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When and how communicated guilt affects contributions in public good dilemmas

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A B S T R A C T

Two laboratory studies investigated how groups may deal with the strong emotions that social dilemmas often elicit. A first study showed that a new group member evaluated guilt communicated by a fellow group member as more instrumental than neutral emotion feedback when the amount of required resources to obtain the public good (i.e., provision point) was perceived as difficult to obtain. A second study revealed that participants use communicated guilt to draw inferences about both past and future contributions from all fellow group members. Participants also contributed more themselves and adhered to equality more often when guilt versus no emotion was communicated, but only when the provision point was high. Expected contributions from fellow group members mediated this effect.

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Introduction

People interacting in groups sometimes find that their individual interests conflict with the collective interest. Individuals may be tempted, for example, to refrain from investing time, energy, or resources in a team project, so they may free-ride on the efforts of others. If, however, each individual follows this strategy, the team project will inevitably fail and all will be worse off than if they would have cooperated. This type of mixed-motive situation is referred to as a social dilemma, or—more specifically—as a *public good dilemma* (for reviews, see Pruitt, 1998; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004). Often, public goods can only be provided when the total amount of contributions surpasses a certain threshold or *provision point*. Such instances are known as *step-level* public good dilemmas and will be the focus of the present research.

In step-level public good dilemmas it is important for people to display cooperation by means of coordinating their individual contributions so that they do not squander resources in an attempt to reach the provision point. A generally preferred solution to this coordination problem is for each group member to contribute an equal share of the provision point (Lutz, 2001; Messick, 1993). Indeed, because this so-called *equality rule* is both fair and efficient (Stouten, De Cremer, & Van Dijk, 2005), it is an effective coordination principle that is frequently adhered to or at least used as an anchor to base one's eventual contributions on (Allison, McQueen, & Schaerfl, 1992; Samuelson & Allison, 1994; Van Dijk & Wilke, 1995).

For an individual group member, using the equality rule to coordinate contributions is only effective when the other group members can be expected to act in a similar way. One therefore needs to be responsive to cues from other group members that may signal their intentions to cooperate, especially when one is a newcomer to a group and thus lacks information about previous social dilemma interactions. One cue that people entering an existing group may pay attention to, and one that has been neglected by social dilemma research so far, is how the group members *feel* about past decisions. An interesting illustration that affect about past decision behavior within the group may be present and thus can be used by group members to base their inferences and decisions on is provided by Dawes, McTavish, and Shaklee (1977; see also Xiao & Houser, 2005). They noted that after playing a social dilemma "one of the most significant aspects of this study did not show up in the data analysis" (p. 7) thereby referring to the observation that it was not unusual for participants "to become extremely angry, or to become tearful" (p. 7) at other participants who had defected. In fact, these authors even note that the affect level was so high that they were unwilling to run any intact groups because of the effect the game might have on the members' feelings of each other.

In the present research we therefore aim to answer two questions. First, when will group members' display of emotions such as guilt be considered as useful or informative in determining decisions to contribute, or—as we prefer to define it in the present paper—when will it be evaluated as *instrumental* (Experiment 1)? Second, how will this emotional display affect contributions and the use of the equality rule in public good dilemmas (Experiment 2)? In the present paper, we will first claim that emotions can serve as important cues to base decisions on. Second, we will reason that such cues will be most functional when coordination is needed the most. Thus, we will develop the argument that communicated emotions are most instrumental when it is relatively difficult to achieve the public good (i.e., high provision point).

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Emotional displays in social dilemmas

A large quantity of research has addressed what exactly an emotion is. Accordingly, emotions can be defined as: "episodic, relatively short-term biologically based patterns of perception, experience, physiology, action, and communication that occur in response to specific physical and social challenges and opportunities" (Keltner & Gross, 1999). However, scholars have also started to focus on the potential of emotions to regulate and coordinate social interactions (i.e., a functional account; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Gross, 1999; Oatley & Jenkins, 1992).

The idea that communicated emotions may convey certain intentions which one may subsequently take into account for one's own actions has been convincingly demonstrated by Van Kleef, De Dreu, and Manstead (2006; see also De Cremer, Wubben, & Brebels, in press; Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). These authors showed that when a negotiation opponent communicated guilt, people were unlikely to concede because they expected their opponent to be willing to make up for his or her tough demands that were offered in previous rounds (Van Kleef et al., 2006). Even more important for the present paper, very recent research has provided first evidence that in step-level public good dilemmas emotions communicated by fellow group members shape a third party's justice judgments of the group, which subsequently affect this person's preferences for structural change (Wubben, De Cremer, & Van Dijk, 2008). Thus, the information that communicated emotion conveys about fellow group members' intentions may be expected to also influence a third party's contribution decisions and use of the equality rule.

