

## WHEN DOES A HARM-DOER COMPENSATE A VICTIM?

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It was hypothesized that individuals who had harmed another person would be more likely to compensate their victim if the available compensation made up exactly for the harm done than if, in order to compensate at all, it was necessary to give the victim either an insufficient or an excessive compensation. Ss were members of women's church auxiliaries who in the course of a game were led to deprive a fellow church member of green-stamp books. In a 2nd game they had a chance to award a bonus to the deprived woman. It was found that individuals were more likely to compensate their victim with the bonus if it was adequate to cover the harm done than if the available bonus was insufficient or excessive. From these findings an interesting hypothesis can be derived. If a harm-doer's range of compensatory opportunities is limited, exaggeration by the victim of the harm he has suffered may cause the harm-doer to perceive that his available compensations are inadequate; thus the harm-doer may be less likely to compensate the victim than he would have been had the victim described his suffering in a more modest way.

Common responses to the act of harming another person appear to fall into two major categories: *justification* of the performance of the harmful act and *compensation* to the victim for the harm done.

The distress an individual is likely to feel after harming another may be reduced through the utilization of justification techniques. The harm-doer may, for example, minimize the amount of harm he has done (Brock & Buss, 1962), he may deny responsibility for the harmful act, or he may convince himself that the victim was deserving of his suffering. This last mode of justification as a response to the performance of a harmful act has often been demonstrated by experimenters working within the framework of cognitive-dissonance theory. Davidson (1964), Davis and Jones (1960), and Glass (1964), for example, performed experiments which indicate that the dissonance aroused by performance of a harmful act will be reduced by denigration of the victim, if other means of

dissonance reduction are not available.<sup>2</sup> One mode of dissonance reduction which was carefully blocked in all the preceding studies was compensation. In all cases, the harm-doer's opportunities for atoning to the victim were either nonexistent or minimal.

The possibility for compensation is eliminated from experimental designs so consistently that experimenters sometimes forget that this reaction to harming a victim exists (Aronson, 1967). There are only a few isolated studies which demonstrate that harm-doers do often attempt to compensate the people they have harmed. One such study was performed by Walster and Prestholdt (1966), who examined the effect of public commitment on one's tendency to either justify or compensate for the harm he had done. They found that when the harm-doer was publicly committed to his harmful act, he justified his harm-doing by denigrating the victim. When the subject was not as committed, he tended to compensate the victim by a subsequent overevaluation.

It is obvious that in order for a harm-doer to compensate his victim, opportunities for making compensatory acts must exist. But it also is apparent from daily experience that people do not always choose to avail themselves of their opportunities to make com-

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<sup>2</sup> For an explication of this point, see Walster and Berscheid, 1966.

pensation. The experiment reported in this paper was designed to investigate one possible determinant of whether or not a particular compensatory act will be performed. Specifically, we wished to investigate the effect that adequacy of compensation has on the probability of performance of the compensatory act. By adequacy of compensation, we mean the extent to which the compensation benefits the victim, relative to the harm done him.

When only one act of compensation is available, we felt that the harm-doer would be more likely to perform that one act when the amount of benefit it would confer upon the victim was adequate (exactly matching the amount of harm done) than when it was inadequate or excessive. In effect we wished to change the focal point of the Mosaic law of justice, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," from punishment of the harm-doer to compensation of the victim, and to predict that a compensatory act is most likely to be performed if it will replace an eye for an eye. Acts which will replace a glass eye for one eye, or three eyes for one eye, should have lower performance probabilities. In situations in which the harm-doer's range of compensatory opportunities are limited to acts of these last two types, we predicted that the victim is most likely to be left with no compensation at all.

There is some experimental evidence which bears on this proposition. Walster, Walster, Abrahams, and Brown (1966) found that if an individual discovered that he had accorded another person either less esteem or more esteem than the other deserved, he would subsequently attempt to make up for his injustice. This experiment tends to suggest that people feel others should get exactly what they deserve, no more and no less.

Because we were interested in investigating the extent to which harm-doers use a principle of justice in situations in which compensation is possible, we wished to eliminate from consideration alternative means by which the same hypothesis could be derived. One alternative way in which the hypothesis could be derived is apparent from a consideration of the various functions of reparation. In ordinary circumstances the performance of an act of compensation generally causes the harm-

doer himself to suffer or to sacrifice to some extent. And, the amount of suffering involved in making the compensation often increases as the amount of compensation, or benefit conferred upon the victim, increases. Thus, in usual circumstances, the more the harm-doer compensates exactly, the more his suffering is comparable to that of the victim. And if it is true that self-punishment in itself acts to relieve feelings of guilt on the part of the harm-doer, then guilt feelings may be best alleviated by compensating the victim exactly. Suffering less than the victim has suffered does not entirely relieve guilt feelings; suffering more is superfluous. Though this is an interesting hypothesis in itself, we wished to eliminate it from consideration in this experiment. Consequently, the experiment was designed so that the act of compensation would personally cost the harm-doer nothing to perform.

