

# Victim Entitlement to Behave Selfishly

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Three experiments demonstrated that feeling wronged leads to a sense of entitlement and to selfish behavior. In Experiment 1, participants instructed to recall a time when their lives were unfair were more likely to refuse to help the experimenter with a supplementary task than were participants who recalled a time when they were bored. In Experiment 2, the same manipulation increased intentions to engage in a number of selfish behaviors, and this effect was mediated by self-reported entitlement to obtain positive (and avoid negative) outcomes. In Experiment 3, participants who lost at a computer game for an unfair reason (a glitch in the program) requested a more selfish money allocation for a future task than did participants who lost the game for a fair reason, and this effect was again mediated by entitlement.

*Keywords:* entitlement, selfish behavior, victim, unfair, morality

Does feeling like a victim make one behave more or less selfishly? Imagine that an individual feels wronged by an everyday event: An executive sees a colleague receive a promotion that she feels she deserved instead; an academic finds out that he is once more assigned to a tedious committee, whereas his colleagues seem miraculously spared; an author is about to send off a manuscript when a computer glitch erases weeks' worth of work, and she is penalized for missing her deadline. As these individuals contemplate their unfortunate lot, how motivated would they be to help others? One could imagine that individuals who have received the short end of the stick would be especially motivated to help others, to redress other wrongs, or to make themselves feel better with the warm glow that comes from doing good. In this article, we make the opposite prediction: We propose instead that feeling wronged gives people a sense of entitlement to obtain positive outcomes—and to avoid negative ones—that frees them from the usual requirements of social life. Whereas individuals typically contend with a strong norm of benevolence that encourages helping and curbs egoism, we propose that wronged individuals, because of their heightened sense of entitlement, feel relieved from this communal obligation and therefore exhibit more selfish intentions and behavior.

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## Feeling Wronged and Its Consequences

Individuals feel wronged when they experience outcomes that depart from what they believe they deserve, such as being treated with respect (Miller, 2001), being treated in the same way as similar others (Major, 1994), receiving an output that is proportional to their input (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), being offered justifications for decisions that affect them (Bies & Shapiro, 1987), or even just having a happy childhood (Lamb, 1996). Different individuals feel deserving of different things (Lerner, 1991; Major, 1994), so wronging will take various forms; but regardless of its specific source, the experience of being wronged is unpleasant and often elicits negative affect, such as anger (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987; Walster et al., 1978).

We propose that this perception of being wronged increases individuals' sense of entitlement to avoid further suffering and to obtain positive outcomes for themselves.<sup>1</sup> Wronged individuals feel that they have already done their fair share of suffering—as if there were a maximum amount of victimhood that a person can reasonably be expected to endure—and consequently, they feel entitled to spare themselves some of life's inconveniences, such as being attentive to the needs of others. We predict that this should lead individuals to behave selfishly by, for example, refusing to help, endorsing self-serving intentions, or claiming a bigger piece of the pie when sharing resources with others.

## Past Research on the Links Between Victimhood, Entitlement, and Selfish Behavior

### Victimhood and Entitlement

Clinical psychologists have long suggested a link between unpleasant life experiences and a sense of entitlement. Freud (1916) observed that people who thought they had suffered poor childhoods felt entitled not to endure any more of life's "disagreeable

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, we use the term *entitlement* as shorthand for this particular type of entitlement, unless otherwise noted.

necessities” (p. 320). More recently, Bishop and Lane (2000) suggested that people who grew up without a father often show an increased sense of entitlement to special treatment (see also Bishop & Lane, 2002; Shabad, 1993). Some evidence suggests that this phenomenon is moderated by how the misfortune is construed: In a study of individuals with disabilities, those who least accepted their disability—those who presumably felt most wronged by it—felt most entitled to use alcohol and drugs (Li & Moore, 2001). This body of work suggests that at a chronic level, individuals who feel that they have suffered in life possess more of a sense of entitlement than do others who perceive their life narrative as more clement.

