Barriers to Transforming Hostile Relations: Why Friendly Gestures Can Backfire

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Abstract

Friendly gestures (e.g., smiles, flattery, favors) typically build trust and earn good will. However, we propose that people feel unsettled when enemies initiate friendly gestures. To resolve these sensemaking difficulties, people find order through superstitious reasoning about friendly enemies. Supporting this theorizing, friendly enemies created sensemaking difficulty, which in turn mediated people's tendencies to blame them for coincidental negative outcomes (Experiment 1). Further implicating these processes, individuals high in need for structure were especially prone to make these attributions (Experiment 2). Finally, we explored consequences of such blame, showing that blame mediates people's beliefs that mere contact with friendly enemies is unlucky and should be avoided (Experiment 3). Taken together, these results suggest that, rather than transforming hostile relationships, an enemy's friendliness can be so unnerving that it sometimes leads people down blind alleys of superstitious reasoning.

O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!

…that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain. (Shakespeare, 2003, p. 4)

History is replete with protracted struggles between sworn enemies. Indeed, even among modern Americans, 70% of people report coping with enemies (often coworkers, former friends, or estranged lovers) in the course of their daily lives (Holt, 1989). Given the pervasiveness of enemy relationships (also termed *enemyship*, Wiseman & Duck, 1995), a critical question is how people might manage these deep divisions. If only one party could initiate a small act of kindness, a friendly gesture of some sort, might enemies perhaps take a first step toward peace and reconciliation?

American President Barack Obama made such an overture in his first year as president, sending a surprise holiday video greeting to the Iranian people with a message of peace and new beginnings. Research on conflict and negotiation confirms that these friendly words, including flattery (Vonk, 2002), positive feedback (Kim, Diekmann, & Tensbrunsel, 2003), self-disclosure (Moore, Kurtzberg, Thompson, & Morris, 1999), and explanation (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Shapiro, 1991), are interpersonally effective and inspire integrative outcomes (Carnevale & Isen, 1986). These gestures are not merely cheap talk (Farrell & Gibbons, 1989; Pillutla & Murnighan, 1995): They can sometimes diffuse tension and help smooth difficult relationships (Bies & Shapiro, 1987; Kim et al., 2003; Shapiro, 1991).

However, friendly gestures are not always embraced. In the above diplomatic scenario, an advisor to the Iranian president responded warily to Obama's gesture, enumerating decades-old grudges. These sentiments echo Biblical parables about sweet-talking serpents and Shakespeare's descriptions of "daggers in men's smiles" (1986, p. 979) which enable treacherous enemies to "assume a pleasing shape" (p. 697). Similarly, the vast body of anthropological research on the evil eye superstition, a belief particularly prevalent in South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean cultures, documents that people fear misfortune when threatening- others lavish compliments (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972). These examples suggest that people do not simply devalue an enemy's material concessions (Ross & Stillinger, 1991): They might paradoxically find friendly enemies even more disconcerting than overtly hostile enemies. The present research seeks to document this possibility empirically while also exploring psychological antecedents.

Specifically, we propose that this backfire effect can occur because friendly enemies are confusing and ambiguous. They provoke sensemaking difficulty, leaving people struggling to make sense of and predict them (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Kelley, 1971; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Synder, 1982; Weary & Edwards, 1996). Given that people facing sensemaking difficulty often resort to superstition to regain control in their environment (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Keinan, 1994; Vyse, 1997; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), we further contend that backlash to friendly enemies can assume a superstitious form, leading people to blame such targets as jinxes and avoid them. These processes suggest that even if enemies intend to set aside past hostilities and move forward through friendliness, their efforts may paradoxically have just the opposite effect, blocking the road to reconciliation. After reviewing relevant support for these propositions, we describe the results of three studies designed to test them.

The Challenge of Transforming Enemy Relationships through Friendliness

Economists often describe friendly words in the context of trust building as mere cheap talk—they are costless to initiate and may not be sincere, suggesting that rational actors would do well to ignore them (Farrell & Gibbons, 1989; Pillutla & Murnighan, 1995). Other lines of thinking, however, suggest that friendly gestures can in fact have positive effects. In the domain of sports, children typically learn at an early age that good sportsmanship requires outward friendliness and compliments, regardless of who wins and loses. Such gestures give respect and dignity to even one's fiercest opponents.

Beyond being *nice*, research indicates that friendly gestures can also be interpersonally effective, especially when they are well developed (Shapiro, 1991) and substantive (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002). They lead negotiators to make more concessions (Barry & Oliver, 1996) and to generate more integrative outcomes (Baron, 1990; Carnevale & Isen, 1986; Drolet & Morris, 2000; Kramer, Newton, & Pommerenke, 1993). Additionally, they can serve as a crucial first step in initiating trust building, fostering social connections, signaling benign rather than threatening intentions (Shapiro, 1991), and generating positive affect, rapport, and reciprocity (Cialdini, 2001).

However, a significantly less documented possibility and one that we explore here is that, at least under certain conditions, friendly gestures can backfire. This proposition is consistent with research on reactive devaluation (Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Ross & Ward, 1995), which shows that people are less likely to embrace a proposal authored by an enemy (e.g., a Russian leader) than the same proposal authored by an in-group member (e.g., an American leader), because they assume that the enemy's proposal is less favorable.

We build upon these findings in three ways. First, whereas reactive devaluation research shows that an enemy's friendliness is more aversive than a friend's, we explore the more counterintuitive possibility that an enemy's friendliness can also be more aversive than their hostility.

Second, to explain this counterintuitive possibility, the present research offers a more general psychological reason than previously documented for why friendliness from enemies might backfire. Past research suggests that such backlash occurs in part because people are fearful of exploitation. Such

suspicions account for backlash to counterparts who use friendly words to manipulatively frame a poor offer as if it were a good one (relative to a neutral presentation, Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004) and sales people (Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007) who use friendliness and flattery to manipulate.

However, while it may be perfectly rational to remain guarded when transacting with a potential manipulator, fear of exploitation alone does not explain why people may actually rebuff an enemy's friendliness even more than an enemy's overt hostility, which more certainly signals negative intent. Further, people may recoil from friendly enemies, even when the friendliness does not occur in the context of a potentially exploitative transaction. For instance, anthropological research on the evil eye shows how people recoil simply from an enemy's compliments, that is, mere words that do not implicate exploitation (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972).

