and momentous tasks. When asking for assistance, is it beneficial to incentivize a helper by offering a *motivated gift* (i.e., a gift with the hope of getting support in return)? Six studies ( $N > 2,500$ ) examine the frequency and potential costs of motivated gifts. In Study 1, a third of Americans indicated that they had given a motivated gift at least once, while nearly two-thirds believed they had received one. In Studies 2a–d, most participants who imagined receiving a motivated gift before a favor request reported lower willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping than participants who imagined simply being asked for a favor. Finally, Study 3 replicates these findings with actual help provided among friends in a laboratory setting. Findings suggest that motivated gifts are relatively common but may sometimes undermine the assistance that people hope to receive.

**KEYWORDS**

favor, gift giving, helping behavior, prosocial behavior, support provision

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Humans are an exceptionally prosocial species. From large-scale and life-saving acts, such as organ donation, to mundane but meaningful gestures, such as helping one's partner with the dishes, prosocial behavior is typically beneficial for givers and receivers. While givers experience a number of positive outcomes, including reputational (e.g., Flynn, Reagens, Amanatullah & Ames, 2006; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Jordan, Hoffman, Bloom & Rand, 2016; Simpson & Willer, 2008), health (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003; Whillans, Dunn, Sandstrom & Dickerson, 2016), and well-being boosts (Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2008), recipients often gain from receiving the assistance they require. Indeed, support from close others is associated with greater psychological and physical health outcomes (e.g., Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris & Stephenson, 2015; Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996) and helps people achieve personal goals and cope with life stressors (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Given the various benefits of giving and receiving support, it seems worthwhile to explore how people can encourage generosity to make assistance more rewarding and

likely to occur in the future. Here, we investigate the potential practical consequences of one possible strategy—offering a gift alongside a favor request.

A large body of research in both economics and psychology demonstrates that incentives and extrinsic rewards can be effective in promoting a desired behavior. As such, providing a gift alongside a favor request might seem like an effective way to not only incentivize prosocial behavior, but also boost the helper's anticipated emotional rewards of helping. Indeed, requesters typically underestimate the likelihood that others will comply with direct appeals for assistance (Flynn & Lake, 2008), and thus may feel compelled to persuade potential helpers by offering a gift. This strategy seems appealing for several reasons. First, to the extent that asking for help imposes a burden on the helper, offering a gift allows the recipient to return or reward the favor by providing something in exchange. Such gifts may "balance the scales" and model the generosity that recipients hope to receive (Gouldner, 1960). Second, the norm of reciprocity suggests that giving a small gift can pay dividends when requesting help later on because people feel obliged to repay acts of kindness (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2002). Demonstrating this, classic research by

Regan (1971) found that when an experimenter provided a stranger with an unsolicited favor (i.e., gave them a can of soda), strangers purchased twice as many raffle tickets from the experimenter half an hour later as compared to those not gifted a soda.

Unfortunately, there are several reasons why attempting to motivate acts of kindness could backfire and reduce the likelihood of receiving help. First, a growing body of research suggests that prosocial behavior may be intuitive and intrinsically rewarding, providing helpers with a host of intrapersonal benefits from their kind acts (Dunn, Aknin & Norton, 2014; Inagaki & Orehek, 2017; Zaki & Mitchell, 2013; see Curry et al., 2018 for meta-analysis of the emotional rewards of giving). Consistent with this possibility, prosocial behavior is evident early in life (Brownell, 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2006), activates pleasure centers in the brain (Moll et al., 2006; Tankersley, Stowe & Huettel, 2007), and can be learned at speeds akin to inherently rewarding tasks (e.g., finding food; Bartal, Decety & Mason, 2011). Thus, providing an external reward or incentive in exchange for prosocial action may undermine intrinsic motivations and decrease both the likelihood that a recipient complies (Titmuss, 1970) as well as reduce the helper's anticipated satisfaction. Indeed, potential helpers may be willing to assist out of altruistic motives but find themselves stunted when given a gift. Just as rewarding a child for a task they like can undermine engagement and enjoyment (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008), incentivizing would-be helpers with a motivated gift may actually *reduce* the assistance by introducing egoistic motives (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Feiler, Tost & Grant, 2012).

Second, offering a motivated gift may also reduce the desired behavior—helping—because it raises suspicion of manipulation. While evoking the norm of reciprocity may be effective when targets are unaware, people often resist requests for assistance if they feel someone is trying to influence or coerce them into action (Cialdini, 1987; Sagarin, Cialdini, Rice, & Serna, 2002), perhaps driven in part by an evolved tendency to avoid exploitation (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Indeed, decades of research on Reactance Theory (Brehm, 1966) has documented how individuals like to feel in control of their own behavior (see also Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Jones, 1964; Jones & Wortman, 1973). As a result, when one feels that their personal freedoms are being challenged, people may defy requests through refusal as a means of regaining control. Indeed, had participants in Regan's classic (1971) study seen the soda as a means of gaining favor before a request for assistance, participants may have felt manipulated and purchased *fewer* raffle tickets as a result. Thus, giving a motivated gift could reduce the amount of assistance one receives in response a favor request because helpers feel manipulated.

Interestingly, past research suggests that the type and amount of incentive may be critical for shaping the amount of help offered. For instance, Heyman and Ariely (2004) found that direct financial incentives (i.e., money) signal money markets in which greater compensation translates into greater effort. People work harder or longer in exchange for \$5 than for \$0.50. However, when gifts are provided, a social market guides the exchange, and assistance is often high regardless of the gift value (Heyman & Ariely, 2004).

