

Fairness is an important social norm. Whenever people are given a chance, they tend to share resources equally. For example, when we share a bar of chocolate, it would be perceived as rude and inappropriate to give someone only one or two pieces and eat the rest. Moreover, people are very sensitive to inequality - even little children notice it and respond negatively. Once people are treated unfairly, they tend to enforce fairness, even if it is costly for them or respond with unfair treatment in return. However, when instant revenge is not possible, an experience of unfairness influences subsequent interactions with new partners because people forward unfair behavior to uninvolved third persons. Thus, unfairness spreads easily and one person who was treated unfairly might start a whole chain of unfairness.

So far, studies have demonstrated that people indeed pay unfairness forward. This phenomenon is called generalized negative reciprocity. In typical research, a participant experiences unfair treatment allegedly from a previous participant and subsequently has a chance to decide how to treat the next participant, uninvolved in the previous interaction. Usually, the participants are asked to perform the same task that s/he was affected with, typically a split of some kind of resources. This kind of research scenario enables to demonstrate the spread of bad actions from person to person. However, in real-life decisions, rarely do people have a chance to pay forward unkind behavior of the same type they have received. Thus, there is much to be investigated. For example, it is not clear whether unfairness experienced in one area of life (e.g. financial) is paid forward equally likely in another area of life (e.g. social) because all the previous studies that focused on the way unfairness spreads from person to person took into account only a single area of life. The next questions focus on recipients of generalized negative reciprocity – uninvolved people who meet a victim of unfairness. We wonder whether the identity of the recipient is important and whether unfairness spreads easier between people who are in a relation of a certain kind. Is it equally probable that a victim of unfairness will pay forward this behavior to a member of his or her own group as to members of another group or to an anonymous individual? Another question concerns the intentions of the person who treats us unfairly. Does it matter that a person who treated us unfairly did not have any better option? Finally, there are questions about the limits of the chain of unfairness. Will a victim of unfairness be unfair to another person in a situation where s/he gains nothing from such action or, even more extremely, if there is a cost of such behavior?

In this research project, we aim to explore the abovementioned questions. In eleven short experiments, using economic games, we will introduce an experience of unfair treatment and investigate whether it spreads from person to person across areas of life, the importance of the identity of the potential recipient of generalized negative reciprocity and of the intentions of a person who offer an unfair split of resources. We will also try to establish mechanisms standing behind generalized negative reciprocity by investigating whether victims of unfairness will be willing to treat others unfairly even in a situation when it is costly for them.