To explain these possibilities, we look to prior theorizing about how people respond to social and interpersonal uncertainty, and we propose that people recoil from friendly enemies because of the confusion and disruption that they provoke (Bond et al., 1992; Burgoon & Walther, 1990; Festinger, 1957). The present research thus goes a step further than prior work on the limits of friendliness in trust building by documenting an even more basic aversion to enemies' attempts to forge a social connection. Specifically, it suggests that people are not merely suspicious of exploitative exchange: They may even recoil against friendly words.

Finally, a third contribution of the present work is to show the unique superstitious form of this aversion. People experiencing uncertainty often turn to superstition to establish causal order (Vyse, 1997; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), and enemies frequently become a locus for superstition. Just as ancient people blamed certain disliked members of a community for negative outcomes (e.g., practicing witchcraft or possessing the evil eye), modern people may feel similarly jinxed or hexed (albeit at a perhaps less conscious level) by disliked people in their lives. To set the stage for our discussion of how superstitious reasoning affects enemy perceptions, we begin by considering the nature of enemyship itself.

The Nature of Enemyship

Enemies may be defined as those individuals who people mistrust and dislike most intensely in their personal lives (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). They are individuals typically seen as possessing interpersonal and social power over targets of their enmity (Wiseman & Duck, 1995). If trust involves "confident positive expectations about another's motives" (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995, p. 139), enemyship involves confident negative expectations (Menon & Blount, 2003; Wiseman & Duck, 1995) in which parties' view each other as motivated to use influence and power to undermine their personal goals and well-being (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010). Instead of being guided by an implicit contract, that is, a pre-existing groundwork of trust (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993), people view enemies as "hostile, manipulative, opportunistic, and untrustworthy" (Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005, p. 782).

According to Wiseman and Duck's (1995) analysis of people's subjective perceptions of enemyship, certain features of the relationship operate on a continuum with friendship, whereas others involve categorically different features than friendship. Consistent with a continuum, people certainly like their friends more than their enemies. However, consider the nuanced ways in which trust dynamics operate within these relationships. Whereas enemyship can be equated with an absence of trust, friendship is not synonymous with trust, as friends may not fully support each other in all situations (Tesser, 1988). Further, while trust often grows incrementally in friendship (Burt & Knez, 1996; Kim et al., 2003), enemyship does not necessarily result from incremental declines in trust nor from a single catastrophic trust violation. Indeed, Wiseman (1989) found that in many cases, enemies were individuals with whom people did not have open conflict and whom in some cases they had not even construed as enemies until these individuals suddenly harmed them out of the blue. Given these nuanced processes, it is unsurprising that enacting behaviors that typically symbolize friendship would not be enough to repair relationships between enemies.

One specific reason why the particular backfire effect we explore here has received so little attention to date may be that prior research on the effects of friendliness as a trust-building strategy has focused primarily on relationships other than enemyship, such as competitive relations in mixed-motive settings (Bottom et al., 2002; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006), low trust or affectively negative relationships (Labianca & Brass, 2006; McAllister, 1995), and conflictual relationships more generally (Jehn, 1997). At first glance, it might seem as though friendly overtures would operate similarly, whether initiated by competitors, dislikable or disagreeable others, or enemies. However, as hinted at above, enemyship is qualitatively quite different than most other types of aversive relations, with two key distinctions of relevance being the comparative level of malevolence attributed to enemies and the potential threats that enemies can pose. While competitors in mixed-motive settings or rivalrous friends (c.f. Tesser, 1988) generally experience tension, they need not harbor malicious intentions toward one another and may, on occasion, even collaborate or actively support each other. And while we may dislike people for many reasons (e.g., they are rude, strange, unlikeable), we do not necessarily worry that merely dislikable others are out to get us. We may indeed avoid them (Jehn, 1997; Labianca & Brass, 2006)—but they are not necessarily threatening. The same holds true for those with whom we experience ordinary task, relationship, and process conflict (Jehn, 1997), although particularly intense, intractable relationship conflicts may well devolve into enemyship.

In sum, enemyship is a relatively extreme and unusual category of relationship. Enemies are not merely unlikeable people, they are people who strike fear in our hearts because their ill will could threaten us in real ways. The fact that enemies would like harm to befall their targets is a defining feature of enemyship (Labianca & Brass, 2006; Wiseman & Duck, 1995) and one which produces superstitious concerns about their power to jinx. Enemies may be few and far between in our lives and more prevalent in non-Western than Western cultures (Adams, 2005). However, as noted at the outset, they are nevertheless quite prevalent in the latter (Holt, 1989) and are an important category in determining organizational outcomes (Labianca & Brass, 2006).

Friendly Enemies Provoke Sensemaking Difficulties

Having defined enemy relationships more clearly, let us now consider why enemies who direct friendly gestures are likely to induce superstitious attribution. Enemy relationships are naturally fraught with uncertainty, regardless of how a given enemy behaves (Wiseman & Duck, 1995; Ybarra et al., 2010), and such uncertainty is aversive. However, while hostile enemies are unpleasant, they at least offer counterparts some sense of predictive control because their behavior is consistent with relational norms and they respect boundaries. In contrast, when enemies blur relational boundaries by offering gestures that are normally reserved for friends (e.g., warm words, touching, and intrusions of physical space, Hall, 1966), it feels inconsistent, violates expectations (Bond et al., 1992; Burgoon & Walther, 1990), and disrupts prediction (c.f. Festinger, 1957). An enemy's facade of friendship feels disconcerting because it mimics the security and comfort people have when relating with friends rather than the vigilance they must maintain with opportunistic foes (Wiseman & Duck, 1995).

Faced with such inconsistency, people struggle to explain it (Festinger, 1957). Indeed, a mere smile or encouraging word from an enemy may leave perceivers struggling to interpret an enemy's true intentions. Recalling the example at the outset, Iranians might have interpreted President Obama's overture as a genuine attempt to restart the relationship or as a sinister attempt to lower their defenses before an attack. Similarly, people could view an enemy's compliment as negative (a sarcastic put-down or a sneaky ploy) or as a genuine olive branch. When viewed through the lens of enemyship, genuine, insincere, or conniving motives may seem equally plausible, and people struggle to make sense of and manage the relationship. Thus, even if people are not so quick to categorize the friendliness attempt negatively, they are still left with multiple possible interpretations of the action. Given their uncertain nature in the context of enemyship, we thus propose that friendly gestures will induce interpersonal sensemaking difficulty.