Most relevant to the present research, however, Heyman and Ariely (2004) find that assistance levels are similar and high when the helper is provided a gift and in a control condition when the helper receives no gift or mention of money. We extend upon this past research in various ways. First, in addition to examining *how much* effort a potential helper is willing to invest (as measured along a continuum), we examine the dichotomous decision of *whether* a helper provides assistance or not. Second, we focus on the consequences of providing motivated gifts (as opposed to no gift) before requesting help to zero in on the potential costs of motivated gifts in social market exchanges (Fiske, 1992; Heyman & Ariely, 2004). Finally, in addition to investigating hypothetical and actual support provision after motivated gifts, we probe an additional and novel dependent variable: anticipated enjoyment from helping. To the best of our knowledge, affective forecasts have not been studied in the context of motivated gifts.

## 2 | PRESENT STUDIES

Six studies examine the frequency and potential costs of *motivated gifts*, defined as gifts given with the hope of getting help or support in return. In light of past research outlined above, we predicted that instances of motivated gift giving may be relatively common; people underestimate the willingness of others to provide assistance (e.g., Flynn & Lake, 2008) and thus feel compelled to encourage helpers to act. Moreover, we predicted that participants offered a motivated gift before a request for help would be less likely to provide assistance and anticipate reduced satisfaction from helping (as compared to participants who are directly asked for help). We tested these predictions in six studies. First, because the frequency of giving motivated gifts is currently unknown, we examined data from a nationally representative sample of Americans reporting whether they had ever given or received a motivated gift in Study 1. Then, in Studies 2a–d, we used hypothetical designs to examine the consequences motivated gifts by comparing willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping after either (a) a direct favor request or (b) receiving a motivated gift and then a favor request in various contexts. Finally, in Study 3, we examined the potential immediate functional costs of motivated gifts in a laboratory experiment with real friendship pairs. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in these studies (materials, syntax and data provided at <https://osf.io/jnyfz/>).

## 3 | STUDY 1

### 3.1 | Participants

An economically representative sample of 501 ( $M_{age} = 48.5$ ,  $SD = 15.8$ ; 49.9% female) Americans recruited via Qualtrics national panel completed an online survey for a small monetary payment. Sample size was determined a priori to examine another research question;

data from the larger study and for this particular question has not yet been published.

### 3.2 | Procedure

As part of a survey exploring an unrelated question, participants were asked if they had ever given a gift to someone else with the hope of getting something in return (yes/no) and whether they thought someone else had ever given them a gift with the hope of getting something in return (yes/no).

### 3.3 | Results and Discussion

Suggesting that motivated gifts are relatively common, 173 participants (34.5%), or just over one third of the sample, stated that they had given a gift with the hope of getting something in return. Meanwhile, 327 participants said they had not. Interestingly, the majority of participants believed they had received a motivated gift from someone else ( $n = 312$ ) while a minority ( $n = 188$ ) believed they had not,  $\chi^2(1) = 30.752, p < 0.001$ . Among individuals who admitted to giving a motivated gift ( $n = 173$ ), the significant majority said others had done so too ( $n = 151, n = 22$  said they had not),  $\chi^2(1) = 96.191, p < 0.001$ . However, among individuals who said they had not given a motivated gift ( $n = 327$ ), respondents were more evenly split about whether others had given them a motivated gift ( $n = 161$  said others had given them a motivated gift,  $n = 166$  said others had not given them a motivated gift,  $\chi^2(1) = 0.076, ns$ ).

## 4 | STUDIES 2A–D

Study 1 suggests that significant majority of people think they have received a motivated gift—a gift given with the hope of getting something in return—and one third of the sample admitted to giving a motivated gift. To our knowledge, this is the first assessment exploring the frequency of this behavior among a large and nationally representative panel of Americans. But what are the practical consequences of receiving a seemingly motivated gift?

To explore this question, we followed the lead of past researchers examining similar questions (Heyman & Ariely, 2004) and conducted four studies using hypothetical designs to investigate the recipient's willingness to help and expected satisfaction from helping after receiving either (a) a direct favor request, or (b) a motivated gift and then a favor request across a series of contexts and scenarios. If gifts are seen positively as kind gestures that boost liking and evaluations of the giver, then individuals provided with a gift—even alongside a favor request—should be more likely to help and expect to enjoy helping more than those simply asked for a favor. However, if a gift given alongside a favor request is seen as a manipulative gesture then individuals offered a gift should report lower willingness to help and lower levels of anticipated satisfaction than those asked for a favor without a gift.

## 5 | STUDY 2A

In Study 2a, we examined the potential costs of motivated gifts by asking participants to imagine receiving either (a) a direct favor request, or (b) a motivated gift and then a favor request. Afterward, participants reported their willingness to help and expected satisfaction from helping. In light of past research it seemed possible that recipients told that they had received a motivated gift would report lower willingness to help and lower levels of satisfaction from helping.

### 5.1 | Participants

Three-hundred and fifty-six participants (62% female) were recruited on a university campus. An a priori power analyses indicated that a sample of approximately 350 could detect a small-to-medium size effect ( $f = 0.15$ ) with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.80$ .

