

# The Privileges We Do and Do Not See: The Relative Salience of Interpersonal and Circumstantial Benefits

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## Abstract

People attend more to disadvantages in their lives than to advantages, a phenomenon known as the *Headwinds/Tailwinds Asymmetry*. In seven studies ( $N = 1,526$ ), we present an important caveat to this pattern: When people do notice and acknowledge their advantages, they mostly focus on the benefits they receive from other people (i.e., interpersonal benefits), as opposed to benefits they receive because of their demographics, personal traits, and life circumstances (i.e., circumstantial benefits). We demonstrate that people notice and remember others who helped them rather than hurt them and that they notice the help they receive from people more than from favorable, non-interpersonal factors. Finally, we find that the tendency to notice interpersonal advantages is related to a social norm requiring people to acknowledge helpful others (but not other advantages) and that changing the salience of this norm affects people's likelihood of acknowledging the support they have received from others.

## Keywords

headwinds/tailwinds asymmetry, positive/negative asymmetry, gratitude, social norms, privilege

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If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive.

—Barack Obama, 2012

The obstacles that hold people back in life command more attention than the advantages and benefits that push them forward, creating a *headwind/tailwind asymmetry*. Davidai and Gilovich (2016), for example, found that political opponents notice the challenges facing their party more than the challenges facing opposing parties, that sports fans focus more on the difficult games on their team's schedule than the easy games, that researchers see their sub-discipline as disadvantaged compared with other subdisciplines, and that trivia contestants remember their own difficult categories more than their opponents' difficult categories. People also readily view other people, groups, and countries as benefiting at their expense, but rarely notice when they, their group, or their country benefit at others' expense (Roberts & Davidai, 2021). Indeed, even when confronted with objective privileges from which they and their groups have benefited (e.g., having high socioeconomic status), people focus

on the hardships that they personally faced and downplay or ignore the good fortune they've enjoyed (Phillips & Lowery, 2020). Thus, because people attend more to the challenges they must overcome than to the advantages they can simply (and mindlessly) enjoy, they are more likely to remember the forces that hold them back than those that propel them forward (Hansson et al., 2021).

Of course, people sometimes do notice and appreciate the metaphorical "tailwinds" that push them forward in life. They count their blessings at Thanksgiving, acknowledge their good fortune at retirement parties, express gratitude at award ceremonies, and so on. How can people so often ignore or downplay their advantages in life and yet, on occasion, express such effusive gratitude for the benefits that gave them a leg up? Are certain types of advantages more likely to get noticed and cited, and others more likely to be ignored?

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In this article, we argue that some types of privileges command more attention than others. Specifically, we argue that people are more likely to notice, remember, and appreciate the *interpersonal benefits* they've received (those bestowed on them by family, friends, colleagues, mentors, and others) than *circumstantial benefits* that stem from non-interpersonal sources such as demographics, economic background, chance, and other favorable circumstances. In other words, we suggest that people notice the interpersonal forces that help them (e.g., the support of a helpful mentor) more than the circumstantial forces that do so (e.g., being of a certain gender, race, or class; having been born with favorable physical skills; etc.). By "circumstantial" benefits, we simply mean any benefit that is not derived from an interpersonal source or is not viewed by the beneficiary as having been personally bestowed by another person or persons. We use the terms "benefits," "advantages," and "privileges" somewhat interchangeably throughout this article, and we used these different terms in our research materials to ensure that our effects are robust to such variations.

Of course, although some advantages are unambiguously interpersonal (e.g., having an emotionally supportive spouse) and some are clearly not (e.g., being tall), others are more ambiguous. For example, while some may view parental financial support as interpersonal (i.e., having caring parents), others may view it as circumstantial (i.e., coming from a financially affluent background). In such cases, we argue, how people construe the benefits affects how much they notice and acknowledge them: Benefits are more likely to be noticed and remembered when seen as interpersonal, and less likely when seen as circumstantial or non-interpersonal.

## Visible and Invisible Privileges

Some privileges in life, such as those that originate from demographic categories like race or gender, are often invisible to those who benefit from them (Kimmel, 2013; McIntosh, 1989). Indeed, because many privileges involve the absence of a disadvantage (e.g., not being mistreated by the police) rather than the presence of an advantage, they tend to be less visible and less cognitively accessible (Hearst, 1991; Wu & Dunning, 2020). And, because acknowledging privilege challenges people's meritocratic ideology that success is hard-earned, even those who notice their privileges tend to deemphasize the role they play in their lives. For instance, people tend to downplay how much their success has been due to their race and play up the hardships they have personally experienced (Phillips & Lowery, 2015), thus profiting from their advantages while minimizing any negative affects that acknowledging them might elicit (Phillips & Lowery, 2018).

In contrast, the advantages that come from others' assistance are more likely to be noticed, acknowledged, and remembered. Both the norm of reciprocity and the experience of gratitude motivate people to attend to, reflect on, and

acknowledge the help and support they receive from others, making such advantages stand out. Indeed, while reciprocating good deeds builds trust and strengthens relationships between benefactors and their beneficiaries (Molm et al., 2007; Sondern & Hertel, 2019), failing to notice and reciprocate others' help can harm one's reputation and be personally costly (Cialdini, 1984; Daughters et al., 2017; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Gouldner, 1960). Moreover, according to the *Find, Remind, and Bind* theory of gratitude, feeling grateful motivates people to identify and strengthen their relationships with beneficial interaction partners (Algoe, 2012; Algoe et al., 2008), making the tendency to notice privileges that stem from *interpersonal* sources beneficial for survival and success. In fact, expressing and even experiencing gratitude may be seen as a moral obligation (McCullough et al., 2001; although see Jackson, 2016 for another perspective). Thus, to the extent that people feel obligated to notice and remember others' assistance, we would expect them to be more attentive to their interpersonal advantages and benefits than any non-interpersonal ones.

Of course, if people notice, remember, and acknowledge others' help and support because they feel normatively obligated to do so, then the extent to which they focus on such interpersonal privileges should vary with the strength and salience of such norms. For instance, people may feel obligated to keep track of any help they receive from others with whom they expect to collaborate in the future but not from those with whom they expect to compete. And, while a norm to notice and appreciate others' help may be strongly enforced in cooperative environments, doing so may not be as heavily prescribed in more competitive environments. Thus, just as the perceived norm of self-interest (Miller, 1999) varies across situations (Frank et al., 1993), the felt obligation to attend to others' help may vary with the prevailing context. That is, although people may generally attend more to their interpersonal (vs. circumstantial) advantages, the extent to which they do so may be moderated by the salience of local norms.