Superstitious Blame of Friendly Enemies

A number of downstream consequences might be expected to follow from this sensemaking difficulty. When events provoke uncertainty (Kelley, 1971), people frequently attribute outcomes to external forces (Rothbaum et al., 1982) such as God (e.g., Kay et al., 2008), fate (Risen & Gilovich, 2008), conspiracies, and superstitions (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Although these attributions might involve magical thinking and illusory correlations (Friedland, Keinan, & Regev, 1992; Heine et al., 2006; Keinan, 1994; Malinowski, 1954; Padgett & Jorgenson, 1982; Pronin, Wegner, McCarthy, & Rodriguez, 2006), they enable people to reorder their social worlds.

Likewise, people facing the uncertainties of high stakes conflict frequently sharpen their portrayal of enemies whether they are friendly or not, "to revive the alertness" of the in-group, encourage "concerted action" against the enemy (Coser, 1956, p. 106), and provide a sense of meaning (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2010). While friendliness might seem like it should soften an enemy's image, we propose that the sensemaking difficulties it creates will in fact amplify people's already active search for meaning, causing them to regain order in their environment by asserting the enemy's causal power. Our predictions are inspired by anthropological work on the evil eye, which has linked superstitious cognition to friendly encounters with enemies (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972). While evil eye research has been qualitative and has less to say about antecedent conditions, we hypothesize that superstitious processes should emerge when friendly enemies provoke sensemaking difficulties. In particular, we predict that friendliness, and the uncertainty it provokes, will make people more likely to blame friendly enemies for purely coincidental negative outcomes, seeing them as jinxes.[1] Such attributions are superstitious in the sense that they implicate friendly enemies in events that they could not cause based on "known laws of nature or … what is generally considered rational in society" (Kramer & Block, 2008, p. 784).

Consequences of Blame

From such superstitious attributions, at least two relational implications might be expected to follow. First, in addition to simply blaming friendly enemies for a single coincidental outcome, people may generalize the enemy's ability to spread negative outcomes in the future, perceiving them as unlucky and inferring that mere contact with them (e.g., seeing or touching them and their associated objects) could trigger future bad luck.

Second, following prior anthropological theorizing that suggests that people typically avoid rather than directly engage with confusing entities, we propose that superstitious blame should also translate into behavioral avoidance rather than engagement. Just as people avoid contact with uncontrollable infectious agents such as germs and viruses, the anthropologist Douglas (1966) has noted that people actively avoid

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[1]One question raised by this focus on coincidental negative outcomes is how our predictions might apply to positive coincidences that follow an enemy's friendliness. Would there be a similar backlash effect? And if not, would people attribute such positive outcomes to the enemy's friendliness, allowing for the possibility of trust building? While we did not experimentally test these predictions, the existing literature on attributions offers clear evidence that outcome valence is likely to represent an important boundary condition on the phenomenon we seek to study. First, past research suggests that positive outcomes would not generate the same kind of backlash as negative outcomes because positive outcomes do not prompt as much sensemaking as negative attributions (Wong & Weiner, 1981). People facing failures and negative outcomes spontaneously make attributions, whereas successes are less likely to elicit attributional activity. Second, even if positive outcomes following an enemy's friendly gesture do not produce backlash, there is little reason to think they would therefore produce trust-building effects. When people experience positive outcomes, they tend to internalize them (i.e., take credit for such successes themselves) rather than attributing them to external factors (see Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Thus, it is unlikely that a positive outcome would lead people to credit the enemy for the outcome. As such, there is little theoretical basis on which to expect a trust-building effect could occur with respect to positive coincidences. This psychological evidence aligns with the anthropological evidence (especially on the evil eye, Dundes, 1992) that links an enemy's positive words to unlucky outcomes (as compared with positive).

uncontrollable human entities who blur boundaries (e.g., those who violate rigid social taboos such as gender roles through dress or physical appearance or norms of intercaste and interclass boundaries through overly familiar contact, see also White & Langer, 1999). Friendly enemies meet Douglas' criteria as entities that muddle organized patterns, creating confusion. Indeed, a defining characteristic of people who believe in the *evil eye* is that they also exhibit superstitious forms of avoidance, recoiling from friendly enemies' mere gaze and touch, and performing rituals to avoid and cleanse away their contaminating contact (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972). On these bases, we predict that people will be more likely to view friendly enemies as agents of unluckiness and to avoid them than they will hostile enemies.

Overview

Across three studies designed to test different parts of our model, we explore the above predictions that friendly enemies provoke sensemaking difficulties, leading others to blame them for purely coincidental negative outcomes and to treat them superstitiously moving forward. Focusing on the first part of this model, Experiment 1 offers initial evidence that the tendency to blame friendly enemies is mediated by people's sensemaking difficulties about their behaviors. Experiment 2 sheds further light on these psychological conditions by testing whether need for structure (NFS, Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), an individual difference in people's level of comfort with ambiguity in their everyday lives, moderates the tendency to blame friendly enemies. We predict that individuals most upset by ambiguity (i.e., high NFS individuals) will be most prone to blame a friendly enemy. Finally, Experiment 3 examines the two proposed consequences of blame. We test whether people generalize their blame of friendly enemies, expecting mere contact with them to bring future bad luck, and whether they express behavioral intentions to avoid them.[2]

Operationalizing Key Constructs

Across our studies, we operationalized enemies following Nemeroff and Rozin's (1994) method. Employing a protocol that combines recall (to activate real relationships) and hypothetical situations (to standardize the events, see Menon, Thompson, & Choi, 2006; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994 for examples of this method), we asked participants to identify actual negative people from their lives and imagine interacting with them in a new, standardized situation.

Our second key construct, friendly versus hostile gestures, concerned the enemy's outward expressions. We implemented these via the enemy's friendly or ill wishes, consistent with prior work that primed superstitious cognition through verbal comments implicating the potential role of luck and fate in an upcoming task (Damisch, Stoberock, & Mussweiler, 2010; Risen & Gilovich, 2008).