### 5.2 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two prompts. Specifically, participants read:

Imagine that tomorrow your friend invites you over. You agree to go, and head over to his/her house; you're looking forward to catching up. The two of you sit down in the living room and begin to catch up. [To your surprise, your friend gives you a box of chocolates, which you accept.] After a few minutes of chatting about your week, your friend mentions that s/he has an essay due next week and would really like it if you could help edit their paper. [It seems that your friend gave you the box of chocolates so that s/he could ask for a favor in return.]

After, participants reported their current affect on the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) and their feelings of closeness toward the person requesting the favor using a 7-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from 1 - *extremely distant* to 7 - *extremely close*. Participants also reported the likelihood that they would provide help (1 - *very unlikely*, 7 - *very likely*) and how satisfied they expected to feel after helping (1 - *very unsatisfied*, 7 - *very satisfied*). Finally, participants reported their demographics.

### 5.3 | Results and discussion

We first examined whether receiving a motivated gift influenced willingness to help and how the helper expected to feel after providing assistance using two separate between-subjects ANOVAs. Individuals assigned to imagine receiving a motivated gift in exchange for a favor reported that they were marginally less willing to help ( $M = 4.83, SD = 1.52$ ) than participants who imagined being asked for a favor with no gift ( $M = 5.14, SD = 1.49$ ),  $t(352) = 1.927, p$

= 0.055,  $f = 0.10$ . In addition, participants who imagined receiving a motivated gift reported that they expected to feel less satisfied helping ( $M = 4.99$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than participants who were not offered a gift ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(353) = 2.744$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ,  $f = 0.14$ .

Closeness ratings and positive affect levels were also compared using separate ANOVAs. Analyses revealed that participants assigned to imagine receiving a motivated gift in exchange for a favor ( $n = 187$ ) reported lower levels of closeness ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) than participants assigned to imagine being asked for a favor with no gift offered ( $n = 169$ ;  $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(353) = 3.890$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.20$ . Positive affect ratings did not differ across conditions,  $t(354) = 1.297$ ,  $p = 0.196$ ,  $f = 0.005$ .

## 6 | STUDY 2B

Study 2b was conducted to examine whether the consequences of motivated gifts differ as a function of relation type. In particular, Clark, Mills and Powell (1986) describe *exchange relationships* in which each partner tracks their investments and returns, striving toward equity, and *communal relationships* in which each partner pays little attention to investments and returns because they are concerned about the others' needs, providing help when needed and/or to please the other. We operationalized these types of relationship by describing the requester in Study 2b as a familiar target. Specifically, an acquaintance was used to represent an exchange relationship and a close friend was used to represent a communal relationship. Thus, in Study 2b, participants were asked to read one of four hypothetical scenarios in which an acquaintance or close friend requested a favor or requested a favor and offered a motivated gift in return. Afterward, participants reported their perceived closeness, willingness to help, and anticipated satisfaction from helping. Although we did not have a priori predictions, we sought to examine whether motivated gifts reduce the recipient's willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping (as compared to a direct favor request) when imagining interactions with either close friends or acquaintances.

### 6.1 | Participants

Seven hundred and ninety nine individuals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 28.53$ ,  $SD = 10.92$ ; 52% female) were recruited online ( $n = 398$ ) and on a university campus ( $n = 401$ ) to complete a survey in exchange for a small monetary payment or candy bars. Sample size was determined by an a priori power analysis indicating that a sample of 800 was large enough to detect an interaction as small as  $f = 0.09$  with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.80$ . Dropout rates for online data collection did not differ by condition (see Table S1).

### 6.2 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2(target: close friend vs. acquaintance)  $\times$  2(motivated gift offered:

yes vs. no) design. Hypothetical scenarios were identical to those used in Study 2a except that the text indicated whether the target requesting help was a close friend or an acquaintance. After reading the scenario, participants reported their feelings of perceived closeness on the Inclusion of the Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992). Participants also reported the likelihood that they would provide help to the requester and how satisfied they expected to feel after helping using the same items of Study 2a. Finally, participants reported their current affect on the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988), their state happiness on the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), and demographics.

## 6.3 | Results and discussion

We first analyzed willingness to help reports using a 2 (target: close friend vs. acquaintance)  $\times$  2 (motivated gift offered: yes vs. no) between-subjects ANOVA. Analyses revealed a main effect of target type,  $F(1,792) = 45.385$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.24$ , demonstrating that people were more likely to help close friends ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) than acquaintances ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) and a main effect of motivated gift offering,  $F(1,792) = 8.011$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $f = 0.10$ , such that participants asked for a favor without a gift reported greater willingness to help ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than participants given a gift before the favor request ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ). We did not detect evidence for an interaction,  $F(1,792) = 0.759$ ,  $p = 0.384$ .

Next, we analyzed expected satisfaction after helping with the same 2x2 ANOVA. We detected a main effect of target type,  $F(1,794) = 30.983$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.20$ , demonstrating that people expected to feel more satisfaction after helping a close friend ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than acquaintance ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and a main effect of motivated gift offering,  $F(1,794) = 23.928$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.18$ , such that participants asked for a favor without a gift thought they would experience greater satisfaction after helping ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than participants given a gift before the favor request ( $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). We did not detect an interaction,  $F(1,794) = 0.003$ ,  $p = 0.954$ .