## Research Overview

In seven studies, we identify a particular type of advantage that commands people's attention. First, we examine whether *interpersonal* factors are more cognitively available when people think about their advantages in life than when they think about their disadvantages, finding that participants are particularly likely to notice and remember the people who have helped them move forward in life (Studies 1 and 2). Next, we examine whether people feel obligated by prevailing norms to attend to the individuals who have helped them more than the circumstances that have given them a boost (Studies 3 and 4). We then test whether framing a benefit as interpersonal (vs. circumstantial) affects how much people like and respect those who acknowledge their advantages (Study 5). Finally, we explore whether the

tendency to focus on interpersonal advantages is moderated by the strength and salience of a social norm to do so (Studies 6 and 7).

For all studies, we report all conditions run and measures collected. To ensure sufficient power, we followed a heuristic of including at least 50 participants per condition (but often many more). Sample sizes were determined in advance and analyses were conducted only once data collection was complete. For each study, we report a sensitivity power analysis for the smallest effect size detectable with 80% power, calculated using the *pwr* (Champely et al., 2020) or *PowerUpR* packages in *R* (Bulus et al., 2021). All studies follow APA's ethical standards and were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the authors' institutions. The materials, data, codebooks, and analyses for all studies are available at <https://osf.io/5zeqt/>. Study 5 was preregistered.

## Study 1

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred thirty-nine Cornell University students (89 women, 41 men, and 9 unspecified) completed this study in exchange for course credit. This sample size allows us to detect effects of size  $d = 0.51$  with 80% power.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants responded to an open-ended question about their experiences at Cornell. In the *advantages* condition, they read:

Many students have it easier than others here at Cornell—they face fewer obstacles, enjoy more privileges, have fewer demands on them, and face fewer distractions. What about you? In what ways have you had it easier than other students here at Cornell? What advantages and privileges have you benefited from, are currently benefitting from, or expect to benefit from in the future? What are some of the advantages that you have enjoyed that other students haven't?

Participants in the *disadvantages* condition received similar instructions regarding the difficulties they had faced:

Many students have it harder than others here at Cornell—they face more obstacles, enjoy fewer privileges, have more demands on them, and face more distractions. What about you? In what ways have you had it harder than other students here at Cornell? What obstacles and hardships have you had to confront, are currently facing, or expect to face in the future? What are some of the obstacles that you have had to overcome that other students haven't?

Finally, participants in the *mixed* condition reflected on both their advantages and disadvantages relative to others.<sup>1</sup>

Three research assistants who were unaware of the hypotheses coded participants' responses for whether the

advantages/disadvantages they cited stemmed from "social relationships (e.g., having financially and emotionally supportive/unsupportive parents, getting useful/useless advice from friends, etc.)" or from "non-social sources (e.g., being of a specific ethnicity, coming from a certain socio-economic status, etc.)" Specifically, the coders rated, for each participant, the extent to which they wrote about interpersonal or non-interpersonal forces on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Wrote exclusively about advantages/disadvantages that stem from non-social sources" to (5) "Wrote exclusively about advantages/disadvantages that stem from social relationships,"  $\alpha = 0.69$ .

## Results

A linear regression predicting the proportion of interpersonal forces listed by participants yielded significant between-condition differences,  $F(2, 135) = 9.08, p < .001$ . Specifically, a planned contrast between the *advantages* and *disadvantages* conditions revealed that participants who reflected on their advantages were more likely to write about social relationships ( $M = 3.27$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 1.21) than those who reflected on their disadvantages ( $M = 2.30, SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(135) = 4.25, p < .001, d = -0.88$ , 95% confidence interval [CI]: [0.51, 1.41]. Participants in the *mixed* condition (who reflected on their advantages and their disadvantages) were more prone to mention other people ( $M = 2.83, SD = 1.05$ ) than participants who reflected on their disadvantages,  $t(135) = -2.35, p = .020, d = 0.52$ , 95% CI [-0.97, -0.08], but did not differ significantly from participants who reflected on their advantages,  $t(135) = 1.94, p = .054$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.88].

## Study 2

Participants in Study 1 were more likely to write about other people when thinking about the advantages that pushed them forward in life than the disadvantages that held them back. Study 2 expands on these findings in three important ways. First, the fact that participants in Study 1 were at an especially social time of their lives (i.e., college) may have heightened the salience of their supportive social relationships. To explore our findings' generalizability, we examined whether the pattern observed in Study 1 replicates in an older, more diverse, and more broadly representative sample. Second, rather than using independent coders, we asked participants themselves to indicate whether each of their responses involved a social relationship (i.e., whether their advantages stemmed from interpersonal or circumstantial factors). Third, to ensure our effects were not due to the specific wording (e.g., the use of the word "privilege") in Study 1, we used a simpler prompt asking participants to consider factors without which their lives would have been easier or more difficult.

## Method

**Participants.** Two hundred eighty-one U.S. residents were recruited from Mechanical Turk (174 women, 104 men,  $M_{age} = 38.41$ , 80% European American, 7% African American, 5% Asian, and 6% Hispanic/Latino) to complete the study below and other questions that were a part of an unrelated project. This sample size allows the detection of effects of size  $d = 0.34$  with 80% power.

**Materials and Procedures.** Participants were randomly assigned to write about their advantages or disadvantages in life. In the *advantages* condition, participants considered the things that made their lives easier than they could have been. Participants were asked to provide three answers to the prompt, “*My life would have been much more difficult if it weren’t for . . .*” and code each of their responses for whether it reflected an interpersonal (i.e., social) or non-interpersonal (i.e., circumstantial) aspect of their life, in line with these instructions:

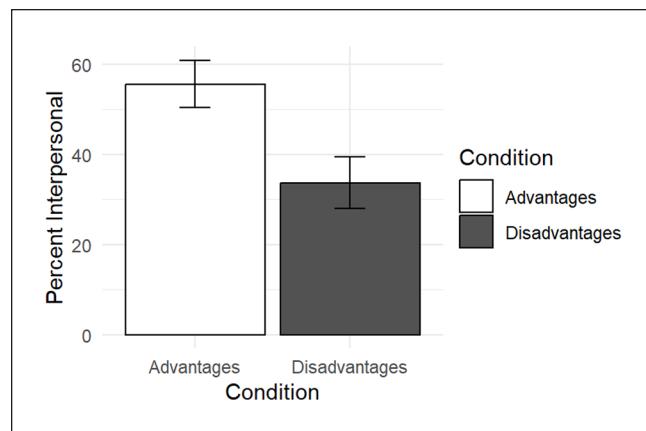
Sometimes, the things that make our lives easier are, by nature, social (for example—friends, family, co-workers and so forth who are like a “tailwind” at our back and make it easier for us to progress on whatever path we’ve taken). Other times, the things that make our lives easier are not at all social (for example, rules, institutions and procedures that put us at an advantage, personal traits that are helping our progress, financial allowances that we benefit from, etc.)