### Entitlement and Selfish Behavior

Does feeling entitled lead people to behave more selfishly? Convergent correlational evidence using various measures of entitlement suggests that this is the case. In one study, individuals who scored higher on the Psychological Entitlement Scale took more candy from a bowl that was to be shared with children, said they deserved higher salaries than other workers, acted more greedily in a commons dilemma game, and treated their romantic partners in a more selfish manner (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). In another study, higher scores on the Exploitativeness/Entitlement dimension of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981) predicted less social responsibility (P. J. Watson & Morris, 1991). Finally, in a third study, parents who scored higher on the Basic Adlerian Scales for Interpersonal Success—Adult Form (a measurement of preference for special treatment; Wheeler, Kern, & Curlette, 1993) were more likely to drop out of a parenting class, even though material learned in it could benefit their children (Snow, Kern, & Curlette, 2001). These three studies suggest that a chronic disposition toward entitlement, as measured by these various scales, is related to selfish behavior.

### Victimhood and Selfish Behavior

As we have briefly reviewed, a sense of victimhood may lead to entitlement, and entitlement, in turn, is associated with selfish behavior. Bringing these two findings together, our central claim is that feeling wronged can lead to more selfish behavior through an increase in entitlement. Although, to our knowledge, this hypothesis has never been tested directly, some existing research provides suggestive support. For example, individuals who are especially sensitive to being the victims of unfair treatment (as measured by Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada’s 1995 scale) were more likely to behave selfishly in a dictator game (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004) and reported being more likely to commit minor moral transgressions (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005). In another study, women who were victims of sexual abuse reported being less likely to think of and help others compared with non-victims (McMullin, Wirth, & White, 2007). In a similar vein, Bishop and Lane (2000) described a clinical case study of a boy who, as a consequence of being abandoned by his father, engaged in “acts of entitlement” (p. 115), such as stealing and trying to get his therapist in trouble for purportedly failing to help him.

Perhaps most suggestive is the experimental work exploring how individuals strive to maintain “equity with the world” (Austin

& Walster, 1975; see also Moschetti & Kues, 1978) or equity in their relationships overall: If they are under-benefited in one relationship (e.g., underpaid), they may try to over-benefit themselves in another (e.g., overpay themselves). In support of this equity-with-the-world hypothesis, Austin and Walster (1975) found that participants who were underpaid by an individual in a first task were later more likely to underpay a different individual (and overpay themselves) in another task, compared with participants who were equitably paid in the first task. Although limited to the domain of monetary allocations, equity-with-the-world research suggests that suffering unfairness may indeed lead to selfish behavior in the same domain.

In these studies, after making the ungenerous allocation, participants reported that anger affected their decision, leading Austin and Walster (1975) and Moschetti and Kues (1978) to propose anger as a mediator. However, empirical support for the role of anger in decreasing prosociality has been scant. In a meta-analysis of 85 studies on negative affect and helping, anger (as well as other negative emotions, such as frustration and sadness) was not related to helpfulness when controlling for other helping-related variables (Carlson & Miller, 1987). Therefore, although people may feel anger and other negative emotions after being wronged, we believe that entitlement, and not anger, is the main cause of subsequent selfish behavior. We return to this point later.

Our own preliminary research (Zitek, Jordan, Leach, & Monin, 2007) has shown that college students who had been the victims of a common type of campus crime reported being more likely to commit the same crime against other students in the future. Past and present bike-light owners read scenarios asking them to imagine that they did not currently have a bike light. Participants were then asked how likely they would be to steal someone else’s light (rather than buying one) and how morally permissible such an action would be. As predicted, participants whose own light had been stolen in real life reported being more likely to take someone else’s bike light, and they viewed this behavior as more morally acceptable. Like the equity-with-the-world results, these data suggest that feeling wronged can license people to shortchange others in the same domain.