We analyzed perceived closeness ratings using the same 2x2 ANOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect of relationship type,  $F(1,793) = 180.688$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.48$ , whereby participants reported higher relationship closeness with a close friend ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) than with an acquaintance ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ). Analyses also revealed main effect of motivated gift offering,  $F(1,793) = 16.357$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.14$ , such that participants who were asked for a favor without a gift reported higher levels of relationship closeness ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) than participants given a gift before the favor request ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ). Again, we did not detect an interaction,  $F(1,793) = 1.089$ ,  $p = 0.297$ .

Finally, we analyzed well-being ratings using two separate 2x2 ANOVAs. Results on the SHS revealed no differences (all  $F_s < 1.94$ , all  $p_s > 0.16$ ) on either main effect or the interaction. However, analyses of PANAS reports revealed a significant main effect of relationship type,  $F(1,798) = 14.269$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.13$ , whereby participants reported higher positive affect after interacting with a friend ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) than with an acquaintance ( $M = 2.38$ ,

$SD = 0.87$ ). Unlike Study 2a, analyses also revealed main effect of motivated gift offering,  $F(1,798) = 21.292, p < 0.001, f = 0.16$ , such that participants who were asked for a favor without a gift reported higher levels of positive affect ( $M = 2.63, SD = 0.89$ ) than participants given a gift before the favor request ( $M = 2.35, SD = 0.87$ ).

The results of Study 2b replicate the potential costs of motivated gifts for willingness to help, anticipated satisfaction from providing help, and relationship closeness.

## 7 | STUDY 2C

Friends frequently request favors and exchange gifts, suggesting that neither of these actions are problematic in isolation and may only cause concern when a gift is provided alongside a favor request with instrumental motives. To test this idea, we conducted Study 2c in which participants read a scenario wherein a friend either gave a gift (or did not) when asking for a favor (or not). Critically, when the gift was presented with a favor request it was suggested that the gift may have been to secure their help (i.e., was a motivated gift). We predicted that an interaction would emerge between the presence of a gift and favor request, such that assistance and anticipated satisfaction from helping would be lowest when a gift accompanied a favor request.

In Study 2c, we also explored two potential mechanisms. First, we examined whether a motivated gift made participants feel as if they had been manipulated by their friend, which, in turn, led to lower willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping. Second, we examined whether seeing their friend offer a motivated gift made them think of their friend in a less positive manner (e.g., see them as inconsiderate, rude), which led to lower willingness to help and anticipating satisfaction from helping.

### 7.1 | Participants

Three-hundred ninety-two adults (46% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.86, SD = 10.98$ ) completed this study on Mechanical Turk in exchange for payment. Sample size was determined by an a priori power analysis indicating that a sample of four-hundred could detect an effect as small as  $f = 0.12$  with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.80$ . Dropout rates did not differ by condition (see Table S1).

### 7.2 | Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four hypothetical scenarios about themselves either receiving a gift (or not) before being asked for a favor (or not) in a 2 (favor request present: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (gift given: yes vs. no) design. Participants then reported their perceived closeness to the friend both before and after the scenario. In addition, participants were asked to report their happiness (1 – *very slightly or not at all*, 5 – *extremely*). To measure the first potential mediator, participants reported the extent to which they would have felt manipulated, used, and taken advantage of by their friend (each

rated from 1 – *very slightly or not at all*, 5 – *extremely*;  $\alpha = .97$ ). To measure the second potential mediator, participants evaluated their friend's character by reporting the extent to which their friend was mean, inconsiderate, rude, kind, reasonable, likeable, and generous (1 – *strongly disagree*, 7 – *strongly agree*; last four items were reverse scored so higher values indicate more negative evaluation of one's friend;  $\alpha = 0.91$ ). Given the high reliability displayed among each set of items, we created composite measures for each potential mediator by taking the average of all relevant items. Finally, participants reported their willingness to help (same scale as Study 2a), anticipated satisfaction from helping (same scale as Study 2a), and demographics.

### 7.3 | Results and discussion

We first submitted willingness to help ratings to a 2 (favor request present: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (gift given: yes vs. no) between subjects ANOVA. As predicted, analyses revealed no main effect of gift offering,  $F(1, 386) = 0.107, p = 0.743, f = 0.01$ , and no main effect of favor request,  $F(1, 386) = 2.589, p = 0.108, f = 0.08$ . Importantly, however, we observed a significant cross-over interaction,  $F(1, 386) = 7.561, p = 0.006, f = 0.14$ , and therefore, probed our key question of interest using a planned contrast. Specifically, we tested whether participants assigned to imagine their friend giving them a motivated gift (contrast weight =  $-1$ ) reported lower rates of willingness to help than participants assigned to imagine their friend simply asking for a favor (contrast weight =  $1$ ). Analyses supported this prediction, demonstrating that participants assigned to the motivated gift condition ( $n = 101$ ) were less likely to provide the requested help ( $M = 5.87, SD = 1.20$ ) than participants assigned to imagine receiving a direct favor request ( $n = 96; M = 6.20, SD = 1.13$ ),  $t(386) = 2.185, p = 0.030$ . Meanwhile, there was no difference in willingness to help when participants were asked to imagine that they had received a gift ( $n = 96; M = 5.99, SD = 0.81$ ) versus when they did not ( $n = 97; M = 5.73, SD = 1.01$ ),  $t(386) = 1.706, p = 0.089$ .

