Partners in crime: Gratitude increases corrupt collaboration

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Abstract

- Prior research finds that gratitude can decrease cheating for oneself (DeSteno et al., 2019) and increase rule compliance (Septianto & Garg, 2021; Tong et al., 2021), suggesting that it may decrease cheating in general.
- Building upon the appraisal-tendency framework (Lerner et al., 2015), we hypothesized and found that inducing **gratitude increased cheating** to benefit not only **people whose behavior caused their gratitude** (*integral gratitude*), but also **people with whom they had no prior acquaintance** (*incidental gratitude*). We provided evidence from three financially-incentivized experiments (collective *N* > 4,200).
- The effects of gratitude cannot be explained by reciprocity, as reciprocity has thus far been found to have only null effects on cheating to benefit others (Beck et al., 2020; Boster et al., 2001; Dato et al., 2019; Gneezy et al., 2019; Pimentel et al., 2015).
- The effects were **mediated by other-focus and the intensity of gratitude**.
- Additionally, inducing gratitude increased the endorsement of prescriptive social norms to help others even if this required bending rules or deceiving others.
- These findings provide a nuanced understanding of gratitude as a moral emotion and highlight the possible role of gratitude in enabling exploitation and corruption.
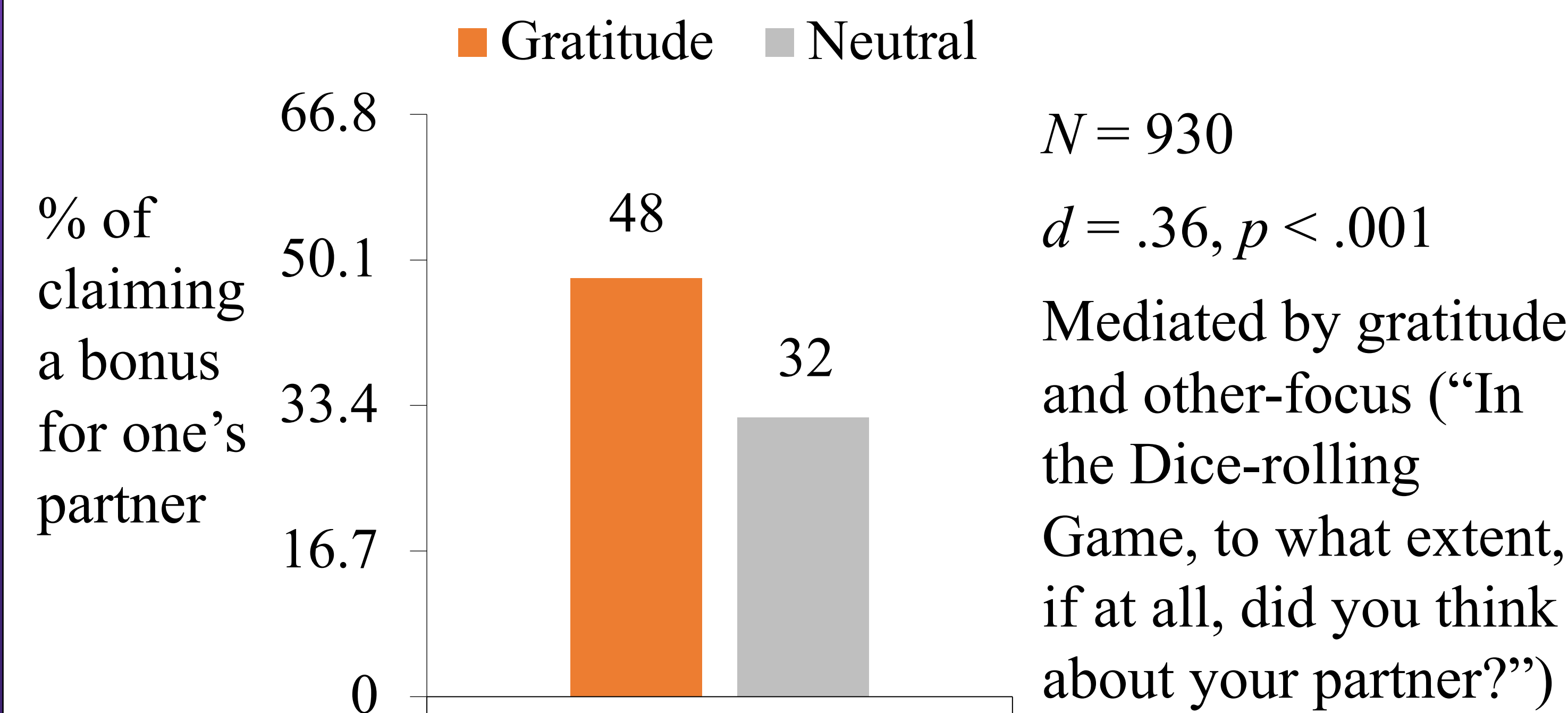
Methods