There was one other variable, often present in reparation situations, which we wished to eliminate from our design. The performance of an act of reparation ordinarily gives the victim information that the harm-doer has tried to make up for his injustice. The release of such information may save the harm-doer loss of esteem from the victim and the public at large, and, in addition, may ward off acts of retaliation. Insufficient acts may indicate that the harm-doer has not tried hard enough to compensate and, consequently, may prove unsatisfactory for this reason. Acts which confer excessive benefit upon the victim, on the other hand, may indicate that he has tried very hard to compensate and is generous to boot. In such a case our prediction with regard to excessive compensation would not be likely to hold. We wished to eliminate this confounding consideration from our design. Both insufficient and oversufficient acts should give the same information that the harm-doer has tried to atone, if it is quite clear to all concerned that the one act—inadequate, sufficient, or excessive—is the *only* act in the harm-doer's repertoire.

## METHOD

### *Overview*

To test our hypothesis, all subjects inflicted harm on another person and, in all instances, the amount

of harm done to the victim remained constant. Specifically, each subject prevented the victim from winning a prize of two books of S&H green stamps in a cooperative game.

Subjects were then divided into three compensation groups: in an *insufficient* compensation group, subjects were given an opportunity to make a compensation which was, in terms of the amount of benefit it would give the victim, inadequate to amend the amount of harm done him. In an *adequate* compensation group, subjects were given an opportunity to exactly compensate the victim. Finally, in an *excessive* compensation group, the only available compensation was one which would benefit the victim over and above the amount of harm done.

Each of the three compensation groups were subdivided, thus yielding a  $3 \times 2$  design. Half of the subjects in each compensation condition (the experimental subjects) were given an opportunity to compensate the person they had harmed. The remaining subjects in each compensation condition (the control subjects) were given a chance to award the compensation only to a person other than the one they had harmed. This latter group served as a control for the extent to which people who have recently hurt another person tend to be generous to other people in their immediate environment, and for the extent to which each level of compensation was a desirable gift for any partner.

In the experimental groups, we predicted that subjects in the *adequate* condition would compensate the victim more often than would subjects in the *insufficient* and *excessive* conditions. We predicted that subjects in the control condition would show less compensation at all compensation levels than experimental subjects, since compensation would not aid the victim. In addition, control subjects should not show the marked differences between the adequate and the inadequate-excessive conditions that we expected in the experimental groups.

### Subjects

Subjects were 75 groups of women (240 women in all) who belonged to various church auxiliary groups in the Minneapolis area. The groups ranged in size from two to five women. These women had volunteered to participate in a psychological experiment (which was previously described to the head of each church organization) in return for a donation to the church's treasury.

### Procedure

After the women in a particular group arrived at their church along with a female confederate, the experimenter asked all of the ladies to introduce themselves. Quite often all of the women knew each other. They never knew our confederate (Mrs. Bender), who was introduced as a friend of the church secretary and who had been recruited to fill out the group. The experimenter also mentioned, at

this point, that one other lady, unknown to the group, a Mrs. Hartig, was scheduled to take part in the survey but that she would be late. Supposedly, the first part of the survey had been explained to Mrs. Hartig on the phone so that the group would be able to start on time and she would be able to begin participating as soon as she arrived.

The experimenter then provided the following rationale for the experiment:

We are here today to find out how much members of a large urban area such as Minneapolis and Saint Paul know about the community in which they live. You probably have often heard the comment that people generally know a lot about other communities, but very little about their own. In this survey, we are going to try to find out how true that observation really is. This means that we will be asking you questions about the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul and the State of Minnesota. In order to make this survey as pleasant as possible, we have decided to gather our information by having you play two games. In each game you will be playing with a partner. As I noted before, there are only five ladies [or how many showed up] here now, but the sixth lady will be the lady that is coming late, Mrs. Hartig. In order to complete the session on time, however, we will have to go right on without her. As soon as she comes she will be assigned a partner.