Experiment 1: Sensemaking Difficulty Underlies Blame

Experiment 1 hypothesizes that sensemaking difficulty underlies people's tendencies to blame friendly enemies as a jinx. Additionally, we included friendly and hostile friends as comparison conditions, expecting backlash only with respect to friendly enemies. One question that arises from prior anthropological research on the evil eye is why superstitious reasoning emerges in response to friendly behaviors from negative people, but not to hostile behaviors from friends (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972). We suggest that this asymmetry between enemyship and friendship (Wiseman & Duck, 1995) arises because people

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[2]To show that avoidance of friendly enemies does not simply reflect dislike but also superstition, the present research statistically tests whether superstitious blame mediates people's avoidance of friendly enemies. Further, we test whether people's intention to avoid friendly enemies goes beyond face-to-face contact and extends to mere contact with friendly enemies' associated objects, reflecting principles of sympathetic magic (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994).

often have both supportive and competitive feelings toward friends (Tesser, 1988), giving them more leeway in their range of behaviors. Thus, whereas critical and negative remarks from friends may be unpleasant, we did not expect that they would provoke sensemaking difficulty or blaming as a jinx.

Participants and Design

Ninety-six undergraduates (38% men) were paid $3 each to participate. The experiment had a 2 (relationship: friend, enemy) × 2 (gesture: friendly, hostile) between-subjects design. We dropped six participants who did not complete the first manipulation, described below.

Procedures and Materials

We first directed participants to recall and write about either a supportive friend or unsupportive hostile person in their life. In particular, we asked them to recall and write about a real person from their life who "you do not feel at all close to and who hopes for the worst for you…someone who would enjoy it if you failed" (*enemy condition*) or "who pulls for your success …someone who would enjoy it if you succeeded" (*friend condition*). We then administered a manipulation check to confirm the nature of their relationship with this person. In particular, we asked them, "How close (i.e., friendly) are you to this person? (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very close*).

Next, participants read about an athletic situation in which they were part of a track team along with that person (who competed in different events). As participants warmed up for their key race, the person who they had previously recalled approached them and said:

Hostile comment: "Don't get your hopes up too high, as this is gonna be a difficult one for you."

Friendly comment: "I'm sure you're gonna win this one without even breaking a sweat."

As a second manipulation check, we checked whether participants recognized this comment as a positive gesture, asking them whether the comment was a likeable gesture (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). At this time, we also asked participants a few questions about how they would interpret the comments, including one key item focusing on their interpretive (i.e., sensemaking) difficulty following the exchange: In particular, we asked them "to what extent would you consider the person who approached you in the scenario to be difficult to interpret (1 = *not difficult to interpret*, 7 = *very difficult to interpret*)."

The participants then read that they ran a good first lap but, during the second lap, twisted their ankle due to a factor unrelated to the comment (i.e., the irregularity of the track) and could not finish the race. Finally, participants answered the primary dependent measures, along with several filler items to help mask our true questions of interest.

Dependent Measures

Superstitious Blame

We measured superstitious blame with four items: "To what extent do you think this event was likely caused by"…"the other person's behavior, which invited bad luck upon you," "the fact that the person who approached you beforehand was a jinx," "the other person's ill will," and "the other person sabotaging you with their negative intentions" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We computed the average across the four items to create a composite measure of superstitious blame ($\alpha = .87$).

Other Attributions

We also included a range of other items assessing whether they blamed any of several internal factors (e.g., their own preparation, their own ability as an athlete) as well as potential external factors not

involving the person they encountered ("bad luck in general—not caused by this person," "the challenging competition;" $1 = not\ at\ all$, $7 = very\ much$). Note that we differentiated between bad luck in general (which is impersonal and random, Weiner et al., 1971) as compared with jinx-driven luck (which is carried by a human agent).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

We confirmed that participants recalled appropriate targets. Participants who thought about friends indeed felt closer to them than participants who thought about enemies (friends: $M = 6.46$, $SD = 1.09$; enemies: $M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.89$), $F(1, 88) = 152.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .63$.

As expected, participants perceived the friendly enemy as being more likeable than the hostile enemy (friendly friend: $M = 6.28$, $SD = 1.06$; hostile friend: $M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.76$; friendly enemy: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.90$; hostile enemy: $M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 86) = 24.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$. Additionally, we found a main effect of relationship, $F(1, 86) = 77.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .48$, and no interaction, $F(1, 78) = 0.25$, $p = .62$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. This suggests that participants did not simply interpret the friendly comment as sarcastic, manipulative, or otherwise negative.

Sensemaking Difficulty

While participants acknowledged the friendly nature of the comment, they still struggled to understand the friendly enemy. We conducted 2 (relationship: friend, enemy) × 2 (gesture: friendly, hostile) between-subjects ANOVAs for each of the dependent variables, beginning with the proposed mediator. As predicted, enemy gesture and relationship interacted, $F(1, 86) = 5.04$, $p = .027$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$ (see Table 1, for all Experiment 1 means). People experienced more sensemaking difficulty in response to the enemy's friendly comments than each of the other conditions, $F(1, 38) > 3.94$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 > .08$ for friendly friend and hostile friend comparisons; $F(1, 38) = 5.164$, $p < .03$, $\eta_p^2 > .10$ for the hostile enemy comparison. Although people generally experienced more sensemaking difficulties with respect to their enemies than their friends, $F(1, 86) = 5.12$, $p < .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, there was no main effect for the gesture's valence, $F(1, 86) = 0.56$, $p = .46$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Superstitious Blame

Next, we examined participants' blame attributions. As predicted, we found a significant interaction for superstitious blame, $F(1, 86) = 508$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. We did not find main effects of relationship, $F(1, 86) = 2.01$, $p = .16$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, or gesture, $F(1, 86) = 0.82$, $p = .36$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$. Participants blamed friendly enemies more than friendly friends, hostile friends, and hostile enemies, all $F(1, 38) > 4.82$, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .11$.