Next, we submitted anticipated satisfaction with helping ratings to a 2 (favor request present: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (gift given: yes vs. no) between subjects ANOVA. Once again, analyses revealed no main effect of gift offering,  $F(1, 387) = 0.857, p = 0.355, f = 0.04$ , and no main effect of favor request,  $F(1, 387) = 2.373, p = 0.124, f = 0.08$ . Importantly, however, these nonsignificant main effects were qualified by a significant cross-over interaction,  $F(1, 387) = 7.404, p = 0.007, f = 0.14$ , and allowed us to probe our key question of interest using a planned contrast. Specifically, we tested whether participants assigned to imagine their friend giving them a motivated gift (contrast weight =  $-1$ ) reported lower levels of anticipated satisfaction from helping than participants assigned to imagine their friend simply asking for a favor (contrast weight =  $1$ ). The analysis supported this prediction, demonstrating that participants assigned to the motivated gift condition ( $n = 101$ ) were less likely to provide the requested help ( $M = 5.48, SD = 1.57$ ) than participants assigned to imagine receiving a direct favor request ( $n = 95; M = 5.93, SD = 1.14$ ),  $t(387) = 2.563, p = 0.011$ . Once again, there was no difference

in anticipated satisfaction when participants were asked to imagine that they received a gift ( $n = 98$ ;  $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) versus when they did not ( $n = 97$ ;  $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ),  $t(387) = 1.286$ ,  $p = 0.199$ .

We examined whether the two potential mediators—feelings of manipulation and negative perceptions of one's friend—explained (a) lower rates of helping and (b) lower levels of anticipated satisfaction between our two key conditions of interest: the motivated gifts condition and favor request only condition. To do so, we ran two multiple mediation models in which feelings of manipulation and negative perceptions of one's friend were entered as mediators between the independent variable (motivated gift vs. favor only) and the dependent variables willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping. The first analysis revealed that feelings of manipulation (indirect effect: 0.07,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]), and negative perceptions of one's friend (indirect effect: 0.10,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI [0.03, 0.14]) mediated the effect of receiving a motivated gift on reduced willingness to help (vs. favor only condition). Similarly, the second analysis revealed that feelings of manipulation (indirect effect: 0.07,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]), and negative perceptions of one's friend (indirect effect: 0.12,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI [0.04, 0.20]) mediated the relationship between receiving a motivated gift and anticipating less satisfaction with helping (vs. the favor only condition). Together, these findings suggest that feelings of manipulation and viewing one's friend in a negative light may lead motivated gift recipients to provide less help and anticipate reduced satisfaction from providing assistance.

Finally, we computed a difference score reflecting change in perceived closeness from pre to post favor request and submitted these difference scores to a 2 (favor request present: yes vs. no)  $\times$  2 (gift given: yes vs. no) between subjects ANOVA. We detected a significant main effect of gift offering,  $F(1, 383) = 16.810$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.20$ , such that participants not given a gift reported greater gains in relationship closeness ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.75$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than those given a gift ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.28$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). We also detected a significant main effect of favor request,  $F(1, 383) = 64.840$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.40$ , such that participants not asked for a favor reported greater gains in relationship closeness ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.98$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than those asked for a favor ( $M_{\text{diff}} = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ). These main effects were also qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(1, 383) = 14.160$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 0.19$ , whereby participants assigned to imagine their friend giving them a potentially motivated gift reported a decrease in relationship closeness while participants in all other conditions reported a gain.

## 8 | STUDY 2D

Studies 2a–c suggest that motivated gifts may have practical costs, but all manipulations explicitly identified motivated gifts and the giver's instrumental motives. In Study 2d, the manipulation was more subtle; in the motivated gift condition, a gift was provided before a favor request but there was no suggestion that the gift was given with the hopes of receiving assistance in return. As such, we were able to examine whether motivated gifts impact a recipient's

willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping when the giver's motives are not revealed. We did not have clear a priori predictions. It seemed possible that motivated gifts may undermine helping and satisfaction as seen in Studies 2a–c, even when the context was more subtle. However, it also seemed possible that motivated gifts may not exert the same costs when not identified as instrumental gifts intended to alter the recipient's behavior.

### 8.1 | Participants

Five-hundred and twenty-six adults (61% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.3$ ,  $SD = 4.21$ ) recruited in public spaces on a university campus completed a survey in exchange for mini-chocolate bars. Sample size was determined based on a power analyses indicating that a sample size of at least five-hundred could detect an effect as small as  $d = 0.20$  with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.80$ ; data were accidentally analyzed at an earlier stage ( $n \sim 300$ ) due to miscommunication with research assistants.

### 8.2 | Procedure

Participants were provided with a survey that asked them to imagine that they go for weekly walks with a friend. This week, their friend showed up a few minutes early and explained that they plan to run for the local school board next month.

On the next page of the survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions that described either (a) the friend asking for their vote in the upcoming election, or (b) the friend giving them a package of homemade cookies and asking for their vote in the upcoming election.

Participants were then asked to report their post-request feelings of relationship closeness on the same IOS measure (Aron et al., 1992). Participants to report their feelings of manipulation using the same items three items ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) from Study 2c. In addition, participants reported how willing they would be to vote for their friend and how satisfied they would be after voting for their friend using the same items from Study 2a. Finally, participants reported their current happiness (1 – very slightly or not at all, 5 – extremely) and demographics.