Communicated guilt as a coordination means in step-level public good dilemmas

What do people entering an existing group wish to know in a public good dilemma? They are probably interested in how previous social dilemma interactions have developed and whether or not the other group members can be expected to cooperate in the future. Emotions communicate such inferences. In the present article we focus on communicated guilt. We do so because people often evaluate social dilemmas in terms of morality (e.g., Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994), and guilt is the emotion that is experienced after "having transgressed a moral imperative" in the past (Lazarus, 1991, p. 240; see for applications of guilt in social dilemma settings e.g., Ketelaar & Au, 2003; Nelissen, Dijker, & De Vries, 2007).

What do we infer if we see that a particular member communicates guilt? The communication of guilt may simultaneously generate inferences about the person displaying guilt *and* the other persons in the group. In a public good dilemma people may first of all conclude that the member who communicates guilt has not contributed enough to the public good. And if not contributing to the public good in a previous decision round leads a group member to feel guilty, a newcomer may infer that there must have been a well-established norm of cooperation to which the other group members did adhere. That is, if one's fellow group members would have refrained from cooperating as well, there would be no norm prescribing cooperation and not contributing to the public good would therefore be no reason to experience guilt. Guilt may therefore not only signal that the person displaying guilt did not contribute, but also that the other persons in the group did cooperate. Thus, whereas at first sight guilt merely indicates the presence of a repentant transgressor, other group members may indirectly profit from this emotional display because it may lead third parties to evaluate them as prosocial.

So how do these inferences affect the expectations regarding the *future*? From a functional perspective, guilt signals appeasement (Barrett, 1995; Keltner & Buswell, 1997). As such it is associated with an intention to repair the damage that one has inflicted to a relationship (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Lewis, 2000). Guilt therefore leads to increased prosocial behavior, including helping, making amends, compliance and cooperation (Carlsmith & Gross, 1969; Ketelaar & Au, 2003; Regan, Williams, & Sparling, 1972; Van Kleef et al., 2006). A person communicating guilt therefore signals the willingness to contribute to the public good in the future. And because guilt may also signal that the other group members are willing to contribute, a third party may infer that all fellow group members intend to cooperate in the upcoming decision round. Thus, even though guilt suggests collective failure in the *past*, people may infer that their fellow group members aim to reach the provision point in the *future*.

The main question in Experiment 1 which we alluded to earlier (i.e., when do newcomers find communicated guilt instrumental in determining their contribution decisions?) is thus related to the question "When do people find it instrumental to know that one's fellow group members can be expected to cooperate?" The answer is not immediately clear, because having information about fellow group members' intentions will not always be required to determine how much one should contribute to the public good in order to reach the provision point (cf. Van Vugt & De Cremer, 2002; Wubben et al., 2008, for similar accounts of instrumentality). In fact, even without receiving emotion feedback it is quite common for people to expect others to adhere to equality (Allison et al., 1992; Samuelson & Allison, 1994; Van Dijk & Wilke, 1995). Communicated guilt may therefore primarily facilitate coordination under circumstances where people would anticipate that their fellow group members might not cooperate. Under such conditions, people may feel that their own contributions may be wasted. In step-level public good dilemmas, the anticipation that others may not contribute such that own contributions may be wasted, is referred to as *fear* (Rapoport & Eshed-Levy, 1989). It has been shown to be particularly prevalent when the provision point increases to more than 60% of group members' total endowments (Poppe & Zwikker, 1996). Indeed, under such circumstances efficient coordination is impeded because people's actual contributions do not rise accordingly, making not only that the public good is provided less often but also that more resources are wasted by those who did contribute (Suleiman & Rapoport, 1992). Therefore we reason that only when the provision point is high the display of guilt may be evaluated as more instrumental than neutral emotion feedback, because only then there is substantial fear that communicated guilt may help reduce.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was designed to test if communicated guilt is particularly instrumental in deciding how much to contribute when the provision point is perceived as difficult to obtain. That is, as a first test of our hypothesis we used a subjective evaluation of a fixed provision point to investigate the potential importance of communicated guilt for decision-making in step-level public good dilemmas. Thus, we asked participants to what extent they felt that many chips were required to reach the provision point and, subsequently, how helpful and useful they considered the emotion feedback from a fellow group member to be. Using a separate first study for only these critical inferences allowed us to measure perceived instrumentality directly without unintentionally influencing participants' contribution decisions.

Method

Participants and experimental design

Participants were 47 undergraduate students (17 men and 30 women, average age = 18.79 years, *SD* = 0.95) who participated

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