Table 1

Effects of Counterpart Gesture on Sensemaking Difficulty and Blame as a Function of Relationship Type (Experiment 1)

	Friend		Enemy	
	Friendly gesture	Hostile gesture	Friendly gesture	Hostile gesture
Sensemaking difficulty	2.54 (2.06)	3.17 (1.76)	4.45 (2.19)	3.18 (1.94)
Superstitious blame	1.71 (1.12)	2.08 (1.42)	2.74 (1.69)	1.85 (1.01)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Sensemaking difficulty: Comparison of friendly enemy with friendly friend and hostile friend $F(1, 38) > 3.94$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 > .08$; friendly enemy and hostile enemy, $F(1, 38) = 5.164$, $p < .03$, $\eta_p^2 > .10$; all other means do not differ. Blame: Comparison of friendly enemies with friendly friends, hostile friends, and hostile enemies, all $F(1, 38) > 4.82$, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .11$; all other means do not differ.

Attributions to Other Internal and External Factors

While participants in the friendly enemy condition heightened attributions to the enemy whose behaviors provoked sensemaking difficulties, participants did not differ in attributing to other causes, all $Fs < 1$, $ps > .30$. We did not find different attributions with respect to their own ability based on relationship. They also did not differ in attributing to their own preparation based on the relationship. Similarly, with respect to the external causes, participants did not differ in attributing the outcome to bad luck in general or to the challenging nature of the competition, $Fs < 2$, $ps > .10$.

Mediation

Finally, we tested the prediction that sensemaking difficulty would mediate the interactive effects of gesture and relationship on superstitious blame (described above). In doing so, we employed Baron and Kenny's (1986) 3-step regression method, paired with a Sobel test. Results for the first two steps were reported earlier. In predicting superstitious blame on the final step, we entered our two independent variables, their interaction, and sensemaking difficulty, our theorized mediator. In this regression, the gesture x relationship interaction was no longer significant, $B = -0.28$, $p = .12$, but sensemaking difficulty, $B = 0.28$, $p < .02$ was significant (Sobel test = $p < .05$; see Figure 1). Sensemaking difficulty thus mediated the effect of friendly enemies on blame.

These data offer some initial evidence that cheap talk in the form of friendly gestures is not simply ignored in the context of enemyship: It can also produce backlash. Further, the results show that people were not simply guarding against exploitative exchange, as they rejected even a most minimal form of social connection. Participants who faced friendly enemies blamed them more, even though these enemies held little actual causal power. This backfire effect was attributable to sensemaking difficulty, which mediated heightened attributions of blame.

Finally, consistent with anthropological research (Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972), we found an asymmetry whereby friendly enemies elicited superstitious reasoning to a greater extent than did hostile friends. One psychological explanation for this asymmetry is that hostile friends stand out less because friendship allows more latitude for behavior than does enemyship, including both warmth and negativity (Tesser, 1988). This asymmetrical pattern indicates a specific way that enemyship cannot simply be conceived of as the inverse of friendship (Wiseman & Duck, 1995).
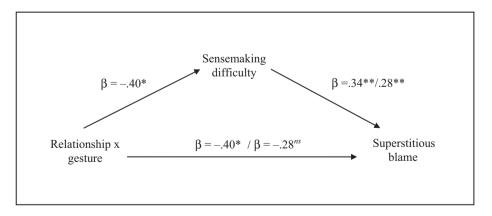

Figure 1. Sensemaking difficulty mediates superstitious blame (Experiment 1).
Note. Coefficients to the left of backslashes correspond to the direct effect. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates significantly different from zero, *$p < .05$ and **$p < .01$.

Experiment 2: Need for Structure Heightens Tendencies to Blame the Jinx

Experiment 2 focuses on individuals high in need for structure, that is, those prone to seek order and control in the world around them (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). Because these individuals are especially disrupted by sensemaking difficulty, they should be more likely to blame friendly enemies. Experiment 2 thus bolsters the mediational findings in Experiment 1, using need for structure as a moderator to help further establish a causal link between disrupted sensemaking and superstition (for similar approaches to testing causality, see LeBoeuf & Norton, 2012; Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Together, both experiments help to specify the psychological conditions under which friendly gestures from enemies can backfire.

Participants and Design

Forty undergraduates (50% men) were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: friendly versus hostile gesture.

Procedure and Materials

Participants first recalled and wrote about a real hostile counterpart from their life, following the same protocol as followed by those assigned to the *enemy condition* in Experiment 1.

Gesture Manipulation
Participants then evaluated a new situation (adapted from Risen & Gilovich, 2008) in which they were expecting an admissions decision from their top graduate school. As they checked the mailbox, they encountered the hostile person they had written about (described above). The person asked whether they had heard from schools and then made a friendly or hostile remark:

> *Friendly condition*: "Of all people, you have nothing to worry about. You'll easily get into whatever graduate programs you applied to."

> *Hostile condition*: "Don't want to burst your bubble or anything, but getting into graduate programs is difficult. Hope you didn't put all your eggs in one basket."

As in Experiment 1, we checked to see whether participants recognized this comment as a likeable gesture (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Finally, participants learned that the letter had arrived, but it was a rejection. Friendly versus hostile gestures could not exert actual causal power because these remarks occurred after the negative outcome was determined but before participants knew the outcome.

Superstitious Blame
Participants next responded to a set of follow up questions, including five items tapping their tendency to blame the counterpart, despite this person having had no actual causal effect on the outcome. This measure adapted Experiment 1's blame measure to this context ($\alpha = .85$; e.g., the event was caused by "simply encountering the other person at school;" "the person who approached you sabotaged you with their negative intentions;" "the other person's ill will;" "an attempt to undermine you;" and "To what extent would you hold the person who approached you responsible for the outcome?" (1 = *not at all likely*, 7 = *very likely*).

Need for Structure Scale
Additionally, participants completed the three facets of the need for closure scale that tapped into the need for structure (need for order, need for prediction, and discomfort with ambiguity, 27 items,

$\alpha = .88$, Neuberg, Judice, & West, 1997; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Need for structure did not vary based on the friendly or hostile comment condition, $F(1, 38) = 0.15$, $p = .70$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, thus confirming that this measure was not affected by the manipulations and reflected individual differences between subjects.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check
As expected, participants exposed to targets who initiated friendly gestures rated these remarks as more likeable than those exposed to targets who initiated hostile gestures (friendly enemy: $M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.50$; hostile enemy: $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.43$), $F(1, 78) = 15.05$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .16$.