### The Present Research: Entitlement as a Dynamic, Domain-General Mindset

We have reviewed research supporting the hypothesis that feeling wronged could lead to selfish behavior as a result of psychological entitlement. Going beyond this past work, we propose that entitlement can be a dynamic mindset, and not just a chronic disposition, and that being wronged in one domain can license selfish behavior in a completely different domain.

### Entitlement as Mindset

Although most past research has focused on entitlement as a stable individual difference, we propose that an individual can also vary in the extent to which he or she feels entitled in the course of any given day, depending on what past experiences are salient in the individual’s mind when the opportunity for selfish behavior presents itself. This approach is consistent with recent social-psychological models demonstrating that factors traditionally thought of as structural and heavily determined by long-term

factors (e.g., power) can be productively reconceptualized as mindsets (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; see also Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995). The model presented here posits that entitlement is a mindset that can be activated whenever one is wronged or even, in the absence of recent victimhood, by merely reminding individuals of a time when they were wronged.

### Entitlement Across Domains

In addition to conceiving of entitlement as a mindset, we suggest that its effects should not be limited to a single domain. Whereas earlier empirical work reviewed above (Austin & Walster, 1975; Moschetti & Kues, 1978; Zitek et al., 2007) focused on how individuals feel licensed to act selfishly (take more money, steal a bike light) after feeling that they have been the victim of someone else's selfishness in the same domain, we propose that entitlement is more far-reaching, so that feeling wronged in one domain should lead to increased selfish behavior even in a completely different domain. This departure from the domain specificity of previous research is important because it avoids the alternative interpretation of social modeling that could explain some previous findings (e.g., after having one's bike light stolen, a person may believe that bike light theft is a more common and thus acceptable behavior).

### Overview of Experiments

Three experiments tested the hypothesis that feeling wronged makes individuals experience a sense of entitlement to avoid further suffering and to obtain positive outcomes, leading them to behave selfishly by refusing to help, expressing more selfish intentions, or claiming a bigger piece of the pie. In Experiment 1, we tested whether having participants recall a time when their lives were unfair would decrease the likelihood that they would help someone in the present. We also examined whether being reminded of this unfair life event would increase their sense of entitlement. In Experiment 2, we tested whether having participants recall a time when their lives were unfair would make them more readily express self-serving intentions and whether this relationship between feeling wronged and selfishness would be mediated by entitlement. Finally, in Experiment 3, instead of having participants remember an unfair life event, we designed a novel online paradigm in which participants missed out on a prize either fairly (poor performance) or unfairly (program malfunction) and then had the opportunity to selfishly claim more of a shared reward. Again, we tested whether this predicted effect would be mediated by entitlement.

#### Experiment 1: Refusing to Help

We designed Experiment 1 to provide initial evidence that feeling wronged causes people to feel entitled and behave selfishly. First, we wanted to determine whether entitlement is more than just a chronic disposition and examine whether feeling wronged can lead to an entitlement mindset. Second, we wanted to determine whether people who experience injustice in one domain might act selfishly in another domain. To achieve these goals, we asked participants to recall a time when their lives were unfair (vs. a time when they were bored, in the control condition), and then we asked them to respond to items measuring their sense of

entitlement. Then, at the end of the study, participants were asked whether they wanted to help the experimenter with an additional, optional task, allowing us to look at real selfish behavior in a different domain from that of the wronging. We predicted that participants' recollections of a time when they were wronged would make them feel entitled, leading them to be less helpful.

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred four Stanford University (Palo Alto, CA) undergraduates (56 women and 48 men) participated in a laboratory study in exchange for partial course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants were directed to a computer in a laboratory room and began reading the instructions on the screen. In the first part of the study, participants were asked to describe events in their lives. They were told that they would write a brief essay on something that they do frequently, and then they would write a brief essay on something that happened at a particular time. They were told that they could spend 5–10 min writing each essay. The first essay asked them to describe their morning routine in detail; this was used to disguise the true purpose of the study. The second essay's topic varied by condition. In the wronging condition, participants wrote an essay in response to the following prompt: "Please describe in detail a time when your life seemed unfair. Perhaps you felt wronged or slighted by someone, for example." In the control condition, the prompt read: "Please describe in detail a time in which you felt bored." Thus, participants in both conditions were instructed to describe something negative that happened in their lives, but we expected the boredom essays to have nothing to do with experiencing unfairness.