Participants in the *disadvantages* condition considered the things that made their lives more difficult than they could have been. They were then asked three times to complete the prompt, “*My life would have been much easier if it weren’t for . . .*” and coded their responses for whether they were interpersonal or not:

Sometimes, the things that make our lives more difficult are, by nature, social (for example—friends, family, co-workers and so forth who are like a ‘headwind’ in our face and make it more difficult for us to progress on whatever path we’ve taken). Other times, the things that make our lives more difficult are not at all social (for example, rules, institutions and procedures that put us at a disadvantage, personal traits that are hurting our progress, financial constraints that we suffer from, etc.)

## Results

We predicted that participants would mention interpersonal relationships more often when reflecting on their privileges than when reflecting on their challenges. Indeed, participants noted more interpersonal factors when considering their advantages ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than when considering their disadvantages ( $M = 0.96$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(278) = 6.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.72$ , 95% CI [0.46, 0.90]. In contrast, they mentioned more non-interpersonal factors when considering their



**Figure 1.** Percentage of Interpersonal Items Mentioned in the Advantages and Disadvantages Conditions in Study 2.

disadvantages ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), than when considering their advantages ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ),  $t(278) = -4.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ , 95% CI [-0.73, -0.28] (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

Another way of looking at these data is to examine the first thing that came to participants’ minds when thinking about their advantages or disadvantages. Providing further support for our hypotheses, 61% of participants in the *advantages* condition first noted an *interpersonal* advantage from which they benefit,  $z = 2.53$ ,  $p = .012$ , but only 30% of participants in the *disadvantages* condition first described someone who hindered them,  $z = 4.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, participants thought of other people more readily when considering their privileges than when considering their hardships,  $\chi^2(1) = 25.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.19, 0.43].

## Study 3

Participants focused on people (rather than circumstances) when considering their advantages but not when considering their disadvantages. As noted above, one possible explanation for this tendency centers on people’s sense of social obligation. For instance, given that acknowledging others’ support carries reputational benefits (Simpson et al., 2018), focusing on help from others may be deemed especially important. Indeed, people typically expect to be acknowledged for their help, and beneficiaries can increase their future likelihood of receiving help by acknowledging any help they have already received (Algove et al., 2008). Thus, the social obligation to keep a tally of helpful others may explain why focusing on one’s privileges brings to mind people rather than beneficial circumstances.

Study 3 examined whether the focus on interpersonal advantages is due to a perceived social norm. Participants were asked to imagine a situation in which social norms are especially salient (i.e., public speaking) and to indicate what aspects of their lives a person ought to focus on (a)

interpersonal advantages, (b) circumstantial advantages, (c) interpersonal disadvantages, or (d) circumstantial disadvantages. We predicted that participants would respond in a way that honors the social obligation to focus on interpersonal (vs. circumstantial) assistance and advantages.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred three U.S. residents were recruited from Mechanical Turk (45 women, 58 men,  $M_{age} = 32.82$ , 79% European American, 13% African American, 1% Asian American, 3% Hispanic/Latino) in exchange for monetary compensation. This sample size allows us to detect effects of size  $d = 0.56$  with 80% power (Champely et al., 2020).

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they thought about someone preparing to give a speech at his retirement party. In the *advantages* condition, they read about someone planning to deliver a speech about “*the ‘lucky breaks’ he caught in his career, including people who have helped and supported him, and other advantages he’s had in life (his economic circumstances, his privileged upbringing, his good health, etc.)*.” They further read that this person was “*wondering how much of the speech to devote to mentioning the people who have helped him in life and how much of the speech to devote to the privileges that he had benefitted from*.” Participants then imagined being in this person’s position and indicated what proportion of his speech he ought to spend “*mentioning people who have helped me in life*” versus “*mentioning privileges I have benefitted from in life*.”

In the *disadvantages* condition, participants read about a person planning to deliver a speech about the difficulties he had weathered throughout his career, including “*the challenges he’s faced and overcome in his career, including people who have hurt him and other disadvantages he’s faced in life (his economic circumstances, his underprivileged upbringing, some health challenges, etc.)*.” They further read that this person was “*wondering how much of the speech to devote to mentioning the people who have held him back in life and how much of the speech to devote to the challenges that he has faced*” and indicated what proportion of his speech he ought to spend “*mentioning people who have hurt me in life*” versus “*mentioning challenges I have faced in life*.”

Participants in both conditions indicated their responses on two sliding scales and could only proceed once their responses totaled 100%.

## Results

We predicted that participants would honor a social norm of acknowledging interpersonal, but not circumstantial, advantages. Indeed, participants in the *advantages* condition said

the retiree ought to spend much more time acknowledging helpful others ( $M = 70.81\%$ ,  $SD = 20.04$ ) than advantageous life circumstances, one-sample  $t(52) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [65.29, 76.33]. In contrast, participants in the *disadvantages* condition said he should focus much less on people who had stymied his success ( $M = 22.82\%$ ,  $SD = 24.67$ ) than the challenging circumstances that had done so, one-sample  $t(49) = -7.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [15.81, 29.83]. Consequently, participants focused more on interpersonal relationships in the *advantages* condition than the *disadvantages* condition,  $t(101) = 10.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.14$ , 95% CI [39.23, 56.75]. Thus, although participants indicated that the retiree was obligated to note the interpersonal advantages that had pushed him forward in life, they did not feel that he faced a similar obligation either to cite circumstantial advantages that had helped him in life or interpersonal disadvantages that had held him back.

## Study 4

The results of Study 3 suggest that a sense of social obligation attunes people to the benefits they have received from others more than the advantageous circumstances they have enjoyed. Building on this, we next examined people’s judgments of others who uphold or violate this norm. Because people prefer those who uphold social norms over those who deviate from them (e.g., Daughters et al., 2017; Schachter, 1951; Wice & Davidai, 2021), we predicted that participants would look favorably upon someone who follows the norm of noticing and acknowledging the interpersonal benefits they received but would not look as favorably on someone who is closely attuned to their advantageous, non-interpersonal life circumstances.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred two U.S. residents were recruited from Mechanical Turk (48 women, 54 men,  $M_{age} = 34.90$ , 72% European American, 12% African American, 6% Asian American, 5% Hispanic/Latino) in exchange for monetary compensation. This sample size allows us to detect effects of size  $d = .56$  with 80% power.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants read about two executives who gave a public speech about their respective careers and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions.