Need for Structure × Gesture Interaction
A hierarchical regression was run with experimental condition, and need for structure entered on the first block and the interaction term entered on the second block. As predicted, there was a main effect of condition with participants blaming friendly enemies ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.85$) more than hostile enemies ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.63$), $B = -0.44$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = .044$. However, this effect was qualified by the predicted gesture × need for structure interaction, $B = -0.79$, $SE = 0.32$, $p = .019$. Using simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), we confirmed that high need for structure participants blamed friendly enemies more than hostile enemies, $B = 0.88$, $SE = 0.20$, $p < .001$, but that there was no effect among low need for structure participants, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.25$, $p = .73$.

Experiment 2 confirms that (a) people attribute more superstitious blame to friendly enemies and (b) need for structure moderates this effect. Those with high need for structure were particularly likely to blame friendly enemies, supporting the hypothesis that people do so because their ambiguous behaviors are disrupting.

Experiment 3: Downstream Consequences of Blaming Friendly Enemies

In the third and final experiment, we sought to identify the consequences of blaming friendly enemies. First, we tested whether people generalize this blame by viewing subsequent contact with friendly enemies as unlucky. We were especially interested in exploring the superstitious, contagion-based nature of these concerns by demonstrating that people see mere contact (e.g., simply seeing or touching the entity or their associated objects) as unlucky (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Further, we tested whether blame also mediates people's intentions to avoid friendly enemies.

Participants and Design

Eighty undergraduates (53% men) were paid $3 to participate. The experiment had a 2 (relationship: friend, enemy) × 2 (gesture: friendly, hostile) between-subjects design.

Procedures and Materials

The procedure was similar to Experiment 1. To confirm that the effects observed in Experiment 1 were not simply due to the specific phrases used in that scenario (see Bottom et al., 2002, for a discussion), Experiment 3 involved Experiment 1's context, but we varied the friendly comments (e.g., "You look great, I'm sure you're going to win this one without even breaking a sweat") and the hostile comments (e.g., "Don't take it personally, but the other team is tough this year and it's going to be difficult for you to win your race"). Other than this change, the protocol was the same as Experiment 1. We again administered a manipulation check for gesture, inquiring as in the previous two experiments how likeable

participants found the gesture (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We also checked to see that participants varied in terms of their reported closeness to the imagined other (1 = *not at all close*, 7 = *very close*).

As in Experiment 1, participants first wrote about either a friend or hostile person in their life, then imagined themselves interacting with the person in the context of the athletic scenario, and finally, learned that they had twisted an ankle during the second lap and could not finish the race. At this point, participants answered the dependent measures.

Dependent Measures

Superstitious Blame
First, participants evaluated the same four items from Experiment 1's superstitious blame measure (α = .77; 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

In addition to these attributions, we also measured two specific consequences relevant to navigating and managing interactions with the other person.

Perceiving Future Unluckiness from Mere Contact
First, we measured whether participants viewed even minimal future physical contact with friendly enemies as transmitting bad luck (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Specifically, we created a 5-item scale that tapped how unlucky participants considered various levels of future interpersonal contact with the person in the scenario (α = .85, "You simply see the person right before a future event. You don't exchange words;" "Seeing their car in a parking lot before a future event;" "The person who approached you before the last race approaches you once again at a later time and makes similar comments to you;" "You physically bump into the other person right before a future race. You're both preoccupied with other things and it's an accident. No one's hurt;" "You forget to bring your own jersey to a future race and this person offers to let you wear one of their extra jerseys. [It's washed and completely clean]." 1 = *not unlucky at all*, 7 = *very unlucky*).

Avoidance
Secondly, participants rated five items that assessed their desire to avoid the person (e.g., avoid talking to this person before future races; avoid this person in general in the future; avoid even *seeing* this person before future races; avoid seeing this person before final exams). Additionally, they were asked to use the same response scale for the following question: "To what extent do you believe that you could avoid a similar outcome if you were to avoid contact with the person who approached you before the last race," α = .88.

A common factor analysis (with maximum likelihood estimation) performed on all items from each of the above three scales (blame, future unluckiness, and avoidance) supported the three-factor structure: All items loaded on the expected factors, and each factor had an eigenvalue > 1.00.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks
Both manipulations proved successful. Participants who thought about friends indeed felt closer to them than participants who thought about enemies (friends: $M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.30$; enemies: $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 76) = 6.40$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = .077$.

Moreover, participants perceived the friendly comment as more likeable than the hostile comment (friendly friend: $M = 6.20$, $SD = 0.95$; hostile friend: $M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.61$; friendly enemy: $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.31$; hostile enemy: $M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.87$), $F(1, 78) = 3.85$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Incidentally, results also revealed a main effect of relationship, $F(1, 78) = 20.54$, $p = .00$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$, and no interaction, $F(1, 78) = 1.13$, $p = .29$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$.

Superstitious Blame

We conducted 2 (relationship: friend, enemy) × 2 (gesture: friendly, hostile) between-subjects ANOVAs for each of the dependent variables (see Table 2, for means). Replicating Experiment 1, there was a main effect of relationship: people blamed enemies more than friends, $F(1, 76) = 9.11$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. This main effect was qualified by the hypothesized interaction, $F(1, 76) = 7.53$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Participants blamed friendly enemies more than each of the three other conditions, all $F(1, 38) > 4.82$, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .11$.

Unluckiness

Mirroring the results for superstitious blame, gesture, and relationship again interacted as predicted with respect to perceived unluckiness, $F(1, 75) = 4.43$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .055$. As predicted, people considered future contact with friendly enemies more unlucky than future contact in the each of the other three conditions, all $F(1, 38) > 7.46$, all $p < .02$, all $\eta_p^2 > .16$.

Avoidance

Gesture and relationship also interacted to predict avoidance, $F(1, 75) = 7.021$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .085$. Participants avoided friendly enemies more than each of the other three conditions, all $F(1, 38) > 4.63$, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .10$.