### 8.3 | Results and discussion

First, we examined whether a motivated gift influenced willingness to vote for the friend and how the helper expected to feel after doing so. Contrary to the previous studies, individuals assigned to imagine receiving a motivated gift before a favor request did not report that they were significantly less willing to help,  $F(1,524) = 0.639$ ,  $p = 0.43$ , or that they would be significantly less satisfied helping,  $F(1,523) = 0.928$ ,  $p = 0.34$ , than individuals who imagined a favor request, though means were in the predicted direction. However, we did detect evidence of an indirect effect. When participants imagined receiving a motivated gift, they were more likely to feel manipulated, which predicted lower willingness to help ( $\beta = -0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [-0.59, -0.36]; indirect effect = -0.07,  $SE =$

0.02, 95% CI [-0.10, -0.03]), and anticipated satisfaction from doing so ( $\beta = -0.41$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [-0.65, -0.44]; indirect effect = -0.08,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.12, -0.04]).

We also examined how motivated gifts influenced feelings of perceived closeness. To so, we computed a difference score reflecting change in perceived closeness from pre to post favor request. Submitting difference scores to a between subjects ANOVA revealed that participants randomly assigned to imagine receiving a motivated gift before a favor ( $n = 261$ ) reported a greater decrease in closeness ( $M = -0.52$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) than participants assigned to imagine being asked for a favor with no gift offered ( $n = 264$ ;  $M = -0.11$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ),  $F(1, 523) = 9.881$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ,  $d = 0.28$ . Adding happiness as a covariate left the main effect of condition unchanged,  $F(1, 520) = 10.180$ ,  $p < 0.005$ .

### 9 | MINI META-ANALYSES

To investigate the overall impact of motivated gifts, we conducted two mini meta-analyses using fixed effects in which the mean effect sizes (i.e., mean correlation) were weighted by sample size to examine the impact of motivated gifts on (a) the likelihood of receiving help, and (b) anticipated satisfaction after providing the requested help. Following recommendations of Goh, Hall and Rosenthal (2016), we converted Cohen's d into Pearson's correlation for ease of analyses. Correlations were then Fisher's z transformed for analyses and converted back to Pearson correlations for presentation (see Table 1).

Overall, individuals asked to imagine receiving a motivated gift reported a reduced likelihood of providing the requested help,  $M_r = 0.09$ ,  $Z = 4.09$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ , and anticipated lower satisfaction after helping,  $M_r = 0.13$ ,  $Z = 5.86$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . We also conducted a fully random effects tests of each effect and found that they were also significant, as indicated by a one-sample t-test of the mean ES against zero: willingness to help,  $t(3) = 4.045$ ,  $p = 0.027$ , two-tailed; and anticipated satisfaction,  $t(3) = 4.294$ ,  $p = 0.023$ , two-tailed.

### 10 | STUDY 3

Several studies utilizing hypothetical designs demonstrate the potential practical costs of motivated gifts. In most contexts, people asked to imagine receiving a gift before a favor request report lower willingness to help and lower anticipated satisfaction from helping than people asked to imagine a direct request for help. To find out whether motivated gifts can have detrimental consequences for actual rates of assistance in meaningful social relationships, such as among friends, we conducted Study 3 in which we recruited pairs of friends for a laboratory experiment and presented them with either: (a) a favor request, or (b) a promise of a future gift and then a favor request. Afterward, we observed whether friends provided the requested assistance by looking at actual behavior.

**TABLE 1** Sample information and key results for the four studies using hypothetical designs (Studies 2a–d)

Study	N	Location	Willingness				Anticipated Satisfaction											
			$M_{age}$ (SD)	% Female	$X_{MG}$ (SD)	$X_{FO}$ (SD)	t	df	p	d	r	$X_{MG}$ (SD)	$X_{FO}$ (SD)	t	df	p	d	r
2a	356	C	Unknown	62	4.83 (1.53)	5.14 (1.49)	1.93	352	0.055	0.21	0.10	4.99 (1.45)	5.40 (1.39)	2.74	353	0.006	0.29	0.15
2b	799	O 401 C	28.53 (10.92)	52	5.04 (1.39)	5.31 (1.38)	2.76	794	0.006	0.19	0.10	4.82 (1.35)	5.27 (1.27)	4.81	796	<0.001	0.34	0.17
2c	392	O	33.86 (10.98)	46	5.87 (1.20)	6.20 (1.13)	1.97	195	0.05	0.28	0.14	5.48 (1.57)	5.93 (1.14)	2.29	194	0.023	0.33	0.16
2d	526	C	21.30 (4.21)	61	5.13 (1.28)	5.22 (1.28)	0.80	524	0.425	0.07	0.03	4.64 (1.31)	4.75 (1.31)	0.96	523	0.336	0.08	0.04
M rz																		0.14
M r																		0.13
Combined Z																		5.86**

Note. Descriptions of the study procedures and results can be found in the SOM. C = on campus, O = online via mTurk,  $X_{MG}$  = Mean for motivated gift condition,  $X_{FO}$  = Mean for favor only condition. Study 2b presents the main effect of motivated gift versus favor request only collapsing across target (friend vs. acquaintance). Study 2c presents the planned comparison of the relevant conditions, gift + favor vs. favor request only. \*\* indicates  $p < 0.001$ .

## 10.1 | Participants

Forty-two friendship pairs (eighty-four adults; 50% female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 3.07$ ) were recruited in public spaces on a university campus for a study in which they could earn between \$2–\$7 CDN. We reasoned that the immediate potential costs of motivated gifts would likely be larger than those observed in hypothetical paradigms, so we aimed to collect data from 50 dyads (100 participants) to detect an effect of  $d = 0.50$  with  $\alpha = 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.80$ . However, we were only able to collect data from 42 dyads (84 individuals) before the end of the semester.

