Bartering as a Blind Spot: A Call to Action from COVID-19

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Bartering is a common form of negotiation, and COVID-19 may have heightened its occurrence at least temporarily. Yet, bartering has received little attention in the negotiation literature. After defining bartering and describing its relevance and prevalence in the COVID-19 era, this article suggests that an understanding of bartering would significantly enhance our understanding of negotiation in general. Two broad research questions illustrate the importance of better understanding bartering, with important theoretical, pedagogical, and practical implications.

Keywords: negotiation, bartering, trading, COVID-19

Introduction

The negotiation literature examines how people with partially conflicting interests interact to allocate scarce resources (e.g., Brett 2014). A once predominant but still prominent way of allocating scarce resources is bartering—trading goods and services directly and without the use of money (e.g., Anderlini and Sabourian 1994). Given the overlap between bartering and negotiation, the dearth of negotiation research on bartering would be surprising even in the absence of COVID-19. By heightening the prevalence—or at least the prominence—of bartering, however, COVID-19 has highlighted the urgency of filling this gap.

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The current article suggests that, to remain relevant and to understand the timeless aspects of negotiation, negotiation scholars may wish to take up the topic of bartering. After defining bartering and describing its relevance to negotiation, we enumerate the reasons why the pandemic probably has made bartering more common—thereby shedding light on how people negotiate in the midst of such social upheaval. Since relevance and prevalence may not justify increased scientific attention on their own, however, we then describe some ways in which our understanding of negotiation may be limited without an understanding of bartering. Our analysis suggests that understanding bartering is important for theorizing about and studying negotiation in general, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bartering

When individuals barter, they trade the goods and services they have for the goods and services they need, directly and without the use of money or another medium of exchange (e.g., Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1994). In other words, individuals give "what [is] not wanted directly for that which [is] wanted" (Jevons 1885: 3). For such a trade to occur, individuals must achieve a "double coincidence of wants": They must find a trading partner who happens to have what they want and want what they have (Jevons 1885). Additionally, they must view a trade as equitable and sufficiently beneficial (Anderlini and Sabourian 1994).

Since these conditions are difficult to satisfy, economists have characterized bartering as primitive (e.g., Brough 1894; Humphrey 1985; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1994; Thomas 1994; Roberts 2011). In particular, they have portrayed bartering as a less efficient precursor to money, suggesting that barterers long ago began to use commonly bartered items like metals as money, which mitigated the "double coincidence" by allowing individuals to trade for metals they could use later. In this view, bartering was once the predominant form of economic exchange but has been supplanted by more efficient and sophisticated monetary economies (e.g., Brough 1894; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1994; Roberts 2011).

Although few would dispute the monetary foundation of many modern economies, this view overlooks the fact that bartering *trades* remain common. For example, individuals in emerging, isolated, inflationary, and recessionary economies commonly barter (e.g., Fisher and Harte 1985; Humphrey 1985; Marin and Schnitzer 2002). Even in stable economic settings, public- and private-sector organizations often include bartering terms in cross-border deals (e.g., Khoury 1984;

Hammond 1990). Individuals in developed economies also barter at work and at home. At work, for example, team members trade tasks, businesses exchange resources, and individuals involved in parts of the "sharing economy" (e.g., time-banking firms, bartering clubs, and fabrication labs) barter by vocation (Hoffman and Dalin 2010). At home, family members exchange chores, neighbors reciprocally watch each other's pets, and children trade toys. (Indeed, children probably learn to barter and "share" long before they understand the fundamentals of money.)

In sum, bartering was prevalent even before COVID-19. It was also relevant to negotiation, seen as a decision-making process by which people with partially conflicting interests interact to allocate scarce resources (Brett 2014). This is an apt description of bartering, which serves to reallocate resources from individuals who have them to individuals who consider them scarce (e.g., Jones 1976). Additionally, barterers (like those who use money) have partially conflicting interests. Each typically prefers to give less of what they have to obtain more of what they need (e.g., Anderlini and Sabourian 1994), although the magnitude of a person's short-term need may influence how hard they can bargain. Yet, barterers' interests (like the interests of those who use money) only *partially* conflict. By finding a trade that satisfies the double coincidence, both barterers typically walk away happier with the new resource allocation (Jevons 1885). For these reasons, bartering inherently resembles and involves negotiation (Dalli and Fortezza 2019). Put simply, bartering was a common form of negotiation even before COVID-19, making its general omission from the negotiation literature notable. The next section and first research question below discuss bartering (versus monetary transactions) as an activity; the second research question discusses bartering as a mindset that could be applied to other contexts, including monetary negotiations.