The experimenter then described two games to the subjects. Ostensibly, the first game gave subjects a chance to win S&H green stamps for themselves and their partners.<sup>3</sup> The second game gave them a chance to win green stamps for a crippled child. (Each woman had earlier been assigned the name of a particular child for whom she would be winning stamps.)

Actually, the first game was designed solely to lead all subjects to deprive their partner of two books of green stamps. The second game was designed solely to give the subject a chance to compensate either her partner or a stranger for the harm the subject had done. The first game was described as follows:

In the first game you will be randomly assigned to be the partner of another lady in the group. One of the partners will be the supervisor, and the way we will decide this is by a flip of a coin. The supervisor will make all the decisions in the game. I will give the supervisor a set of ten sample questions. As I mentioned before, these will be about Minneapolis and Saint Paul and about Minnesota. The supervisor must then decide, from looking at these sample questions, how many questions of this type she thinks she and her partner can answer when the real game starts. Taking into

<sup>3</sup> The authors would like to express their appreciation to the Sperry and Hutchinson Company and to Eugene Beem for the loan of 40 books of green stamps.

consideration the number she and her partner can answer, she will decide how many books of green stamps she will be going for.

At this time the experimenter distributed a small  $3 \times 5$  card on which there were listed the number of questions each supervisor could set as her and her partner's "quota" of correctly answered questions, and the number of green stamps they would get as a prize if they fulfilled their quota. The higher the quota the more green stamps women could win as a prize. She explained to them:

If you think, for example, that both you and your partner can each get from 5 to 7 questions right, then you should set your quota for 6 books of green stamps. This means that *both* you and your partner must, individually, get at least 5 questions right. If you set your quota for 5 to 7 questions and it turns out that you get 8 questions right, but your partner only gets 4 right, neither one of you will win the green stamps. You must each get *at least* the number you say you are going for. If you set your quota for 5 to 7 questions and both of you get 8 right, you will still only get the 6 books of green stamps for which you contracted. You can see that it is important that you pick exactly the number of questions that you think that you can get right and set your quota near that level. Are there any questions up to this point?

Then the experimenter explained that each one of the ladies would be working in a separate room so as to prevent conversation. She randomly assigned each woman to a room. After the ladies were encooned in their rooms, the experimenter went into each room, flipped a coin, and announced that the flip determined that the subject would be a supervisor and that Mrs. Bender (our confederate) would be her partner. She further instructed the subject as follows:

There is just one more thing that I would like you to do before you start the game. That is, we would like you to write on this piece of paper something about yourself, your hobbies, your interests, or your family. I will take this to your partner. She is doing the same thing. This procedure will enable you to know your partner better, and her to know you a little better, and you both to feel more at ease playing with each other.

A few minutes later, the experimenter brought the confederate's "Personal Interest Card" which stated:

Nila Bender. Married, have two sons. Moved to Minneapolis ten years ago. Worked as a secretary downtown for two years. Was glad to quit when I got married. I went to college two years before that. Husband went to the University before we were married. Now works for an insurance company. I wish I could see the set of sample questions to tell you what I know about. I know a little about politics, religion and literature (read quite a bit). Am active in the League of Women

Voters. If you don't mind I would like to make a suggestion. Let's go for the 1 to 3 question category. My youngest son's birthday is a week from today and I could get him what he wants with two more books. I never thought I would be able to save enough by then but it looks like maybe I have got a chance now. However, you know more about what to go for since you have seen the sample questions.

After distributing these cards and the sample questions to each of the subjects, the experimenter went back to the rooms and asked the subject what quota she had decided to set. Which quota to set posed a problem for the subject. On the one hand she wanted to set a low quota as her partner had suggested. On the other hand, she was anxious to win as many green stamp books as possible for herself. The sample questions the subject received were designed to lead her to set a very high quota. Of the 10 sample questions, 8 were quite easy to answer. They were concerned with things about Minneapolis-Saint Paul that most people should and do know. Two of them, however, were extremely hard. A subject was thus led to the conclusion that she could probably answer 8 of the 10 test questions correctly. All but four of our subjects did disregard the confederate's suggestions and did set a fairly high quota. The data obtained from the four subjects who set the lowest quota are not included in any analyses.

