

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, September 26, 2016

Where: 360 JMHH

When: 12:00 – 1:15 pm

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Thanking, Apologizing, Bragging, and Blaming: Responsibility Exchange Theory and the Currency of Communication

ABSTRACT: Why do we care so much when someone says, or fails to say, “thank you” or “I’m sorry”? Why are people sometimes as reluctant to thank or apologize as they would be to part with property or money? In this paper, we propose and formalize a theory that draws connections between four forms of communication that have not previously been connected: thanking, apologizing, bragging, and blaming. In certain types of two-agent interactions, all four forms of communication relay information about credit or blame for a positive or negative outcome, and this affects the perceived competence of both the communicator and the recipient of communication. Because people care about appearing competent, communications that confer credit or blame involve benefits as well as costs: The two forms of communication that reduce perceived competence by conferring credit or accepting blame (thanking and apologizing) involve generous acts and thus increase perceived warmth; conversely, bragging and blaming, which take credit or place blame, have selfish outcomes and thus decrease perceived warmth. To the degree that each form of communication affects judgments of competence, it tends to affect judgments of warmth in the opposite direction. In two experiments, we test and find evidence supporting the main assumptions of the model regarding the effects of communication on judgments. Following this, we test whether people value thanks enough to let it affect something as important as the choice to collaborate with a teammate in the future. Consistent with predicted behavior, receiving thanks from an incompetent teammate increases the partner’s willingness to work with that teammate in the future (relative to not receiving thanks) despite the task being one for which competence should matter more than warmth. Ongoing work seeks to clarify the mechanism as well as to identify when and how people make mistakes regarding the communication of credit and blame.