Bartering in the COVID-19 Era

Importantly, the onset of COVID-19 seems to have made bartering substantially more prevalent—or at least more prominent—in public discourse. Since the current situation may provide general insights into how people negotiate in times of social upheaval, bartering may merit additional research attention. Several statistics support the heightened prevalence and/or prominence of bartering. For example, public Facebook posts mentioning "barter" or "trade" increased 250 percent in March and April of 2020 (Tomky 2020), and person-to-person bartering of packaged goods is expected to increase 50 percent in 2020 (Guynn 2020). Similarly, a Google Trends analysis (e.g., Cho et al.

2013) indicates that the prevalence of U.S.-based Google searches for "barter" from January 1, 2020 to April 30, 2020 increased 24 percent in March–April 2020 (score = 68.82) versus January–February 2020 (score = 55.62), with the most searches on April 16, 2020 and no comparable pattern in 2019. In addition to indicating heightened attention to bartering online, this pattern suggests heightened offline attention (Stephens-Davidowitz 2013). Complementing these patterns is a variety of popular press reports that highlight the increased prevalence of bartering during COVID-19 and seek to explain the increase as a function of factors like supply chain challenges, monetary shortages, or fit with family and community contexts (e.g., Ax and Trotta 2020; Baldonado 2020; Brandus 2020; Conklin 2020; Guynn 2020; Hirsch 2020; Huber 2020; Kharif 2020; Leffler 2020; Lerman 2020; Suva 2020; Tomky 2020; *Yucatan Times* 2020). We now organize the possible reasons for the increase in bartering activity into five major categories and provide illustrative references for each.

Economic, Social, and Technological Conditions

As noted, bartering tends to increase during periods of economic recession or inflation (e.g., Fisher and Harte 1985; Humphrey 1985; Marin and Schnitzer 2002). Thus, broadly speaking, the economic slowdown and any eventual inflation attributable to COVID-19 may prompt bartering. Broad social and technological trends may also support bartering. For example, young people may be uniquely receptive to bartering since they already participate in aspects of the sharing economy that resemble bartering, such as couch-surfing (perhaps on the rise due to an increase in evictions), ride-sharing, and exchanging online content (Conklin 2020). Additionally, they make use of technologies that enable the more efficient swapping of resources and information such as Facebook, Nextdoor, and open-source software (Guynn 2020). Accordingly, they may be more comfortable than others trusting in goods and services provided by fellow individuals and certified by digital platforms (Botsman 2017).

Monetary Shortages

COVID-19 has left many firms without revenue and many individuals without jobs, limiting both firms' and individuals' access to the cash they would otherwise use to make purchases. In response, many firms and individuals have started bartering to procure essential supplies such as cleaning products or to conserve their cash for basic needs such as rent. They also have accessed new lines of credit via bartering clubs (Brandus 2020). A lack of cash and a shortage of necessary commodities has prompted individuals, in particular, to search for other sources of value such as marketable talents or valuable but superfluous items that they could trade to obtain needed goods (Ax and Trotta 2020). Even employed but quarantined individuals may have begun to engage in bartering to the extent that it allows them to transform anything they have started producing, such as sourdough (Leffler 2020), into something they need—or to access luxury items that would otherwise remain out of reach such as designer clothing (Huber 2020).

Fit with Family and Community

COVID-19 has led people to spend more time with their families and in their communities and less in commercial and other arms-length settings. Yet, families and community members still experience partially conflicting interests and need to allocate scarce resources. Anthropological work (e.g., Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1994) and articles in the popular press (e.g., Lerman 2020) suggest that bartering is more communal than monetary transactions and thus better suited to negotiations in family and community settings. Whereas offering to sell a neighbor sourdough might seem offensive, offering to trade it for toilet paper might not. Additionally, communities from the U.S. (Hirsch 2020), to Mexico (*Yucatan Times* 2020), to Fiji (Suva 2020) have started to recognize that bartering buffers them from macroeconomic pressures or at least binds them together and solves local problems. Finally, many community members may have begun to barter not so much for economic but for social reasons, as bartering can reinforce social connections, express kindness, or secure essential supplies for neighbors suffering hardship (Lerman 2020).

Challenges with Supply and Demand

COVID-19 has led many organizations and individuals to barter out of necessity, as supply chain disruptions (such as illnesses at meatpacking plants (Guynn 2020)) and panic buying have precluded them from purchasing certain goods from suppliers or stores (Lerman 2020). Shortages have ranged from the essential (such as PPE and food) to the desired (such as video games and garden supplies). Another result of panic buying, however, is that some people have found themselves oversupplied with essential items, allowing for mutually beneficial trades (Conklin 2020). Organizations are also dealing with an excess of certain goods while facing a shortage of others. They may, for example, need to move excess inventory that has accumulated due to shifting consumer demand. Governments may also have begun bartering in order to obtain pandemic-related supplies such as testing kits.