Mediation

Finally, we tested whether superstitious blame (which tapped people's causal attributions for the original event) mediated the interactive effects of gesture and relationship on both unluckiness (inferences about the person's broader negative influence) and avoidance (participants' behavioral intentions with respect to future encounters with the person) in two separate sets of regression analyses. We did so using the same methodology employed when testing mediation in Study 1. In predicting generalized unluckiness on the third step of the first of our two mediation analyses, we entered the main effects of our two independent variables, their interaction term, and blame (the results of Steps 1 and 2 are already reported above). Supporting our hypothesis that the interactive effects of gesture and relationship on unluckiness would flow through blame, the gesture × relationship interaction was no longer significant, $B = -0.36$, $p = .40$, but blame was significant $B = 0.49$, $p = .001$ (Sobel test = $p < .02$, see Figure 2).

We did the same when testing whether superstitious blame would likewise drive avoidance. On the third step of our second mediation analysis, the gesture x relationship interaction was once again reduced to nonsignificance, $B = -0.53$, $p = .18$, while blame was significant, $B = 0.51$, $p = .001$ (Sobel test = $p < .02$; see Figure 3). Blame thus mediated the interactive effect of gesture and relationship on both unluckiness and avoidance.

Table 2

Effects of Counterpart Gesture as a Function of Relationship Type (Experiment 3)

	Friend		Enemy	
	Friendly gesture	Hostile gesture	Friendly gesture	Hostile gesture
Superstitious blame	1.32 (0.69)	1.73 (0.88)	2.72 (1.29)	1.80 (1.34)
Unluckiness	1.59 (0.95)	1.62 (0.92)	2.59 (1.20)	1.68 (0.88)
Avoidance	1.44 (0.96)	2.05 (1.44)	3.38 (1.36)	2.44 (1.42)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Blame: Participants blamed friendly enemies more than each of the three other conditions, all F(1, 38) > 4.82, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .11$. Unluckiness: Participants considered future contact with friendly enemies more unlucky than future contact in the each of the other three conditions, all F(1, 38) > 7.46, all $p < .02$, all $\eta_p^2 > .16$. Avoidance: Participants avoided friendly enemies more than each of the other three conditions, all F(1, 38) > 4.63, all $p < .04$, all $\eta_p^2 > .10$.
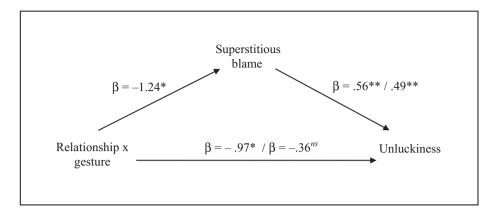
Figure 2. Blame as a mediator of generalized unluckiness (Experiment 3).
Note. Coefficients to the left of backslashes correspond to the direct effect. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates significantly different from zero, *p < .05 and **p < .01.

Replicating previous results, the above results show that participants who faced friendly enemies blamed them more, even though their enemies held little actual causal power. Additionally, the present study shows that participants considered friendly enemies to be especially potent agents whose mere gaze or touch brought bad luck, consistent with contagion and contamination beliefs (Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Blame mediated people's perceptions of future contact with friendly enemies as unlucky as well as their intentions to avoid such entities. Importantly, participants' aversion to these counterparts went beyond face-to-face communication and involved magical principles of contagion (e.g., mere contact with their associated objects such as simply seeing their car or wearing their jersey, Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994).

General Discussion

Intuitive and academic theories alike suggest that friendly gestures build rapport and smooth the cogs of social interaction. However, the results across three experiments suggest an asymmetry between people's intuitive beliefs about how best to manage hostile enemy relationships and the actual phenomenology of those who are recipients of friendliness. Specifically, this research highlights a boundary condition on the palliative effects of friendly gestures, showing that friendly gestures are difficult to interpret and therefore provoke superstitiously fueled backlash when initiated in the context of enemyship. Across three experiments, we found that enemies' friendly gestures led counterparts to blame them, to perceive future contact with them as unlucky, and to avoid them. While some prior research suggests that friendly gestures might not yield positive effects because they are perceived as cheap talk (Farrell & Gibbons, 1989) or manipulative (Main et al., 2007; Skarlicki et al., 2004), we introduce yet another reason why they can backfire: They unnerve their recipients and create confusion.[3]

Before considering the broader implications of these findings, it is worth noting that this work represents one of only a few attempts to date to look at enemyship in a controlled setting. With a few exceptions (e.g., Adams, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2010), prior work has been almost exclusively

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[3]Notably, one question that our the studies leave unanswered is whether the backlash we observe is restricted to an enemy's talk or might also occur in response to an enemy's substantive actions (e.g., penance, Bottom et al., 2002). In pilot testing, we found that people were equally disrupted by receiving a substantive offer from an enemy (help from a personal contact for their college admissions) as they were by mere words. This result suggests a "Trojan horse" effect, which could trigger the same psychological processes. However, further research might explore whether more nuanced types of offers (see Bottom et al., 2002) could overcome this backlash.
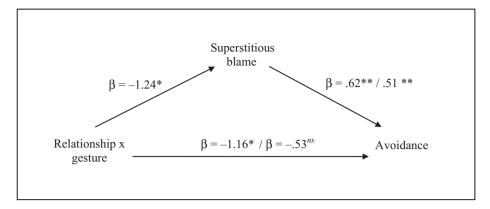
Figure 3. Blame as a mediator of avoidance (Experiment 3).
Note. Coefficients to the left of backslashes correspond to the direct effect. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates significantly different from zero, *p < .05 and **p < .01.

qualitative and correlational (e.g., Wiseman, 1989; and anthropological studies of the evil eye, Dundes, 1992; Foster, 1972). Our method, in contrast, offers one clear way that researchers might begin to examine such relationships more systematically. Although recall methods and scenarios obviously offer only an approximation of these processes, recall methods have repeatedly been shown to be effective in recreating prior psychological experiences anew in people's minds (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Given that it is difficult to activate the full experience of enemyship in the laboratory, these methods have been especially useful in studying dynamics among enemies (Menon et al., 2006; Nemeroff & Rozin, 1994). Moreover, hypothetical scenarios, for all their limitations, have proven quite useful in investigating issues related to person perception and social attribution. This is not to deny the usefulness of other potential methods (e.g., those that simulate interaction) moving forward. However, any limitations of the present studies should ultimately be considered in light of the fact that it is difficult to recreate or manipulate the experience of enemyship in the laboratory. The purpose here was simply to provide an initial test of some long theorized but empirically undocumented relationships in a controlled setting.

