

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Magic of "*Thank You*"

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Your parents tell you to say "*thank you*" to people who do something nice for you. Why are you supposed to say "*thank you*"? Your parents typically told you to do it to be *polite*. Rather than doing it merely to be polite, I am suggesting that you save it to reinforce (reward) desired behavior.

"*Thank you*" — or some similar phrase — is the cheapest, most powerful secondary reinforcer available. A **secondary reinforcer** has *no* reinforcing power of its own. It gains its reinforcing power by previous association with primary reinforcers. **Primary reinforcers** satisfy our physical needs for oxygen, food, drink, sex, reduction of pain or discomfort, and so on. Primary reinforcers are *unlearned*, while secondary reinforcers are *learned*.

As a secondary reinforcer, "*thank you*" starts to gain its reinforcing power in infancy. When your mother gave you a baby bottle, she usually held you gently in her arms and slowly inserted the nipple in your mouth. Cuddled safely in her arms and drinking your formula, you heard your mother cooing to you or talking baby-talk. In contrast to normal conversation with adults, when people talk to babies, they use a much higher pitch. (Next time, notice how the pitch of your voice gets higher, when the people you are speaking to are smaller.) This high-pitched voice is associated with being warm and comfortable and receiving food and drink. In this way, the high-pitched voice becomes a secondary reinforcer.

If you don't believe this, you can experiment with almost any 4-6 month-old infant (before s/he understands words). Talk to the infant in this *high-pitched, cooing voice*. It doesn't matter what you say. You could say, "*I hate your guts. I'm going to chop you up in teeny bits and use you for fertilizer.*" As long as you use this high-pitched voice, the infant will just lie there and *smile* at you. Try it!

The same principle applies to pets. You will have little trouble getting your dog to come to you, if you use this high-pitched voice. However, if you say, "*Come here,*" in your normal speaking voice with adults, you will notice a definite difference.

As children grow older, that high-pitched voice — along with hugs and treats — becomes linked with words like, "*good,*" "*nice,*" and even, "*thank you.*" This is how "*thank you*" gains its reinforcing power.

To find out how powerful a reinforcer is, you can withhold it when it is expected. For example, as a secretary, a friend of mine was asked by her boss to do some extra typing at home as a favor. She consented and spent four hours typing the materials at home. The next day, she brought the extra work to the office. The boss took the work from her, making a casual comment like, "*Oh, you have it done.*"

We saw her that evening. She was furious! She told us the story, adding, "*I'll never do any extra work for him again!*"

I remarked, "*You didn't expect to get extra pay, did you?*"

She snapped back, "*No, but he didn't even say, 'Thank you'!*"

Almost any **expression of approval** can be as good as a secondary reinforcer. Some therapists do this by saying, "*Uh-huh,*" in a high-pitched voice to obtain changes in behavior. Suppose a therapist has a client who is very self-centered, talking only about himself. The therapist could ignore the self-centered statements and reward statements about others with "*uh-huh.*"

Client: *"I'm a terrific fisherman. Last week, I caught 22 big fish."*

Therapist: (Silence....)

Client: *"George was fishing with me, but he only caught 3 fish."*

Therapist: *"Uh-huh."*

Client: *"I always catch at least 20 fish every time I go fishing."*

Therapist: (Silence....)

Client: *"This is only the second time George has gone fishing."*

Therapist: *"Uh-huh."*

Pretty soon, the amount of time the client speaks about himself will drop, and the time he talks about George or others will increase.

Many people do the same thing as therapists. However, they may not be as careful about how they do it. Suppose a "bore" corners you at a social gathering to tell you the same story for the fifth time. You stand there, nodding, *"Uh-huh... uh-huh... uh-huh."* At the same time, you may be asking yourself, *"Why does he keep boring me with the same story?"* Essentially, to be "polite," you are reinforcing behavior you do *not* want! (Of course — even knowing this — if the person speaking has power over me, I might "uh-huh" him all day long.)

Rewarding behavior merely to be polite often gets people to repeat unwanted responses.

In a similar way, laughter is a secondary reinforcer for telling a joke. What if somebody tells a sexist or racist joke, or merely a joke you don't think is funny? Many people will laugh anyway. Why? They are merely being "polite." In the name of politeness, they are reinforcing behavior they do *not* like. If someone tells a terrible joke, you don't need to tell them it is bad. If nobody laughs, they will usually get the idea. (Jokes that I tend to repeat in my lectures are those that cause my students to laugh. If they don't laugh at a particular joke, I rarely use it again.)

It is ineffective to thank someone merely to be polite. To get the most out of the magic of a sincere "thank you," say it only when others do behavior that you want them to repeat.