Fit with Social Distancing

Finally, many people may have started to barter in the COVID-19 era to reduce their risk of infection. For example, some prefer to minimize grocery store visits or consume food from known sources such as local producers (Kharif 2020). Likewise, with homeschooling and virtual learning now established and the trajectory of COVID-19 uncertain, many may need or wish to keep their kids at home in the future, swapping who teaches what (or when) with family members and neighbors, or even swapping teachers and tutors (with their consent). Finally, and related to several of the points above, many individuals in quarantine have simply sought out new hobbies, and bartering has offered an easy way of obtaining the necessary sourdough starter or tomato shoots (e.g., Lerman 2020).

Implications for Research

The above discussion suggests that bartering activities represent a common form of negotiation, and that COVID-19 may be increasing the prevalence of such activities. Although these considerations might not justify increased scholarly attention on their own, the above discussion also suggests that a better understanding of bartering activities could challenge and extend the scope of our understanding about negotiation processes in general. If so, then bartering will merit further research attention even if and when the pandemic subsides. We now highlight two broad and illustrative research questions, answers to which could change how we think about, teach, and practice negotiation.

Question #1: Do barterers negotiate differently?

The idea that bartering is more communal than other forms of negotiation suggests that people may approach bartering activities in a fundamentally different way than other negotiations. Though grounded in anthropology (e.g., Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1994), this idea would benefit from careful examination by negotiation scholars. Compelling evidence of a fundamentally different approach to bartering than to other negotiations might not only extend our knowledge of bartering; it could also broaden our understanding of negotiation more generally.

For example, decades of research have shown that negotiators display fixed-pie bias and competitive behavior (e.g., Bazerman, Magliozzi, and Neale 1985; Thompson and Hastie 1990; Bazerman and Neale 1992; De Dreu, Koole, and Steinel 2000). Many of these findings, however, arise from studies of negotiations involving underlying monetary transactions (e.g., Thompson and Hastie 1990; De Dreu, Koole, and Steinel 2000; De Dreu 2003). Are all negotiations characterized by fixed-pie bias and competitive behavior, or only negotiations where the parties treat the "deal" as a quantifiable monetary transaction? Based on psychological studies showing that exposure to money can make people self-focused (e.g., Vohs 2015), unethical (Gino and Pierce 2009), and market-oriented

(Caruso et al. 2013), as well as the anthropological proposition that "barter…is radically different from the monetary mentality" (Humphrey 1985: 60), we suspect that negotiations presumed to be transactional and monetary might be particularly conducive to such biases—while negotiations revolving around a bartering trade might not.

Relatedly, whereas monetary transactions often begin with a seller announcing the availability of a product at a set price, many bartering transactions (at least in the COVID-19 era) may start with a "buyer" expressing an acute need (e.g., for hand sanitizer). In particular, the shortage of essential commodities, coupled with many individuals' reluctance or inability to search the market, means that many contemporary bartering buyers may search for the most accessible seller (e.g., a neighbor), who may then ask if the buyer is willing to trade for something. As long as the buyer responds with a viable commodity (e.g., a freshly baked apple pie, thereby becoming a "seller" too), the transaction can proceed. The initial seller may even completely set aside or defer the swap due to a relationship between the two parties, past transactions that the current transaction balances, or a future transaction that both expect to occur. In this instance, neither party may question or attempt to "value" the economics of the transaction or evaluate its fairness using a monetary metric. As long as both trust that mutual needs are (or will be) met, the deal may be done. This analysis, though tentative, is credible based on existing accounts of bartering—and very different than common views of negotiation developed in the context of monetary transactions. We welcome empirical research into these and related issues—particularly how barterers identify prospective partners and trades and whether/how they assess the equitability of trades without a monetary metric.

Collectively, these considerations suggest that people might approach negotiations over bartering trades more creatively and cooperatively (i.e., integratively), understanding that value creation behaviors are necessary to overcome the double coincidence of wants (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011). Given the challenges of finding a mutually beneficial trade, for example, might barterers be willing to extend more trust, disclose more about their true needs, and discuss multiple issues—particularly at the beginning of a conversation and perhaps instead of taking rigid positions? In that case, does the monetary "value" of the transaction ever enter into the conversation? Are the parties more (or less) satisfied with the transaction than they would have been if each measured it in monetary terms? Is this true regardless of the "value" of the objects in question (for example, if an item of significant monetary value is traded for a desperately needed item of low monetary value)? Does bartering strengthen the interpersonal relationship of the barterers, or, more broadly, the social capital in a marketplace? A more communal, interest-based set of beliefs and behaviors like these paints a very different picture of negotiation, which could enhance not just our understanding of bartering negotiations, but of negotiation processes in general. Perhaps bartering can even offer a tangible, real-world glimpse into the "interest-based" bargaining originally envisioned in *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011).

Question #2: Can monetary negotiations be reframed as bartering negotiations?

