

Injustice can spread: Researchers discover how the chain of unfair behavior can be stopped

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Bernd Weber from the Center for Economics and Neuroscience of the University of Bonn investigated how the transfer of unfair behavior to uninvolved parties can be avoided. Credit: Rolf Müller/UKB Corporate Communications

People who feel treated unfairly usually do not direct their anger only towards the perpetrator. They frequently unload their aggressions onto uninvolved outsiders who then in turn behave similarly. How can this chain of unfair behavior be disrupted? A team of researchers under the direction of the University of Bonn discovered that writing a message to the perpetrator is one way to regulate emotions and thereby reassess the situation. The results of the study are now published in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

"Tit for tat!" - If a boss acts unfairly in his professional life, he frequently loses the loyalty of his employee. Moreover, if a boss chews out a subordinate without any apparent reason, the subordinate will typically react with unfair behavior to his/her subordinate. "In such cases of unfair behavior, emotions are running high. Uninvolved outsiders are frequently drawn into the chain of injustice," says Prof. Dr. Bernd Weber from the Center for Economics and Neuroscience (CENs) of the University of Bonn.

Scientists call this phenomenon "generalized negative reciprocity". Negative reciprocity means that the parties involved pay back unfair behavior. "Generalized" refers to the fact that the conflict is also transferred to persons who are uninvolved in the original interaction. A team of researchers working with Prof. Weber from the CENs, the Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the University of Bonn Hospital and the University of Lübeck have now been able to confirm this mechanism in an experiment and could show a way to disrupt this unfortunate chain of unfairness.

Subjects participated in a "dictator game"

A total of 237 subjects took part in what is referred to as a "dictator game" in the BonnEconLab of the University of Bonn. Some of the participants slipped into the role of the dictators: They determined

whether they would either share a certain amount of money for example, 25 euros fairly with another participant or keep the lion's share for themselves and only give away a small remainder.

Of 24 dictators, 83 percent chose the unfair distribution: They kept most of the money for themselves. The counter players could not do anything about this and had to accept the dictator's decisions. This had an effect on the counter player's mood, which decreased. "This emotionally charged situation causes the person who is treated unfairly to behave unfairly towards others in turn," reports Dr. Sabrina Strang, who recently transferred from the CENs in Bonn to the Institute of Psychology of the University of Lübeck. This behavior is an outlet for [negative emotions](#).

Writing mails calms 'hot feelings'

As a next step, the scientists investigated how this chain of unfair actions can be disrupted. Participants ran through one of three different scenarios. First group: A three-minute compulsory break that should ensure emotional detachment. Second group: The participants were asked to describe a neutral picture in order to distract themselves. Third group: The affected persons were allowed to complain about their unfair treatment in a mail to the "dictator."

"The coping strategy in the form of a written complaint turned out to be the best way to regulate negative emotions," says Prof. Dr. So Young Park of the University of Lübeck. In this process, it was irrelevant whether the dictator actually received the mail. On the one hand, it could be shown that the subjects' emotions were significantly calmed after writing a mail, and on the other hand that they subsequently behaved more fairly towards others. The scientists suggest that writing a messages is a suitable way to stop the chain of unfairness by down-regulating negative emotions.

A way out of the chain of negative feelings

When one is unfairly treated and the anger is high, there needs to be a suitable outlet for negative feelings. "Once the emotions decreased, the affected person generally starts to reassess the situation rationally," says Prof. Weber. This makes it possible to not transfer anger further to uninvolved persons. Strategies of this type are also important for professional life. Prof. Weber: "Economic decisions are almost always characterized by social interactions." The study shows a way out of the chain of negative feelings. "So far, there has not been much research on correlations of this type," says Dr. Strang.

More information: Sabrina Strang et al. Generalized Negative Reciprocity in the Dictator Game – How to Interrupt the Chain of Unfairness, *Scientific Reports* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/srep22316](https://doi.org/10.1038/srep22316)

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