In the *advantages* condition, participants read that one speaker focused on his interpersonal advantages (“*people who’ve helped him throughout the years*” and who “*looked out for him*”) and that the other speaker focused on his non-interpersonal advantages (“*advantages he had enjoyed*” and “*‘lucky breaks’ he had caught*”). Participants then indicated which of the two speakers they would like and respect more (forced-choice: “*I would like and respect the first executive*

who talked about the supportive people who'd helped him throughout his career" versus "I would like and respect the second executive who talked about the advantageous life circumstances that had helped him throughout his career").

In the *disadvantages* condition, participants read that one speaker focused on his interpersonal disadvantages ("difficult people who had hurt him throughout the years" and who "were out to get him") and that the other speaker focused on his non-interpersonal disadvantages ("difficulties he'd faced in his career that didn't involve other people" and "how he could 'never catch a lucky break'") and then indicated which of the two speakers they would like and respect more (forced-choice: "I would like and respect the first executive who talked about the hurtful people he'd faced and overcome throughout his career" versus "I would like and respect the second executive who talked about the disadvantageous life circumstances he'd faced and overcome throughout his career").

## Results

We predicted that participants would have more respect and affection for someone who focused on the help they received from others rather than their advantageous life circumstances. Indeed, 78% of participants in the *advantages* condition had more respect for the person who expressed gratitude for the supportive people in his life than the person who focused on his privileged life circumstances,  $z = 3.82, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.64, 0.88]$ . In contrast, only 21.2% participants in the *disadvantages* condition had more respect for the person who focused on the difficult people in his life rather than the person who focused on his challenging life circumstances,  $z = 4.02, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.12, 0.35]$ . Thus, whereas most participants in the *advantages* condition were more favorable toward the person who focused on his interpersonal relationships, few participants in the *disadvantages* condition were similarly inclined to favor the person who focused on interpersonal relationships,  $\chi^2(1) = 30.73, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.39, 0.75]$ .

## Study 5

Studies 3 and 4 documented the impact of an apparent social norm that encourages people to focus on their interpersonal advantages. Of course, although some privileges in life are clearly due to interpersonal connections, others can be construed as either interpersonal or non-interpersonal. We took advantage of this interpretive flexibility in Study 5, examining whether people like and respect those who highlight the interpersonal elements of their privileges more than those who emphasize the non-interpersonal elements. We predicted that participants would look more favorably upon someone who frames a privilege as coming from an interpersonal relationship (e.g., a banker who approved a loan, an investor who helped their company get through rough times)

than someone who frames the same privilege in non-interpersonal terms (e.g., a loan approved by a bank and an investment made by a financial institution).

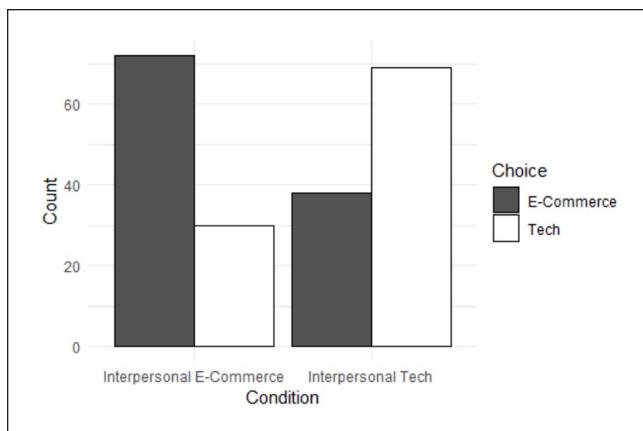
## Method

**Participants.** Two hundred eight U.S. residents were recruited from Mechanical Turk (93 women, 113 men, 2 other,  $M_{age} = 41.90$ , 75% European American, 15% African American, 7% Asian-American, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 1% American-Indian/Alaskan-native, 1% Middle-Eastern/Arab, and 1% Other) to participate in a pre-registered study (<https://aspredicted.org/qq37n.pdf>) in exchange for monetary compensation.<sup>3</sup> This sample allows the detection of effects of size  $d = 0.39$  with 80% power (Champely et al., 2020).

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants read about two entrepreneurs who each gave a speech about the advantages that helped them "overcome serious financial difficulties." One focused on an investment that saved their e-commerce company from "going under" and the other on a bank loan that got their tech start-up through financially difficult times. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, which varied in terms of which entrepreneur (the one running the e-commerce company or the one running the start-up) cited an interpersonal source of their good fortune and which cited a non-interpersonal source.

In the *interpersonal e-commerce* condition, participants read that the e-commerce entrepreneur framed the decisive event that helped their company in interpersonal terms, highlighting the "attentive investor who had saved their company" and thanking that person "for guiding them through a very precarious moment in their life." These participants also read that the tech start-up entrepreneur, in marked contrast, framed the decisive event in non-interpersonal terms, highlighting "a bank loan that helped them through especially dire times" and expressing gratitude "to that financial institution for helping them get to where they are today." Participants then indicated which of the two speakers they would like and respect more (forced-choice: "I would like and respect the speaker who talked about the journey of their e-commerce website (the individual investor who helped them)" versus "I would like and respect the speaker who talked about their journey of their tech start-up (the loan from an institution that helped them)").

In the *interpersonal tech* condition, we flipped which entrepreneur cited the interpersonal element of their good fortune and which one cited a non-interpersonal element. In this condition, the e-commerce entrepreneur framed the decisive event in non-interpersonal terms, as "an investment from a financial institution that saved their company" and thanked "the institution that helped them get to where they are today." The tech start-up entrepreneur, in contrast, framed the decisive event in interpersonal terms, highlighting "the



**Figure 2.** Number of Participants Who Chose the E-Commerce Entrepreneur and the Tech Entrepreneur as the Person They Liked and Respected More in Study 5.

attentive banker who gave them a loan” and “thanking that person for guiding them through a very precarious moment in their life.” Participants then indicated which of the two speakers they would like and respect more (forced-choice: “*I would like and respect the speaker who talked about the journey of their e-commerce website (the investment from an institution that helped them)*” versus “*I would like and respect the speaker who talked about the journey of their tech start-up (the individual banker who helped them)*”).