## 10.2 | Procedure

Pairs of friends were escorted to the lab and told that we were interested in how various forms of communication may help or hinder problem solving and performance. As such, each participant would be given five skill-testing questions from the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) with the goal of solving as many questions as possible in 5-min. To incentivize performance, participants were told that they had earned a base payment of \$2 but that they would receive an additional dollar for every question they answered correctly, allowing them to earn up to \$7.

Importantly, participants were told that since we were interested in various communication styles, pairs were being asked to complete the task in different ways and they had been assigned to the “computer-mediated condition,” meaning that they would be seated in adjacent rooms and allowed to communicate with one another via a computer messenger program if (and only if) they needed help with the GRE questions. In reality, all pairs assigned to the computer-mediated condition because this allowed us to disguise the true source of our key manipulation. The research assistant emphasized that the chat program should not be used for conversation beyond the problem-solving task, and asked that participants turn off and put away their cell phones, precluding conversation via other mediums.

Participants were then escorted to adjacent lab rooms. Each room was equipped with a booklet containing five GRE questions, a response sheet, and a desktop computer displaying the messenger service (Skype). The research assistant oriented each participant individually to the messenger service. Just before the 5-min GRE task began, each participant was asked to put on a pair of noise cancelling headphones. Headphones were used to minimize distraction, ensure awareness of incoming communication on the messenger service (Skype was programmed to provide an audio alert upon incoming communication), and ensure participants could not decipher the source of any typing noises. The research assistant then announced the start of the 5-min timer.

While each participant worked on their GRE questions, the research assistant (blind to condition up until now), determined the condition assignment of each participant. Approximately 2-min into the 5-min timer, the research assistant sent each participant a randomly assigned and pre-set message, which appeared to come from his or her friend in the adjacent room. Participants assigned to the *favor request only condition* received a message saying “can you help me with 2?” Participants assigned to the *motivated gift*

*condition* received a message saying “i’ll get you a treat after soooo can you help me with 2?” Because participants were messaging with the research assistant (not their friend), the research assistant noted whether participants responded to the help request, providing an actual measure of helping behavior (0 = no, 1 = yes).

When 5-min elapsed, the research assistant asked each participant to remain in their own room and complete a post-task questionnaire assessing their current happiness (1 = *not at all happy*, 5 = *extremely happy*), how long they had known their friend, and demographics. Meanwhile, the research assistant collected the GRE answer sheets to score performance. After finishing the post-task questionnaire, participants were debriefed and paid.

## 10.3 | Results and discussion

*Helping.* We predicted that participants randomly assigned to the motivated gift condition ( $n = 43$ ) would provide less help than participants assigned to the favor only condition ( $n = 41$ ). To test this prediction we submitted binary decisions to help (1 = yes, 0 = no) to a General Linear Mixed Model with participants nested within their respective friendship pairs to model the dependence between friends<sup>1</sup>; friends are likely to be more similar in their tendency to help in response to a request than any two strangers. Analyses revealed that participants in the motivated gift condition were significantly less likely to offer assistance in response to the favor request ( $M = 76.7\%$ ) than participants in the favor only condition ( $M = 92.7\%$ ),  $\beta = -0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t(83) = -2.22$ ,  $p = 0.03$ . Similar results were obtained using a between-subjects ANOVA that did not account for dependence within friendship pairs (see note 1 for analysis and results).<sup>2</sup> Taken together, the results of Study 3 suggest that a promise

<sup>1</sup>We tested for non-independence within dyads using a Pearson correlation coefficient, as it has been shown to be a reliable estimator of non-independence for dyadic data with a binary outcome variable (McMahon, Pouget, & Tortu, 2006). Following Kenny and Kashy’s (1991) suggestion, we used a large alpha due to the inflated probability of a Type II error. This analysis demonstrated a relatively high degree of non-independence within the friendship pairs ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $p = 0.32$ ), thus we nested participants within their respective friendship pairs for the main analysis. If data are analyzed with an ANOVA, which does not model dependence in friendship pairs, analyses reveal that participants in the motivated gift condition were significantly less likely to offer assistance in response to the favor request ( $M = 76.7\%$ ) than participants in the favor only condition ( $M = 92.7\%$ ),  $F(1, 80) = 4.931$ ,  $p = 0.029$ .

<sup>2</sup>In Study 3, we also assessed closeness to examine any relational impact of motivated gifts in friendship dyads. Given the discrepancies of our results, we do not report on this information in the main text, but include the information here in order to be transparent about the variables we measured and our findings. Participants reported current feelings of closeness to their friend on the Inclusion of the Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The IOS scale assesses feelings of closeness with another person using a one-item pictorial measure by asking respondents to select an image of two circles that represent their closeness with an identified target on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from close but separate (two side-by-side circles, rated as 1 on scale) to almost completely overlapping circles (rated as 7 on scale).