When the test questions arrived it was evident that this strategy had been a mistake. Through pretesting we had selected 10 questions, the answers to which people *should* know, but in fact often do not know (e.g., "Who is the Congressman from your district?"). When all subjects had finished answering their questions, the experimenter picked up their papers, took time to supposedly score them, and again returned to each room. She commented:

We have now finished scoring your papers and I can give you the scores. You got a score of *two* which, unfortunately, isn't enough. However, your partner did quite well. She got a score of \_\_\_\_\_ [the confederate was always said to have correctly answered enough questions to meet whatever quota the subject had set]. So even though your partner did answer enough questions correctly, you failed to answer enough questions right. This means that neither of you will receive any stamps at all.

(Pretest interviews showed that subjects felt quite guilty and upset about this turn of events. The score of 2, which all subjects were told they had attained, was enough to win the two books Mrs. Bender had urged the supervisor to try for. Nearly all pretest subjects mentioned this fact. In addition, many commented that through their own "greed" they had deprived their partner of the two books which she very much needed to get a toy for her child's birthday.)

The experimenter then introduced the second game. If the subject had been assigned to the experimental condition, she was told that during the second game she would have the same partner she had had during the first game. If the subject was in the control condition, the experimenter explained that she would have a different partner than she had had in the first game; rather than working again with Mrs. Bender, she would be working with Mrs. Hartig, the lady who supposedly arrived late.

In this game, the experimenter explained that this time the supervisor would not answer any questions concerning Minnesota. Instead, Mrs. Bender (or Mrs. Hartig) would answer the questions and the subject would decide whether her answer was correct or not. She was to put a "C" by the answers that seemed right and a check by any that seemed wrong. Since each question counted 1 point, her paper could receive a grade from 1 to 10.

The experimenter then gave the subject the information that she could compensate her partner if she wished. After reminding the subject that in this game she might have the opportunity to award some green stamps to the crippled boy who had been assigned to her (Johnny Trogan),<sup>4</sup> the experimenter said, as though it was an afterthought:

One of the ladies felt that she should be able to give the green stamps to her partner instead of Johnny. I'd never thought of that before, but since you are the supervisor you can do whatever you want. It is completely up to you to decide whether to give the stamps to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ [partner's name] or to Johnny . . . that is if you win any stamps to award.

Whether or not the subject was able to award any stamps appeared to be determined by chance. The subject was told to draw a slip from a grab box to see if she would be allowed to award stamps. The woman drew. In each case she drew a "yes," indicating she would have a chance to award stamps. How many stamps she could award was also said to be determined by chance. The experimenter pointed to a second grab box which was said to contain slips of paper indicating the amount of the bonus she could award. Possible bonuses were said to range from 1 stamp to 10 books. Actually only slips containing "three stamps," "two books," or "five books" were in the bag. Once again the subject drew. Depending on which slip they drew, subjects were assigned to the insufficient, adequate, or excessive condition, respectively.

After a short delay, the experimenter returned with the partner's answers to the 10 questions, and the subject was asked to score them. Finally, the

<sup>4</sup>As the reader will probably guess, Johnny is simply a device designed to make it possible for the subject to decide not to compensate her partner. If the subject had simply been asked to "Compensate her partner or not," choosing not to compensate would probably have been an unacceptable response to all subjects.

experimenter suggested that the subject write down on an address label the name of the person she wanted to receive the green stamps—her partner or the crippled boy. Subjects were reminded that their partners would never know whether or not they had drawn a bonus slip. During the preexperimental discussion, it also had been made clear that Mrs. Bender (and Mrs. Hartig) were not from their neighborhood and so they would not be likely to have a chance to compensate her privately.

Finally, after indicating who should receive the stamps, subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire which was designed to tap several modes the women might use to justify the harm they had done. The experimenter explained that everyone who was participating in the survey would fill out the questionnaire, designed to tell something about them and their partner, so that we could improve the survey next time. Subjects were instructed to put neither their name nor their partner's name on the evaluation sheet and to put all of the papers in an envelope, which was addressed directly to the research laboratory, where it was to be sent without being opened. Each subject was asked to indicate how much she liked her partner, how much the partner liked her in return, how friendly the partner was, and whether or not she would like to meet her partner. Subjects were also asked to estimate how much the partner appreciated green stamps, how much the boy appreciated green stamps, how much she thought the partner had enjoyed the study, and how much she had enjoyed herself. The degree to which each subject justified her act on these measures were combined to form her total justification score.<sup>5</sup>

After the subject had filled out the questionnaire, the experiment was complete. The experimenter introduced the confederate and explained the deception and the necessity for it.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It will be recalled that we predicted that experimental subjects would be less likely to compensate their victim when the available compensation was insufficient or excessive than when it was adequate.<sup>6</sup> Control groups were run to control for an individual's tendency to compensate anyone—victim or not—

<sup>5</sup>Obviously, interpretation of these justification scores would be difficult since the justification information was always collected after the dependent variable. We asked for this information only as a pretest for a subsequent experiment, designed to test directly the relationship between compensation and justification responses.