After completing unrelated filler tasks for about 5 min, participants indicated their agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = *strong disagreement*, 7 = *strong agreement*) with three entitlement items and nine personality-related filler items (e.g., "I have a good memory") presented in random order. The entitlement items were (a) "I deserve more things in my life," (b) "things should go my way," and (c) "I am entitled not to suffer too much." The first two items were taken from the Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004), and the third item was created using language modeled after Freud's (1916) when he described a phenomenon similar to the one studied here. The mean of the three entitlement items was used as the measure of entitlement ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

The helping request was the last measure administered. Instructions on the computer screen told participants that they had completed the study but that they had the option of helping the experimenter with an extra task described as "pilot testing for another project." They were told that this was totally voluntary and not part of the original experiment. On the next screen, participants clicked "yes" or "no" to indicate whether they wanted to help with this extra task. If participants selected "yes," they went on to answer a brief questionnaire about athletes. If they selected "no," this questionnaire was skipped. Then participants were asked to guess the hypothesis of the study and to report whether they were suspicious of anything. Finally, they were debriefed.

### Results

**Preliminary analyses.** An examination of the free-response essays showed that participants in the wronging condition wrote

about a wide variety of situations, such as being accused of bad things they did not do, not getting something good they thought they deserved, and getting treated poorly by close others. We removed three wronging-condition participants who did not accurately answer the question (e.g., wrote about a time when other people were wronged) or who wrote about a time when their lives were “unfair” in a positive sense (e.g., getting something good that they did not deserve). We also removed two control-condition participants who wrote about being wronged in their boredom essays. One other participant was removed because she skipped the essay part of the experiment.

No participant guessed the full hypothesis, but four of the remaining participants expressed suspicion that the request for help with the extra task was what the researchers were actually interested in. We excluded these four participants from all subsequent analyses for clarity of interpretation, but the results reported below were the same regardless of whether we included ( $N = 98$ ) or excluded ( $N = 94$ ) these suspicious participants.

**Selfish behavior.** As predicted, participants who recalled a time when their lives were unfair were significantly less likely (60%) to help the experimenter by completing an extra task than were participants who recalled a time when they were bored (81%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 94) = 5.09, p = .02$ .

**Entitlement.** Also as predicted, participants in the wronging condition reported a higher mean entitlement score ( $M = 4.34, SD = 1.23$ ) than did control participants ( $M = 3.85, SD = 1.19$ ),  $t(92) = 1.96, p = .05$ .

**Mediation by entitlement.** When both condition and entitlement were entered into a logistic regression model predicting a refusal to volunteer for the extra task, as hypothesized, entitlement was significant ( $b = .47, SE b = .21$ ), Wald  $\chi^2 = 4.93, p = .03$ , but condition was no longer significant ( $b = .88, SE b = .49$ ), Wald  $\chi^2 = 3.17, p = .07$ . Using the bootstrapping method (with 10,000 iterations) recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we tested the significance of the indirect effect of condition on helping behavior through entitlement. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect ranged from  $-.0103$  to  $.6284$ , which just includes zero, so it was not significant at the .05 level. However, the 90% confidence interval did not include zero (.0201, .5505), indicating that entitlement was a marginal mediator in this experiment.

## Discussion

After being reminded of a time when life was unfair to them, individuals were less likely to agree to help an experimenter. Furthermore, we demonstrated that being reminded of an unfair event led participants to report a heightened sense of entitlement (i.e., an entitlement mindset). Our first test of the mediation model (that being wronged leads to selfish behavior because of increased entitlement) yielded a marginal result, providing partial support for the mediating role of entitlement.