We examined whether motivated gifts influenced participants’ self-reported feelings of closeness using dyadic multilevel models for indistinguishable dyads using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 24 as outlined by Kenny, Kashy and Cook (2006) because closeness ratings in friendship dyads may be dependent. We regressed closeness on condition (coded 0 = motivated gift condition, 1 = favor only condition). Analyses revealed that the manipulation did not influence participants’ self-reported feelings of closeness; participants in the motivated gift condition did not differ levels of closeness ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) than participants in the favor only condition ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ),  $B = -0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.39$ ,  $t = -0.19$ ,  $p = 0.85$ . Similar results were obtained with a between-subjects ANOVA,  $F(1, 81) = 0.009$ ,  $p = 0.927$ , that did not account for dependence in friends’ closeness reports.



of a motivated gift provided before a request for help can undermine assistance in comparison to an identical but direct request for help.

**Happiness.** We also examined whether current happiness differed across conditions using a between-subjects ANOVA. The analysis revealed no difference,  $F(1,81) = 1.963, p = 0.165$ .

## 11 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

People frequently rely on help from others to complete a range of everyday activities. When asking for help, is it advantageous to incentivize assistance with a gift? The current research suggests that although it is relatively common to provide a motivated gift, doing so can sometimes undermine the likelihood of receiving help and the potential helper's anticipated satisfaction from assisting. In Study 1, we found that majority of people think they have received a motivated gift and a full one third of the sample admitted to giving a motivated gift sometime in their life. Across Studies 2a–d, participants who imagined receiving a gift alongside a favor request reported lower willingness to help the target and lower anticipated satisfaction from helping (though Study 2d was an exception, see below for discussion). Critically, these reports converged with real behavior among friendship pairs. Specifically, participants in Study 3 promised a treat from their friend before a favor request provided less help than those directly asked for the same favor. Taken together, this research highlights the potentially counter-intuitive effects of motivated gifts, and suggests that it may sometimes be advantageous to avoid offering motivated gifts when requesting help from others.

Of course, there are likely various contexts in which motivated gifts may not undermine assistance. What might those be? The data presented in Study 2d provides insight. In most experiments presented here, motivated gifts were either explicitly identified (Studies 2a–c) or made the underlying instrumental motive transparent (Study 3). In these studies, motivated gifts led to real or imagined reductions in assistance. One exception is Study 2d in which motivated gifts were subtle and, in turn, did not undermine willingness to help and satisfaction. This finding aligns with past research on Reactance Theory (Brehm, 1966) indicating that people reject attempts to control their behavior and the present findings; feelings of manipulation mediated lower helping rates and anticipated satisfaction in Studies 2c and 2d. Thus, as discussed in the introduction, motivated gifts may only be problematic when they reveal the giver's instrumental motives and manipulation. When skillfully given, motivated gifts may even boost helping and support provision (e.g., Regan, 1971).

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, these data add to the growing body of research examining potential errors in gift giving (e.g., Aknin & Human, 2015; Chan & Mogilner, 2017; Galak, Givi & Williams, 2016) and more broadly suggest that not all gifts are received with unconditional positive regard. These findings converge with previous research demonstrating that not all acts of assistance and generosity are appreciated or beneficial (e.g., Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Fisher, Nadler & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Schneider, Major, Luhtanen, & Crocker, 1996), highlighting the

importance of context, among other dimensions, when assessing the consequences of prosocial action. Practically speaking, these data suggest that someone in need of assistance should avoid providing motivated gifts that reveal instrumental motives for recruiting help. Or, if keen to provide a gift in exchange for help, consider providing the gift *after* receiving help, rather than before; doing so may reduce the likelihood that the recipient will think the gift was prompted by instrumental motives and, instead, signal gratitude, and appreciation.

### 11.1 | Limitations and future directions

This is the first work we are aware of directly examining the potential costs of motivated gifts and therefore deserving of replication. Indeed, the sample size in Study 3 was smaller than intended, which may raise concerns about the reliability of the effect. As such, future researchers should build upon these initial results with larger and more diverse samples.

In addition, future examinations could improve upon the present methods (questionnaires available at <https://osf.io/jnyfz/>) by clarifying the wording of the dependent variable. For instance, in Study 2c, all participants were asked how willing they would be to help their friend, but only half the participants had been told that their friend asked for a favor. Given that the question wording did not specify the helping context, participants may have interpreted the prompt differently across conditions; participants not asked for favor may have reported their willingness to help the friend *in general*, while participants asked for a favor may have reported their willingness to help with the requested favor. It is possible that this wording introduced unnecessary noise in the data, which while undesirable, suggests that this may have been a relatively conservative test of the present hypothesis.

Finally, future research could consider whether the content of a motivated gift matters. While our studies included a range of motivated gifts, it is possible that the nature of the gift may influence willingness to help and anticipated satisfaction from helping. For instance, exceptional gifts, such as a two-week all trip to Belize, may garner support from most people in most circumstances. Alternatively, recipients may infer different motives from relatively personal or impersonal gifts; recipients may be more likely to assume impersonal gifts are offered with instrumental motives, which therefore reduce helping and satisfaction, while sentimental gifts, such as those reminiscent of shared experiences, may be less likely to appear motivated and, as such, avoid deleterious effects.

## 12 | CONCLUSION

People sometimes offer motivated gifts to others in order to incentivize assistance. While motivated gifts may seem beneficial, the present research demonstrates that they can also be costly. Across a range of experimental studies, we find that individuals provided with a gift alongside a favor request are less likely to provide help and anticipate lower satisfaction from helping than those simply

asked for a favor, particularly when the giver's instrumental motives are noticed, and thus raise concerns of manipulation. These findings suggest that not all gifts are viewed favorably and individuals in need of assistance may be better off directly asking for help than trying to persuade potential helpers to take action.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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