The previous research question implies that people approach bartering negotiations differently than monetary negotiations. Consistent with the idea inherent in the double coincidence of wants that bartering entails the satisfaction of mutual needs, we also wonder whether negotiators could learn to transfer the bartering mentality to non-bartering negotiations. In other words, a distinct research question is whether negotiators who are involved in a deal containing monetary terms can and would benefit from psychologically reframing the deal as a bartering trade. During the planning process, for example, could a negotiator proactively define everything valuable they are offering and everything valuable they need (valued not in economic terms but in terms of "need strength"), then do the same for their counterpart through perspective-taking (e.g., Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001)? Buyers would typically define money as one of several "goods to be offered" in a trade; sellers would typically define money as one of several "needs to be satisfied." During the negotiation, in turn, could a bartering-focused negotiator guide the discussion toward a holistic consideration of both parties' offerings and needs (including money), as well as the mutually beneficial, multi-issue trades they highlight?

By taking such an approach, we suspect that negotiators might channel some of the more creative and cooperative impulses of barterers themselves. For example, by explicitly treating money as one of several bartered goods, negotiators might be more inclined to see the whole deal in multi-issue terms and use productive strategies like multi-issue offers or multiple equivalent simultaneous offers (Leonardelli et al. 2019). These and related research questions abound. For example, might urgent or time-sensitive needs naturally prompt a bartering approach? Would a negotiator using the bartering approach still benefit from making the first offer (Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001), or might the counterpart take advantage of need-related disclosures at the outset by responding with an aggressive monetary price? Given this clash between bartering and monetary frames, which frame predominates and how could the bartering-focused negotiator redirect the discussion to mutual need satisfaction—particularly if they have already received an aggressive first offer from the other side?

These are interesting research questions. Thus far, we can predict that a bartering frame may represent a particularly productive metaphor for theorizing about and studying integrative negotiations. In particular, we suspect that scholars might see and study common concepts like tradeoffs and logrolling in a different light if they thought of negotiations as bartering trades. In sum, by taking up the topic of bartering, the negotiation literature may arrive at a better understanding of negotiation processes in general, thereby helping real negotiators inch closer to "win-win" solutions. Whether we study bartering in the lab, in close-knit communities, in the full-blown bartering subcultures identified by anthropologists, or by comparing national cultures that barter more or less, examining bartering seems worth our time, especially in—but also after—the COVID-19 era.

Implications for Pedagogy and Practice

The relevance, prevalence, and research implications associated with bartering also suggest that negotiation instructors may wish to focus more extensively on this topic. Although some instructors include a bartering simulation in their courses, bartering rarely represents a primary topic. The current article suggests, at a minimum, that more instructors may wish to emphasize the importance of bartering as a form of negotiation and address how bartering negotiations differ from monetary negotiations, perhaps with the support of a bartering simulation like One Paperclip (available from the Northwestern University Dispute Resolution Research Center at https://new.negotiationexercises.com/) or The Bartering Market (available at https://www.negotiationandteamresources.com/). Alternatively, students might be asked to "collect data" from friends, neighbors, and classmates on actual bartering exchanges and how the barterers conceptualize them. Such exercises may allow negotiation instructors to suggest that bartering involves a more need-based discussion from the outset, that it requires a holistic understanding of both parties' needs and offerings, and that the double coincidence may necessitate multi-issue offers. Tentatively but intriguingly, the current article also suggests that instructors may wish to treat bartering not just as a special topic but as a metaphor for negotiation—specifically, as a way of understanding integrative negotiation. Adopting this mindset may take effort since monetary metaphors for negotiation are baked into many aspects of negotiation courses, from profit schedules, to first offers, to reservation prices. Nevertheless, re-conceptualizing negotiations as bartering trades and providing negotiation students with practical tips on how to do that (e.g., through planning documents and opening statements) could truly help to “unfix the fixed pie” (De Dreu, Koole, and Steinel 2000).

Finally, the current article holds implications for practicing negotiators. Empirical support for the first research question above, for example, would suggest that negotiators may achieve better outcomes by seeking to barter more often. Given the ubiquity of monetary negotiations, however, empirical support for the second research question might offer the more generalizable insight that negotiators can learn to think of money as one of several bartered goods. Interestingly, the logic above suggests that doing so might even allow them to walk away with more money.

Conclusion

Bartering is a common form of negotiation. Indeed, bartering’s prominence in early societies, early childhood, close-knit families and communities, and times of crisis and upheaval identifies it as a potentially more basic form of negotiation than the monetary deals we so often study. By unpacking bartering empirically, negotiation scholars may better understand not just a common form of negotiation in the COVID-19 era, but negotiation fundamentals in general—both during and after the pandemic. With these possibilities in mind, we hope this call to action prompts negotiation scholars to better understand barter.

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