

Guilt's Affect on Altruism*

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Managers can feel guilt about assigning unwanted tasks to their employees. This guilt can affect the benefits or lack thereof that the manager can utilize in the workplace. Undergraduates participated in a study that mimicked a management situation. The participants were asked to assign an unknown task to a group of students. Feedback was given to the participants about how much the group who performed the task enjoyed, did not enjoy, or were indifferent to the task. Based on this information the students were instructed to allocate bonus points between themselves and the group of students. Our interest was whether the negative feedback had an effect on the point allocation.

In the business world, managers make countless decisions that affect others' lives on a daily basis.

In decision-making there are cognitive and affective determinates. Logical, fact-based aspects of thinking, like employee ability and performance, combine with emotions which can color the cognitive judgments.

Decisions can be good or bad. Whichever the case, managers learn through this decision-making process about how to be better managers. But, what impact do bad decisions have on them?

People tend to feel guilt whether or not they purposely committed a wrongdoing (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton 1994). This is due in part to needs for equality and fairness.

Evidence of the relationship between guilt and altruism was observed by Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg (1997). They showed that higher empathetic concern yielded more helping. Thus emotions can motive a person to act altruistically.

Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw (1995) showed that empathy could even be strong enough to make people violate basic principles of justice.

That empathy leads to altruism is well known, but researchers have yet to draw a strong link between guilt and altruism.

The decisions that managers make directly affect their employees. Managers sometimes make mistakes that affect their employees negatively. When a negative reaction is presented to a manager, they may feel empathy for the employee coupled with guilt for their decision having caused the negative reaction.

It is logical to expect that guilt resulting from poor management decisions could ultimately lead to some form of altruistic action.

Hypothesis: When someone feels guilt towards another, they will try to compensate, usually with an altruistic act.

Predictions: When acting managers receive feedback that their work assignment decisions were perceived poorly by employees, managers will compensate employees more than when managers receive feedback that their decisions were perceived favorably.

Differences should increase when managers expect to compensate employees publicly compared with the expectation that they will compensate privately.

Methods

Design

The present study used a 2x3 between subjects design based on expectation for a public or private

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defense of their decision and whether positive (no-guilt), neutral, or negative (guilt) feedback was provided. The dependent variable was the allocation of 100 points that the participants divided between their “employees” and themselves.

Participants

The 60 participants were RMU undergraduates who either received course credit for volunteering or were interested in play-acting the role of a manager.

Procedure

After consenting to participate, volunteers were told that they were going to play the role of managers.

Each “manager” had to choose one of four tasks; a task that they would feel most likely to assign for their employees to perform if they were actual managers.

After selecting, they were informed that a group had already performed the task and had provided feedback about their reactions to the task. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either positive (no-guilt), negative (guilt), or no (neutral) feedback comments.

After reviewing the feedback, managers were told that they would next be dividing 100 “bonus” points between themselves and the group. In thinking about this, they were to write some justifications for their point allocation decision.

Half of the participants were then told that they would need to defend their point allocation directly to the group who performed the task. The remaining half was told that their justifications would simply be passed on to the group.

At this point, subjects were allowed to write in point amounts for themselves and their group (which were to total up to 100).

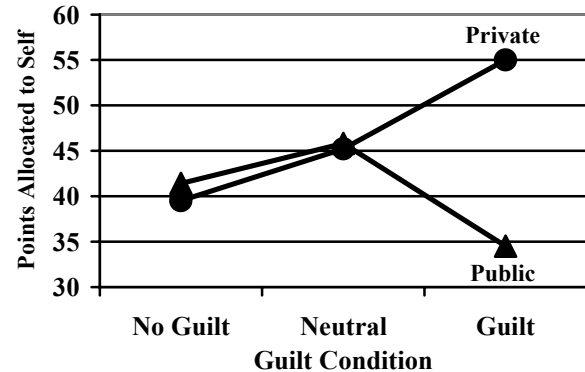
Results

A .05 alpha level was used for all statistical tests. A two-factor between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the points allocated to managers. No significant main effects, but a significant interaction, $F(2, 44) = 3.295$.

As can be seen in Figure 1, all conditions produced approximately equal mean allocation amounts except for the guilt condition.

Managers expecting to defend their point allocations publicly allocated fewer points to themselves than those expecting to defend themselves anonymously.

Figure 1. Mean number of points allocated to self for all conditions (out of 100 possible).



Discussion

The results seem straightforward for all conditions except the Guilt condition. Apparently:

Guilt's Affect in the PUBLIC condition is: FEAR (the “managers” were presumably docking themselves points to appease their disgruntled employees).

Guilt's Affect in the PRIVATE condition is: ANGER (the “managers” resented negative feedback from their employees and punished them by taking away points).

References

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