## Results

We predicted that participants would look more favorably upon someone who framed their good fortune in interpersonal terms than someone who framed it in non-interpersonal terms. Indeed, among participants in the *interpersonal e-commerce* condition (who read about an e-commerce entrepreneur who cited help from an individual investor and a tech entrepreneur who cited help from a financial institution), 70.6% had more respect and affection for the e-commerce entrepreneur,  $z = 4.06, p < .0001$ . In contrast, in the *interpersonal tech* condition (where the e-commerce entrepreneur cited an investment company and the tech entrepreneur cited an attentive banker), only 35.5% of participants had more respect and affection for the e-commerce entrepreneur,  $z = 2.90, p = .004$ . Thus, as shown in Figure 2, regardless of whether the decisive event was an investment or a loan, participants were more favorable toward the individual who cited the interpersonal roots of their privilege than the one who cited its non-interpersonal roots,  $\chi^2(1) = 24.38, p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.21, 0.49].

## Studies 6 and 7

Studies 3–5 documented the impact of an apparent social norm that encourages people to focus on their interpersonal

privileges and how emphasizing the interpersonal aspects of one’s privileges affects judgments of those who benefit from them. In Studies 6 and 7, we examined whether this norm *causes* people to focus on such privileges. To do so, we asked participants to imagine helping a friend apply for a job at a place that either did or did not cultivate interpersonal relationships and indicate how much their friend’s application should focus on their interpersonal advantages or disadvantages. We predicted that imagining an environment that values social relationships (versus one that values competition between individuals) would activate the norm of attending to interpersonal advantages and thus lead participants to recommend that their friend focus more on the interpersonal privileges in their application.

## Study 6

### Method

**Participants.** Two hundred one U.S. residents were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation (122 men, 76 women, one non-binary person, and two undisclosed;  $M_{age} = 37.63$ ; 84% White, 6.47% Black or African American, 6.47% East Asian, 2.49% Southeast Asian, 1.49% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.99% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.99% other). This sample size allows us to detect effects of size  $d = 0.33$  with 80% power.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants imagined helping a friend apply for a job at a company that was either known for cultivating personal relationships among employees (*Collaborative Norm* condition) or one that was not known for doing so (*Competitive Norm* condition)

In the *Collaborative Norm* condition, participants read:

The company prides itself for its “work-life balance” mentality, and employees know that the only way of getting ahead is by helping their colleagues. When people come to work, they immediately check in on each other, almost everyone collaborates with each other, and conversations about non-business-related topics are frequent. In fact, most people who work there say you should try to make lots of friends within the company and try to be well-liked by your coworkers because you need to get personal recommendations to be promoted within the company.

In the *Competitive norm* condition, participants read:

The company prides itself for its “work hard, play hard” mentality, and employees know that the only way of getting ahead is to outperform their colleagues. When people come to work, they immediately get into their offices and close the door. The competition in the company means that people almost never collaborate with each other, and conversations about non-business-related topics are rare. In fact, most people who work

**Table 1.** Interpersonal and Non-Interpersonal Disadvantage and Advantage Options in Study 5.

Valence	Interpersonal	Non-Interpersonal
Disadvantages	<p>1) I learned who I should or shouldn't trust because I had a coworker who tried really hard to prevent me from getting a promotion</p> <p>2) I had to develop thick skin early on because, back in school, I had a professor who told me I wasn't smart enough and tried to convince me to change my major</p>	<p>1) Growing up in a financially unstable community, life was not easy and I quickly became a jack-of-all-trades</p> <p>2) I learned perseverance in high school, when I had to juggle my schoolwork and a part-time job to help with the bills</p>
Advantages	<p>1) I once had a teacher who really believed in me and set me on the right path in choosing a career</p> <p>2) My supervisor at my previous job took me under their wing and was like a mentor to me who helped me develop a lot of new skills</p>	<p>1) I was very lucky to receive financial aid which allowed me to attend a good college</p> <p>2) I entered the job market at a very good period, when a lot of companies were hiring and it was relatively easy to get a job</p>

there say you should keep your work life and friendships separate because you need to have nerves of steel to be promoted in the company.

Participants were then asked to imagine that their friend needed to discuss “*how they got to where they are today*” and to identify three factors that shaped their life. Participants then indicated three factors that their friend ought to focus on out of a list of eight factors: two *interpersonal benefits* (i.e., examples of how they succeeded because of other people’s help), two *interpersonal barriers* (i.e., examples of how they succeeded despite other people’s interference), two *circumstantial benefits* (i.e., examples of how they succeeded because of favorable circumstances), and two *circumstantial barriers* (i.e., examples of how they succeeded despite unfavorable circumstances; Table 1).

Finally, participants indicated how good it would be for their friend to get the job (1—extremely good, 5—extremely bad) and how much they wanted to help their friend succeed. Specifically, we asked:

When you were selecting the items that your friend should include in their application, were you trying to help them get the job? (1—I was trying my best to help them get the job, 5—I was trying my best to prevent them from getting the job).<sup>4</sup>

