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An instrumental perspective on apologizing in bargaining: The importance of forgiveness to apologize

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ABSTRACT

Although very little research in bargaining has addressed how perpetrators should deal with the aftermath of unfair allocations, it has been proposed that an apology may help the reconciliation process. Prior research, however, only focused on whether apologies can reveal positive effects on the reconciliation process but did not focus yet on whether perpetrators are actually willing to apologize. In this paper we investigate perpetrator's willingness to apologize for a trust violation in a bargaining setting. We hypothesized that perpetrators willingness to apologize would be a function of the extent to which the victim of the trust violation is willing to forgive. This effect, however, was expected to emerge only among those perpetrators who are low in dispositional trust. The results from a laboratory study with *actual* transgressions and *actual* apologetic behavior supported our predictions and thus emphasize an instrumental view on apologizing in bargaining situations.
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1. Introduction

Bargaining is a breeding ground for unfair allocations. Due to the highly interdependent nature of bargaining situations, there is a conflict between self-interest and the bargaining partner's interest (Komorita & Parks, 1995). One important guide that people use to balance the conflicting interests in these types of bargaining situations is the equality norm. This norm beholds that all bargaining parties receive an equal share of the commodity that is to be divided (Van Dijk & De Cremer, 2006). This fairness rule implies that people do not only care about their own outcomes in bargaining, but also value the outcomes of others (Blount, 1995; Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989). Breaking the equality norm is not only considered to be unfair and undesirable when one receives less than the other party; receiving more is generally considered to be undesirable too (Blount, 1995; Dana, Cain, & Dawes, 2006; Loewenstein et al., 1989).

People use the equality norm as a guide in bargaining settings. A guide, not only for their own behavior, but also to base their expectations on of what others will do. In other words, people expect their bargaining partner to adhere to

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the equality norm as well (Van Dijk & De Cremer, 2006). For this reason, violating the equality norm does not only lead to perceptions of unfairness but also to a decrease in trust (Desmet, De Cremer, & Van Dijk, 2011). Trust is defined as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395). Based on this definition, it follows that trust can be violated after deviation from the equality norm because this deviation violates the positive expectations of the victim that the other party will act in line with the equality rule. Research indeed suggest that people are aversive towards such an equality violation as people have been shown to make costly choices in order not to violate fairness norms (Dana et al., 2006).

After a trust violation, perpetrators can feel motivated to reconcile with the victim. Reconciliation can be valuable to the perpetrator because successful reconciliation leads to a continuation of a cooperative relationship with the victim. Despite the importance of this reconciliation process, research on bargaining has devoted almost no attention to examining the aftermath of unfair offers (De Cremer, 2010). Rather, most studies have examined how trust develops or how it plays a role in maintaining cooperation. As such, hardly any studies – at least to our knowledge – have looked at how violated trust can be repaired. In fact ever since Elangovan and Shapiro (1998, p. 548) noted at the end of the nineties that, "research on the violation of trust has significantly lagged behind interest in the phenomenon of trust", more recent articles have articulated that despite the need to focus on this topic "surprisingly few studies have directly examined how trust may be repaired" (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006, p. 50). Because trust is considered to be one of the most essential lubricants of our social and economic exchanges (Fukuyama, 1995; Knack & Keefer, 1997; Kramer, 1999), it is important for research to address the kind of actions that are required for reconciliation efforts to succeed.

One important reconciliation tool, available to the perpetrator, is an apology. Apologies address the experienced injustice of the victim (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002; Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). An apology is a combined statement of both and admission of wrongdoing and regret for the violation (Lazare, 2004; Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009). Apologies directly address the violated positive expectations (i.e. trust) of the victim by implicitly promising that the transgression will not be repeated and thus suggesting that the perpetrator is worthy of being trusted again (Kim et al., 2009).

Research outside the bargaining literature has revealed evidence that relationships can be reconciled more effectively if an apology is given and thereby responsibility for the trust violation is acknowledged (De Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004). To date, only a few published studies have addressed whether the specific use of apologies has an effect within more economically-based exchanges such as social dilemmas and ultimatum bargaining games (see Bottom et al. (2002), De Cremer (2010) and De Cremer, Van Dijik, and Pillutla (2010); for an interesting field study, see Cohen, 1999). These studies did indeed reveal that apologizing for unfair allocations led to increased cooperation and higher future trust behavior.

What all these studies have in common is that they adopted the perspective of the victim. That is, these studies examined whether and when apologies delivered by the perpetrator have a positive effect on the party suffering from the trust violation. This approach is a first good step towards identifying the important value of apologies in the reconciliation process (De Cremer et al., 2011). The most important step, however, is to examine whether or not perpetrators are *willing* to apologize, and when they are most likely to do so. This perpetrator perspective is virtually lacking in the literature and particularly so in the bargaining literature. Consequently, we know very little about whether perpetrators are actually willing to make use of an apology when resources are allocated in unfair ways. Because reconciliation of relationships is a bi-directional issue, only knowing whether victims desire an apology is of limited value. Therefore, we need to promote our insights into the motives that make perpetrators apologize.

In the present paper, we adopt the perspective of the perpetrator. We study under which conditions perpetrators choose to apologize to the victim. We examine apologizing as a behavior in the context of a modified trust game in which the second party (the one receiving the tripled money send by party 1) violates the fairness norm of equality and thus hampers the trust of the first party. In predicting whether perpetrators would apologize or not, we adopt an *instrumental* perspective, meaning that the choice to apologize by the perpetrator will be motivated by the likelihood that an apology will elicit its intended effect. The effect that we assume that perpetrators strive for when apologizing is to be forgiven by the victim. We consider this approach to be instrumental because the decision to apologize or not becomes conditional on the likelihood of whether the victim will forgive or not.

2. Apologies: an instrumental perspective

We propose that an important reason to apologize is to restore the relationship with the victim, which usually implies that the perpetrator will be *forgiven*. The desire for forgiveness has been identified as an important motive to initiate the reconciliation process (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). After a transgression, a perpetrator may feel moral inferiority, guilt, or shame. These feelings can lead to an intrinsic motivation to be forgiven by the victim (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Indeed, the motive to be forgiven becomes even more important if the perpetrator wants to continue a cooperative relationship with the victim (Bottom et al., 2002).

It is important to note, however, that while achieving reconciliation may be desirable, perpetrators also take a substantial social risk by apologizing. By apologizing, perpetrators accept blame for their actions (Kim et al., 2009). Hence,

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