- Emotion induction: Participants received a large portion of money in a resource distribution game (Tsang, 2006)
  - Gratitude condition: attributed to partner's generosity
  - Neutral condition: attributed to luck
  - Manipulation check: Participants in the gratitude (vs. neutral) condition reported feeling more gratitude towards their partner, *d*s = 1.14 ~ 1.52, *p*s < .001.
- Measuring cheating behavior: In a dyadic die roll paradigm (Weisel & Shalvi, 2015), participants can cheat by misreporting their die roll to match their partner's die roll and earn money. Assuming honesty, the chance of matching is 16.7%. We ran logistic regression on the binary outcome (matching their partner's die roll or not).
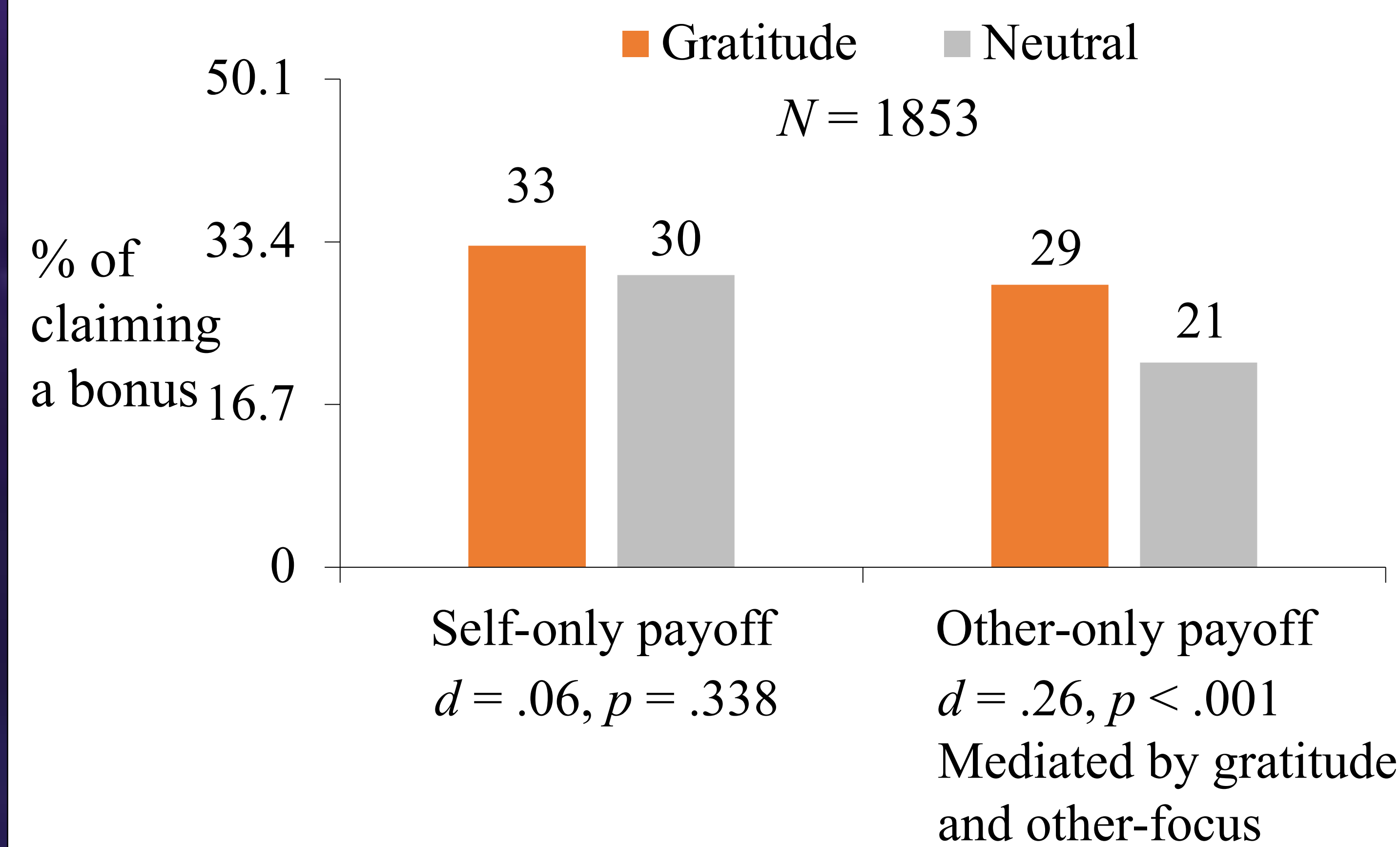
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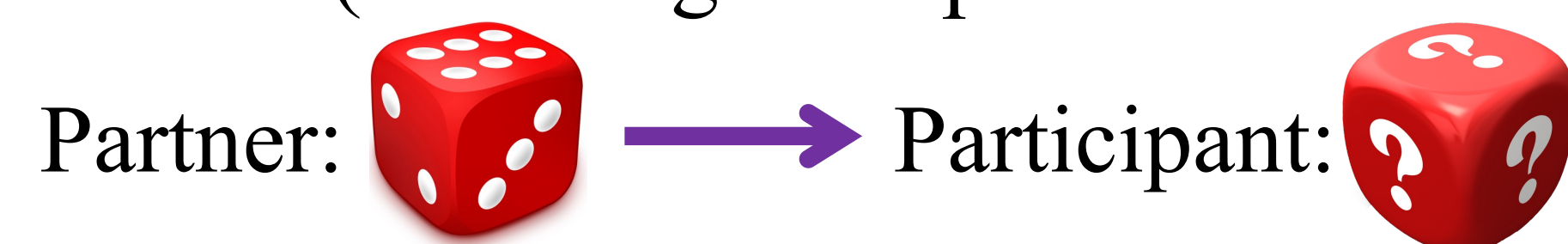
Experiment 1