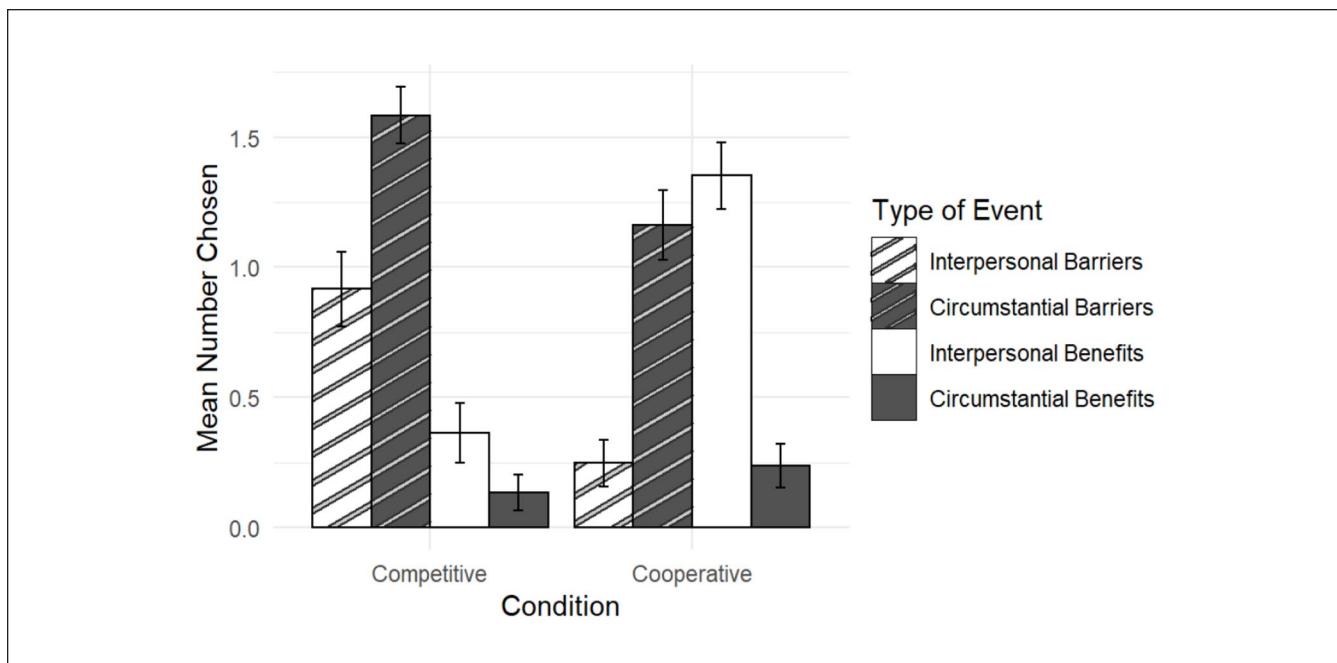
## Results

**The Advantages/Disadvantages Asymmetry.** We examined whether participants generally focused on the barriers and disadvantages that make life difficult versus the benefits and advantages that make it easier. Replicating past research, participants focused more on the headwinds and challenges their friend confronted ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) than the tailwinds and advantages from which they had benefited ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ),  $t(200) = 6.84$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.61, 1.11]. Moreover, participants were especially more likely to select their friend’s disadvantages in the *Competitive Norm* condition,  $t(197) = 0.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.54$ , 95% CI [0.61, -1.10], indicating that the previously documented headwind/

tailwind asymmetry is impacted by the presumed norms of the prevailing environment.

**The Interpersonal Advantages Asymmetry.** We next examined the specific advantages and disadvantages on which participants focused. We predicted that participants would choose more interpersonal advantages (received from social relationships) than circumstantial advantages (received from life circumstances). Indeed, although participants focused more on difficult circumstances their friend had overcome ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) than difficult people who got in their way ( $M = 0.57$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ),  $t(200) = -11.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-0.93, -0.66], the opposite was true for their privileges. Specifically, when it came to their privileges, participants focused more on helpful people that had provided support ( $M = 0.88$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) than lucky breaks their friend happened to catch ( $M = 0.19$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ),  $t(200) = 11.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.57, 0.81]. Thus, despite their general focus on life’s difficulties, participants who did focus on privileges were significantly more likely to focus on *interpersonal* privileges than circumstantial privileges.

Finally, we created an index of participants’ tendency to focus on interpersonal benefits and circumstantial barriers rather than circumstantial benefits and interpersonal barriers. This index, calculated by subtracting the latter two factors from the former two, represents the extent to which people emphasize the help received from others and circumstantial obstacles they encountered and deemphasize their “enemies” and privileged circumstances. We predicted that this emphasis would be significantly more pronounced in the *cooperative* condition than in the *competitive* condition, where focusing on interpersonal privileges might signal an inability to thrive in a competitive workplace. Indeed, a multiple regression analysis predicting this index from condition and the two control variables was significant, revealing significantly higher index scores in the *cooperative* condition ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than in the *competitive* condition ( $M = 0.90$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $F(1, 197) = 37.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.22, 1.16].<sup>5</sup> Thus, as shown in Figure 3, participants focused much more on interpersonal privileges when



**Figure 3.** Types of Life Events Selected by Condition in Study 5.

Note. Displays the number of interpersonal (white) and circumstantial (gray) barriers (striped) and benefits (solid) in the competitive and cooperative norm conditions. Error bars represent 95% CI.

imagining an environment with strong collaborative norms than when imagining an environment with more competitive norms.

## Study 7

Study 7 is a direct replication of Study 6 with three important changes. First, we examined participants' default assumptions about the prevailing norms by including a control condition in which they did not receive any information about the organization's social climate. Second, we edited the manipulation such that it involved a briefer description of the workplace norms, with the conditions differing only in terms of whether current employees were said to appreciate the opportunity to "compete," "collaborate," or "work" (in the control condition) with highly qualified colleagues. Finally, Study 7 included a manipulation check.

## Method

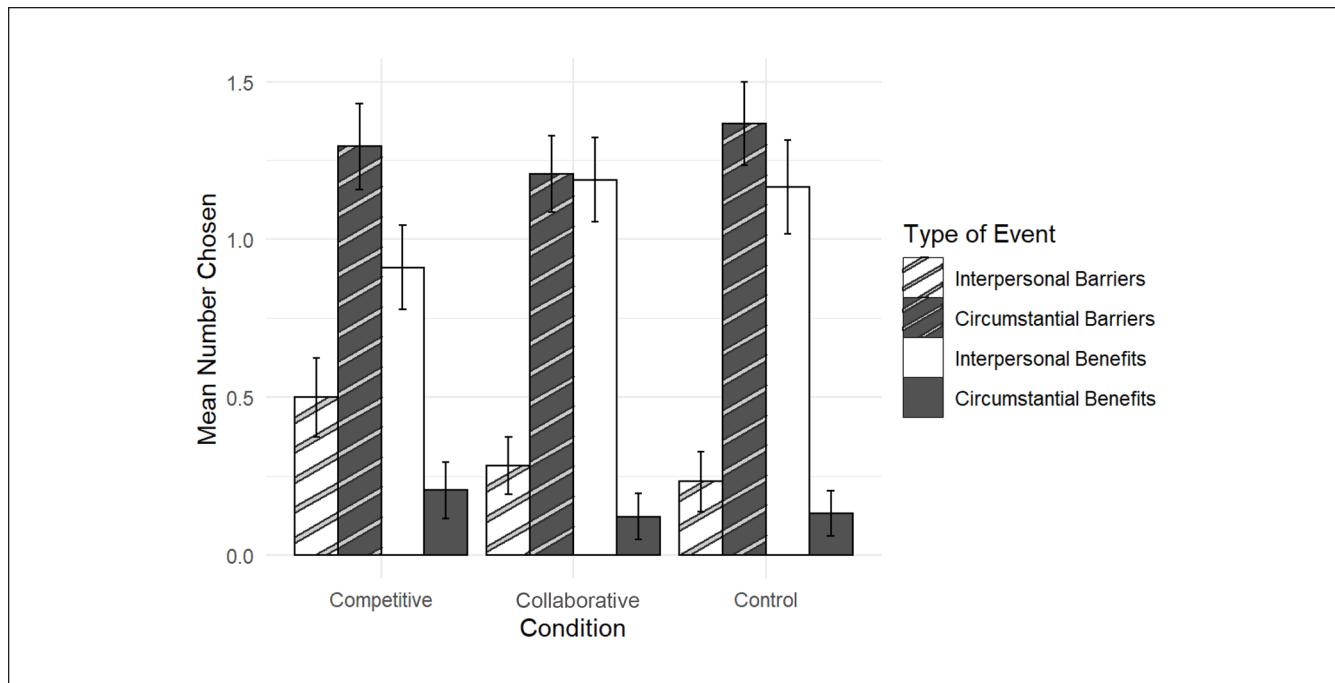
**Participants.** Two hundred ninety-eight U.S. residents were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for monetary compensation (145 men, 138 women, one non-binary person, and two who did not disclose gender;  $M_{age} = 38.50$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.07$ ; 76.2% White, 11.4% Black or African American, 4.7% East Asian, 3.4% Southeast Asian, 0.7% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.7% other ethnicities). This sample size allows us to detect effects of size  $d = 0.27$  with 80% power.