<sup>6</sup>When considering the compensation data, the group, not the individual, will be our unit of analysis. Since all group members reported at the same time and were run in the same condition, the average group response is considered as a single observation.

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS CHOOSING TO  
COMPENSATE IN VARIOUS CONDITIONS

Object of compensation	Adequacy of possible compensation	(N)	% of Ss compensating
Victim	Insufficient	(13)	42%
	Adequate	(13)	73%
	Excessive	(11)	61%
Nonvictim	Insufficient	(13)	2%
	Adequate	(12)	12%
	Excessive	(13)	26%

in the game situation under different compensation levels. Thus, we expected a larger difference in tendency to compensate between the experimental group and the control group in the adequate condition than in the insufficient or excessive conditions. The appropriate test for our prediction was a quadratic interaction contrast:

$$\Gamma_1 = [ +1(\mu_{\text{Exp-Insuf}}) - 2(\mu_{\text{Exp-Adq}}) + 1(\mu_{\text{Exp-Exe}}) - 1(\mu_{\text{Cont-Insuf}}) + 2(\mu_{\text{Cont-Adq}}) - 1(\mu_{\text{Cont-Exe}})]. \quad [1]$$

We tested the hypothesis  $H_0: \Gamma_1 = 0$  against the alternative  $H_a: \Gamma_1 \neq 0$ . An explanation of this procedure is available in Hays (1963). When we turn to our data (See Table 1) we see that our prediction is supported.

In the experimental groups, subjects in the adequate condition are more likely to compensate the victim than are subjects in the insufficient or excessive conditions. In the control conditions this tendency does not exist. In all control conditions, subjects are less likely to compensate their partners than are experimental subjects ( $F = 67.36$ ,  $df = 1, 69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The more stamps the subject has to award, the more she tends to give them to her partner. The quadratic interaction contrast ( $\Gamma_1$ ) we predicted is significant ( $F = 3.83$ ,  $df = 1, 69$ ,  $p = .05$ ).

We also ran a test to determine whether the subjects in the insufficient condition were more or less likely to compensate their partners than subjects in the excessive condition when compared to their relevant control groups. The appropriate test to detect such a linear interaction difference was again a

contrast:

$$\Gamma_2 = [ +1(\mu_{\text{Exp-Insuf}})0(\mu_{\text{Exp-Adq}}) - (\mu_{\text{Exp-Exe}}) - 1(\mu_{\text{Cont-Insuf}})0(\mu_{\text{Cont-Adq}}) + 1(\mu_{\text{Cont-Exe}})]. \quad [2]$$

From this  $F$  it is clear that individuals are just as unlikely to compensate their partner when the only compensation is insufficient as when it is excessive ( $F = .12$ ,  $df = 1, 69$ ,  $p = .73$ ).

It appears that in every respect our hypothesis is supported.<sup>7</sup> Adequacy of compensation makes an individual especially willing to compensate his victim, and inadequate or excessive compensations appear to be equally discouraging to one's tendency to compensate.

These results have an interesting implication. Both in law suits and in more informal interpersonal relations, exaggeration of the degree of harm one has suffered seems to be a common strategy designed to increase the amount of compensation one will receive from the harm-doer. Such a strategy would be effective if the harm-doer's repertoire of compensatory acts includes one which would exactly compensate the victim for the magnified level of harm. If, however, the harm is exaggerated to such an extent that its level exceeds the highest level of compensation available to the harm-doer to perform, the victim may increase his probability of getting nothing at all. Thus, an errant husband may not attempt any compensation at all to a person whom he has "robbed of the best years of her life," but may compensate if the act in question were said to result in harm of a lesser degree, say just enough harm to be compensated for by a new dishwasher.

<sup>7</sup> Since in the control groups the percentage of subjects compensating is very small (2%-26%), while in the experimental groups the percentage is relatively large (42%-61%), the reviewers correctly suggested that an arc-sine transformation of the percentages is appropriate. When such a transformation is made, the results we report remain essentially the same:  $p [\Gamma_1 = 0 | \text{data}] = .07$  ( $F = 3.46$ ,  $df = 1, 69$ ), and  $p [\Gamma_2 = 0 | \text{data}] = .72$ ,  $ns$  ( $F = .13$ ).

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