We now turn to a few implications of the present research, touching in particular on its implications for (a) the power and persistence of negative relationships in organizing people's perceptions of others, (b) people's intuitive theories of how luck flows, and (c) both the potential functions of hostile behavior and efficacy of friendly gestures in managing our most difficult relationships.

The Power and Persistence of Enemy Relationships

At first glance, our evidence that friendly enemies provoke more blame than hostile enemies seems inconsistent with past research on negativity bias. According to the negativity bias, negativity commands more attention (Folkes, 1988), and it is often more diagnostic than positive information (Skowronski & Carlson, 1989).

However, in showing how friendly gestures fail to overturn preexisting negative expectations, the present research in fact underscores the power and persistence of negativity. Consistent with work on reactive devaluation (Ross & Stillinger, 1991), preexisting negative expectations are a tainting lens that distorts the value of concessions and the meaning of apparently friendly overtures. As with Rozin and Royzman's (2001) vivid image of the enduring power of negativity, adding the most delicious accompaniments to a plate full of cockroaches would still not make it edible. Friendly enemies are akin to that plate of cockroaches on a bed of chocolate and whipped cream. This research thus augments the power of this

negativity effect by showing that, not only does friendliness fail to make enemies any more palatable, it also can make them worse. A little positive information does not redeem a negative enemy relationship but can heighten anxiety.

Social Transmission of Unluckiness

A second implication of the present work pertains to how people conceptualize the flow of luck. People do not simply see negativity residing in particular agents: They also see these agents as capable of transmitting that negativity to others and their outcomes. When people encounter an uncontrollable circumstance, they often do not see it as chaotic, random, and impersonal: They attribute it to human agency (Langer, 1975). Sometimes people see their own hand causing bad luck (e.g., "tempting fate," Risen & Gilovich, 2008, p. 293; or provoking voodoo on others, Pronin et al., 2006). Yet at other times, this article suggests that they see other people as the nefarious agents of deviousness who carry bad luck. This article thus highlights *the jinx* as an important target of attributions within social interactions. While the present experiments emphasized situations where enemies did not exert causal power over outcomes, when enemies directly compete and can actually affect each other's outcomes, it is plausible that the tendencies to blame them could be even more pronounced.

More generally, then, the present research offers laboratory-based support to anthropological research, which has long documented people's lay theories of the social transmission of unluckiness. It suggests that, beyond feeling paranoid that others actively plot against them (Kramer, 1998), people appear to worry that enemies can more indirectly and perhaps magically translate negative intentions into negative outcomes. And beyond viewing bad luck as arbitrarily flowing within the environment, people might see negative people as carrying and transmitting bad luck to others through their mere presence.

These observed patterns of blame and avoidance hint at a distinct way to conceptualize luck. Models of causal attribution typically divide causes into internal (about the person) versus external (outside the person, Heider, 1958; Weiner et al., 1971) categories and view luck as a definitively external force. However, rather than viewing luck as due to random, impersonal, and nonhuman factors, this evidence suggests that people sometimes put a human face on luck (see also Pronin et al., 2006; Risen & Gilovich, 2008). We differentiate between people's attributions to luck that is triggered by a human agent and impersonal luck that is due to other forces (e.g., contextual factors).

Hostility as a Natural, Predictable, and Functional Expression of Conflict

Finally, we began this research by noting that people intuitively assume that friendliness is corrective, whereas hostility is corrosive. However, in revealing the psychological processes that can derail the effectiveness of friendly overtures, these findings also support past work that describes the crucial functions played by expressions of hostility (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1950). The dangers of unexpressed hostility are recognized in Simmel's safety valve theory of conflict (Coser, 1956), which suggests that societies allow outlets for releasing hostility to prevent it from destroying the system. According to this theory, "conflict clears the air, that is, it eliminates the accumulation of blocked and balked hostile dispositions by allowing their free behavioral expression" (Coser, 1956, p. 39). Various anthropological studies show that societies tolerate controlled and limited acts of revenge to allow pent-up hostility to surface in controlled ways (e.g., offering a victim of a transgression the right to spear the offender a certain number of times to redress a wrongdoing, Coser, 1956). Even Joseph Goebbels supposedly permitted jokes about the Nazis, because he viewed humor as a harmless verbal outlet for people's hostilities (Coser, 1956). All of these examples assume that hostility cannot be simply eradicated and replaced with friendliness. They reveal how societies instead limit and control the way people express hostility, recognizing hostility as a natural, unsurprising, and predictable expression within difficult relationships.

Limits of Friendly Gestures in Trust Building

In closing, an open question that remains unanswered by the present research is how might one foster trust and reconciliation in the context of hostile relationships when the words, gestures, and behaviors that normally symbolize it can ironically breed mistrust and blame instead? Even if friendly gestures theoretically and anecdotally offer a way to circumvent negative spirals, our evidence suggests that they are no panacea, at least with respect to certain relationships. While past research suggests that trust decays catastrophically (a single dishonest gesture destroys it) but builds incrementally (Burt & Knez, 1996; Kim et al., 2003), the present work suggests that there may be certain barren relationships, such as enemyship, where the seeds of trust can never be planted.

That said, maintaining pure, unambiguous hostility is not only time- and energy-consuming, but is unlikely to improve enemy relationships and may even make hostilities grow deeper. In Douglas's words (1966, p. 163), "Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise." How then might one best cope with the discomforting uncertainty of such relationships? Given that both friendliness and hostility can exacerbate tensions, we suggest that one prudent option may be for people to simply acknowledge that enemy relations may never be truly transformed and hence seek to contain their disruptive potential by, for example, practicing simple avoidance. At the same time, people might look to friends and close others for reassurance, support, and allies. Likewise, our research implies that those who face friendly enemies should watch them vigilantly and avoid superstitious responses that yield little valid knowledge. While we may never feel interpersonally close to our enemies, by watching them closely, perhaps we can make sense of them accurately and eye the same prizes without superstitiously fearing their evil gaze upon us.

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