**Materials and Procedure.** As in Study 6, participants imagined helping a friend with a job application and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *Collaborative Norm* condition, the manipulation noted that employees in the organization "often collaborate with each other, and most people who work there say that the many opportunities to collaborate with such highly qualified colleagues have really improved their skills." In the *Competitive Norm* condition, the manipulation noted that employees "often compete with each other, and most people who work there say that the many opportunities to compete with such highly qualified colleagues have really improved their skills." Finally, the *control condition* did not include any information about the prevailing social norm, only noting that "most people who work there say that the many opportunities to work with such highly qualified colleagues have really improved their skills."

As before, participants selected three factors that their friend ought to focus on from a list of eight factors: two interpersonal benefits, two circumstantial benefits, two interpersonal barriers, and two circumstantial barriers. They then indicated how favorably they viewed the job, how much they tried to help their friend get the job,<sup>6</sup> and completed a manipulation check regarding the organization's prevalent norm (1—extremely cooperative; 5—extremely competitive).

## Results

**Manipulation Check.** As intended, the company's norms were seen as less competitive and more cooperative in the



**Figure 4.** Types of Life Events Selected by Condition in Study 7.

Note. Displays the number of interpersonal (white) and circumstantial (gray) barriers (striped) and benefits (solid) in the competitive norm, collaborative norm, and control conditions. Error bars represent 95% CI.

*Collaborative Norm* condition ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than both the *Control* ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ),  $t(284) = 4.44$ ,  $p < .001$  and *Competitive Norm* conditions ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ),  $t(284) = 10.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , which significantly differed from each other,  $t(284) = -6.11$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**The Advantages/Disadvantages Asymmetry.** As in Study 6, participants were generally more focused on the difficulties and challenges their friend had faced rather than the privileges they enjoyed, focusing more on disadvantages ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) than advantages ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) to mention in the job application,  $t(297) = 4.54$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**The Interpersonal Advantages Asymmetry.** We next examined whether, when focusing on privileges, participants were more attuned to *interpersonal* factors rather than non-*interpersonal* factors. Indeed, when it came to privileges, participants indicated that their friend should focus more on helpful people ( $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) than helpful circumstances ( $M = 0.15$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ),  $t(297) = 19.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . In contrast, when it came to difficulties and disadvantages, participants indicated that their friend should focus more on difficult circumstances ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) than difficult people ( $M = 0.34$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ),  $t(297) = -18.42$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, participants exhibited an *interpersonal privileges asymmetry*, focusing on people when considering advantages but on circumstances when considering disadvantages.

We again created an index of participants' emphasis on interpersonal benefits and circumstantial barriers versus

interpersonal barriers and circumstantial benefits and predicted this index from the condition and the two control variables. A planned contrast of the two experimental conditions (*collaborative* condition weight = +1, *competitive* condition weight = -1) revealed that participants' index scores were significantly higher in the *Collaborative* condition ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than in the *Competitive* condition ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ),  $F(1, 282) = 11.22$ ,  $p = .001$ , 95% CI [0.12, 0.47]. Moreover, a post hoc comparison revealed that participants focused less on their interpersonal benefits and circumstantial barriers in the *Competitive* condition (weight = -1) than in the *Collaborative* and *Control* conditions (weights = .5),  $F(1, 282) = 17.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.23, 0.64]. Thus, reflecting a norm of recognizing others' contributions to our good fortune (Gordon, 2013; Gouldner, 1960; Whatley et al., 1999), participants in the *Control* condition focused as much on interpersonal advantages as those in the *Collaborative Norm* condition, and more than those in the *Competitive Norm* condition (Figure 4).

## General Discussion

Across seven studies, we documented a pronounced asymmetry in the advantages that people notice, remember, and acknowledge in their lives. Although people often fail to note the privileges they enjoy (i.e., the "tailwinds" from which they benefit; Davidai & Gilovich, 2016), we found that not all advantages are treated equally. Rather, our studies make it clear that people notice and acknowledge the *interpersonal*

advantages that push them forward in life (e.g., helpful family, friends, and mentors) much more readily than any circumstantial advantages that do so. Moreover, we found that the tendency to disproportionately attend to interpersonal advantages is at least partially due to a social norm that encourages people to do so and, in turn, helps them solidify their social relationships (Algoe, 2012), bolster their reputations (Cialdini, 1984), and advance their material interests (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Indeed, attesting to the causal impact of such norms, we found that people are more likely to focus on *interpersonal benefits* in situations with strong relationship-focused norms than in situations with more competitive norms. Thus, the tendency to notice and acknowledge the benefits that come from a person's relationships is due, at least in part, to a social obligation to do so—a norm that does not apply to privileges that come from non-interpersonal life circumstances.

### Implications and Future Directions

Any tendency to notice and acknowledge some privileges over others is bound to have important implications. Frequent flyers, for example, may be substantially more pleased to learn that they have been upgraded to business class from a flight attendant than a text message. Similarly, coffee drinkers are likely to better appreciate a drink that is “on the house” when this privilege is personally bestowed upon them by a barista (“I personally welcome your presence here”) rather than the café’s smartphone app (“We appreciate your business”). More generally, people’s tendency to attend to the benefits they receive from others suggests that organizations interested in earning the good favor of the public should “put a face on” benefits they hand out.