- If the participant matched their partner's die roll, their partner earned a bonus.
- The partner was not real, and we programmed all interactions.

% of claiming a bonus for one's partner — Gratitude: 48, Neutral: 32

N = 930
d = .36, *p* < .001
Mediated by gratitude and other-focus ("In the Dice-rolling Game, to what extent, if at all, did you think about your partner?")
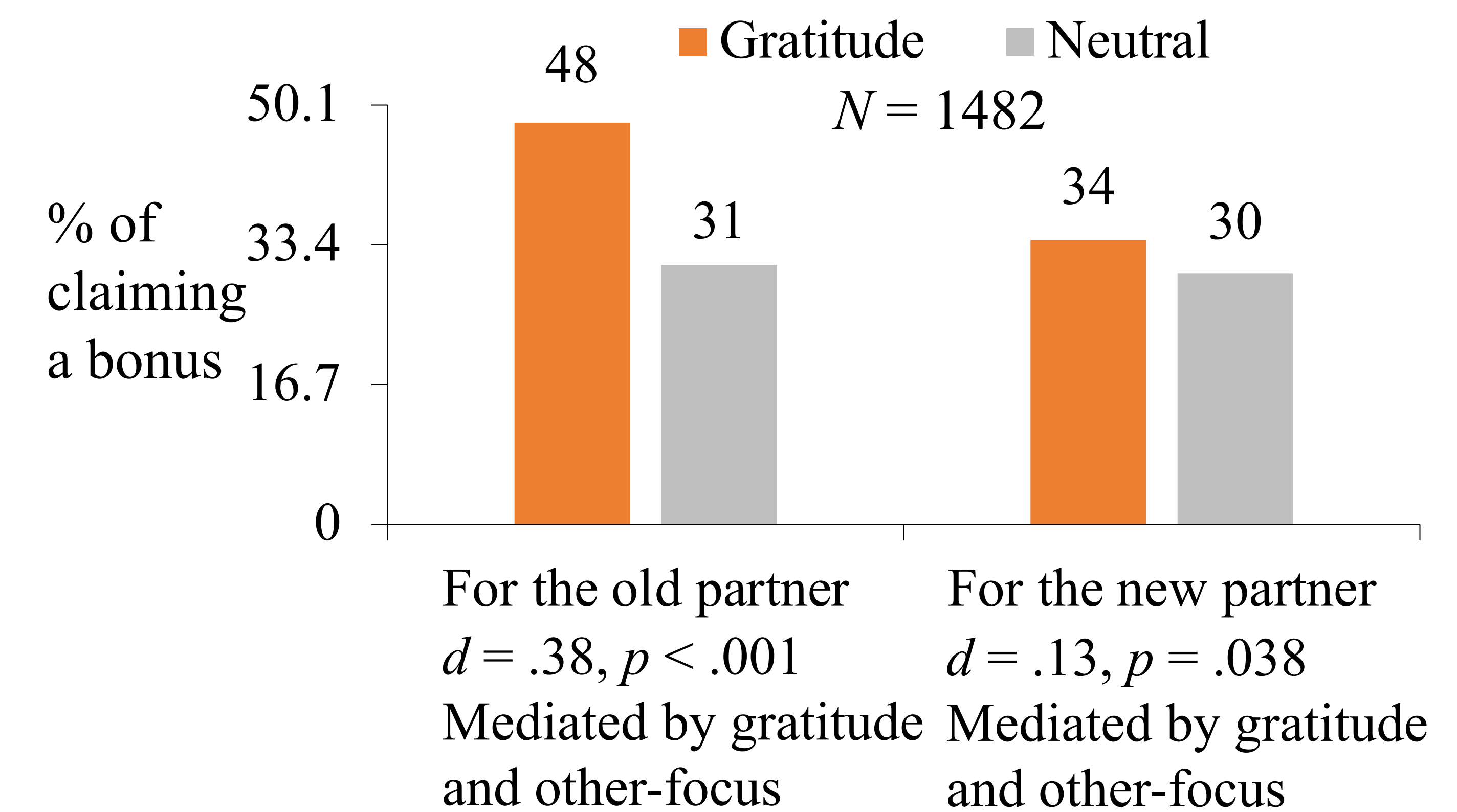
Experiment 2

- If the participant matched their partner's die roll in the
  - Self-only payoff condition: the participant earned a bonus
  - Other-only payoff condition: their partner earned a bonus
- Participants played the game for three rounds, where one round was randomly selected to determine the bonus.

% of claiming a bonus — Self-only payoff: Gratitude 33, Neutral 30; Other-only payoff: Gratitude 29, Neutral 21

N = 1853

Self-only payoff
d = .06, *p* = .338

Other-only payoff
d = .26, *p* < .001
Mediated by gratitude and other-focus

- Appropriateness of lying ("How socially appropriate is it to lie in the Dice-rolling Game?"): The majority of participants (> 70%) judged lying as socially inappropriate in the die roll game in all conditions.

Experiment 3

- Participants had opportunities to cheat to earn bonuses for a partner who was related to the emotion induction (*integral emotion*) and a new partner who was a stranger and unrelated to the emotion induction (*incidental emotion*) (emotion's relevance as a within-subject factor).

% of claiming a bonus — For the old partner: Gratitude 48, Neutral 31; For the new partner: Gratitude 34, Neutral 30

N = 1482

For the old partner
d = .38, *p* < .001
Mediated by gratitude and other-focus

For the new partner
d = .13, *p* = .038
Mediated by gratitude and other-focus

- Inducing gratitude increased endorsing prescriptive norms of unethical helping for:
  - direct reciprocity (e.g., "to what extent should someone help a partner who has helped them in the past even if helping involves deceiving others"; *α* = .87), *d* = 0.15, *p* = .005.
  - strangers (e.g., "to what extent should someone help a stranger even if helping involves deceiving others"; *α* = .88), *d* = 0.11, *p* = .036.

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Comments/advice appreciated!
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