The present findings also have implications for the experience of gratitude. The emotion of gratitude has evolved to help people obey the norm of reciprocity and facilitate group living (Algoe et al., 2008; Frank, 1987; McCullough et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2020), which helps explain the nature of the privileges that people seem particularly inclined to recognize. Because of this readiness to acknowledge interpersonal benefits, they may be especially helpful for people to reflect on in the context of various well-being interventions such as keeping a gratitude diary (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Interventions such as the Gratitude Visit (Seligman et al., 2005) and therapeutic techniques such as Naikan therapy (Reynolds, 1983) already take advantage of this by focusing on being grateful for helpful others (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

Of course, despite finding consistent evidence of a social norm to acknowledge interpersonal privileges, other factors may also contribute to this effect. For one, people may be more attuned to their interpersonal privileges because they see them as more indicative of their identity, believing that the social connections from which they benefit say more about who *they are* than similar privileges that stem from

favorable life circumstances. Indeed, participants in a pilot study indicated that a list of *people* who helped them in life would tell a stranger more about who they are than a list of favorable circumstances from which they benefited. As a result, making internal attributions for interpersonal privileges (e.g., “*they helped me because they like who I am*”) but external attributions for circumstantial privileges (e.g., “*that’s just how the world works*”) may increase the salience of the former over the latter. Put differently, because help received from a deliberate and agentic source who singles out their beneficiary seems more meaningful and valuable, people may be more prone to notice it. At the same time, people may be motivated to downplay harm from an agentic source lest it reflect badly on them. Previous research shows, for instance, that learning that a person was rejected by a romantic partner lowers their perceived mate value (Stanik et al., 2010). Since other people’s help *and* harm can be seen as deserved, people may wish to highlight interpersonal benefits and downplay interpersonal barriers. Thus, future research could examine the attributions people make about the advantages and disadvantages in their lives.

Future research might similarly explore the social forces that reinforce the salience of interpersonal privileges. For instance, as people often interact with those who have helped them in life, their memory of these benefits may be cued by such interactions. And, even when they do not interact with those who have helped them, various cultural events may prompt people to think about the help they have received from others. People are explicitly prompted to reflect on what their parents have done for them on Mother’s and Father’s Day, on the love and support they enjoy from their romantic partners on Valentine’s Day, on the support they have received from supportive teachers and mentors on Teacher Appreciation Week, and so forth. Such societal prompts are not just a Western phenomenon. The annual Hindu and Buddhist tradition of *Guru Purnima*, for example, encourages people to celebrate their teachers, gurus, and mentors. Thus, future research could examine how external prompts affect people’s tendency to notice and acknowledge their interpersonal (vs. circumstantial) privileges.

Finally, future research should examine how to increase people’s awareness of their circumstantial privileges, particularly those related to membership in privileged demographic groups, whether of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and so on. People’s lack of awareness of privileges that are due to their group memberships can make it difficult to adopt policies aimed at reducing social inequalities (Knowles & Lowery, 2012; Kraus et al., 2019; Phillips & Lowery, 2015, 2018, 2020; Wu & Dunning, 2020) and attending to one’s hardships rather than privileges is associated with an endorsement of unethical efforts to “get ahead” (Davidai & Gilovich, 2016). Yet, trying to increase awareness of privileges often leads people to deny the advantages they’ve enjoyed and to emphasize their disadvantages (Lapierre & Aubrey, 2021; Phillips & Lowery, 2015, 2020).

Thus, by exploring the interpersonal privileges that people *do* acknowledge, future research could develop new interventions for increasing their awareness of the circumstantial privileges that they typically *don't* acknowledge. Just as we found that the acknowledgment of interpersonal privileges is affected by a social norm to do so, future research could examine potential situational influences that encourage people to acknowledge their circumstantial privileges.

### Limits on Generality

It is worth noting a few limitations of our findings. First, as our samples were limited to undergraduates at a U.S. university and to U.S. residents recruited from online research panels, more research is needed to test our findings' generalizability across different cultural contexts. Specifically, as the existence and enforcement of social norms related to gratitude and reciprocity norms differ by culture (e.g., Goyal & Miller, 2018; Wice et al., 2018), the documented effects may vary in different countries and cultural contexts. Consequently, future research would benefit from exploring the privileges that people and do not notice across various samples.

In addition, although we focused on social norms that encourage people to attend to their interpersonal benefits, additional social norms that motivate people to "forgive and forget" their interpersonal barriers may similarly shape what people do not notice in their lives (Bono & McCullough, 2006; Enright, 1994). Because such norms regarding others' negative behaviors vary by culture (Günssoy et al., 2015), the extent to which people devote attention to their interpersonal barriers may also vary by cultural context. Thus, beyond examining how people's attention toward their interpersonal privileges differs by culture, future research may also benefit from examining how cultures differ in attention given to interpersonal barriers.

### Conclusion

While our barriers in life must be attended to if we are to overcome them, our blessings may simply be enjoyed and quickly forgotten. Yet, because taking interpersonal privileges for granted comes at the cost of offending others and even severing social ties, norms of gratitude and reciprocity encourage people to notice and acknowledge the more social types of privileges from which they benefit. Consequently, when encouraging people to acknowledge their privileges, it can be helpful to "prime the pump" by calling their attention to the assistance they received from their all friends and mentors along the way.

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### Notes

1. After completing the main dependent variable (writing out their advantages, disadvantages, or both), as part of a different project, participants completed a short questionnaire concerning their views about academic integrity.
2. Excluding the 22 participants who categorized fewer than three advantages (advantages condition,  $n = 2$ ) or disadvantages (disadvantages condition,  $n = 20$ ) does not change the pattern or the significance of the results.
3. Due to an error, the study did not include an attention check and thus no participants were excluded from analyses.
4. Although participants rated the job more favorably in the *Collaborative Norm* condition ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) than in the *Competitive Norm condition* ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $t(199) = -11.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , they stated that they'd tried equally hard to help their friend get the job in both ( $M_{\text{collaborative}} = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.35$ ;  $M_{\text{competitive}} = 1.16$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ;  $t(199) = -1.55$ ,  $p = .122$ ). Nevertheless, we controlled for perceived job quality and effort to help in both conditions.
5. Not surprisingly, we found main effects of perceived job quality ( $F = 7.73$ ,  $p = .006$ ) and the desire for the friend to land the job ( $F = 8.87$ ,  $p = .003$ ). The more participants thought the job was high quality and the more they wanted to help their friend get hired, the higher their scores on the computed index.
6. Participants viewed the job less favorably in *Competitive Norm* condition ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) than either the *Collaborative Norm*,  $M = 1.49$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ,  $t(283) = 3.35$ ,  $p = .001$ , or *Control* conditions,  $M = 1.60$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ,  $t(283) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .024$ , which did not differ from each other,  $t < 1$ . Participants also said they'd try harder to help their friend in the *Competitive Norm* condition ( $M = 1.03$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ) than the *Control* condition,  $M = 1.16$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ;  $t(284) = -2.07$ ,  $p = .039$ , with no difference between the *Collaborative Norm* ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) and *Control conditions*,  $t(284) = -0.93$ ,  $p = .354$ , or between the *Competitive* and *Collaborative conditions*,  $t(284) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .241$ .

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