These results help to rule out social modeling as the sole explanation for our effect. In contrast to other studies demonstrating that being wronged in one domain leads to selfish behavior in the same domain (e.g., Austin & Walster, 1975; Moschetti & Kues, 1978; Zitek et al., 2007), Experiment 1 demonstrated that this effect occurs across domains: Participants recalled being wronged in one way and behaved selfishly in a completely different way.

Even though no participants recalled an unfair life event in which another person refused to help them when they asked for assistance, these participants still showed a decreased propensity to help the experimenter when asked to do so.

## Experiment 2: Expressing Selfish Intentions

Experiment 1 demonstrated our basic effect: Individuals made to feel wronged behaved selfishly by not helping the experimenter. Experiment 1’s results also provided partial support for the hypothesis that entitlement mediates the relationship between feeling wronged and behaving selfishly. In Experiment 2, to increase statistical power and provide a better test of mediation, we improved our measurement of entitlement by refining the items used, we specified to participants that they should focus on their current state of entitlement, and we averaged several ratings of selfish intentions made on a 7-point scale, rather than relying on a single dichotomous measure of selfish behavior, as we did in Experiment 1. We asked participants how likely they would be to engage in a wide range of behaviors in the future, from failing to recycle to helping with a service project. The set of behaviors was diverse, but they all required a trade-off between inconveniencing oneself and burdening the community. We used the same manipulation of wronging as in Experiment 1: asking participants to remember a time when life was unfair to them. Finally, we included measures of anger, frustration, and general negative affect in Experiment 2 to test these emotions as alternative potential mediators of our effect.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred eleven Stanford undergraduates (71 women and 40 men) participated in exchange for partial course credit.

**Procedure.** Participants were seated at a computer in a laboratory room and were given the essay-writing instructions used in Experiment 1. After writing their essays about unfair or boring times in their lives, participants indicated how frustrated, wronged, and bored they felt by the event that they just described on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*). Participants then reported on a 5-point scale the extent to which, at the present moment, they felt the 10 positive and 10 negative emotions that compose the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; D. Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Because the PANAS does not include the words *angry* and *frustrated*—emotions of particular interest here were added.

Next, participants rated their agreement with nine personality-related filler items (also used in Experiment 1) and four entitlement items on a 7-point scale (1 = *strong disagreement*, 7 = *strong agreement*). Going beyond the measurement of entitlement in Experiment 1, only the item “I am entitled not to suffer too much” was retained and three new entitlement items designed to tap more directly into the idea of entitlement to do things that benefit the self (and avoid things that are unpleasant) were otherwise substituted. “I deserve more things in my life” was changed to “I deserve good things in my life” to clarify what that item meant. The final two items included were “I deserve an extra break now and then” and “I should not have to inconvenience myself for others.” Participants were also asked to respond to these statements

on the basis of how they were feeling at that moment in an attempt to measure state (as opposed to trait) entitlement. The mean of the four entitlement items was used as the measure of entitlement ( $\alpha = .60$ ).

After this, participants' selfish intentions were measured (see the Appendix). Participants were asked how likely they would be to engage in 11 selfish (e.g., answering a cell phone in a library) or unselfish (reverse-scored; e.g., volunteering) behaviors on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*definitely will not/would not*) to 7 (*definitely will/would*). The mean of these items ( $\alpha = .67$ ) was taken as a measure of selfish behavioral intentions. Participants also responded to seven filler items (also in the Appendix) that did not gauge self-serving tendencies. Finally, participants reported demographic information, were asked to guess our hypothesis, and were debriefed.

In addition to the explicit self-report measures of how likely people would be to engage in various selfish behaviors, a more subtle measure of selfish behavior was included. Throughout the study, there was a small bin containing 11 pieces of candy on the corner of the participant's desk labeled *candy for research participants*. There were two empty wrappers next to the bin, designed to look as if they had been left behind by a previous participant. The number of pieces of (apparently shared) candy participants ate was surreptitiously recorded, and any other selfish behaviors (e.g., leaving the trash from the candy they ate on the desk, taking the pen used to sign the consent form) were noted.

## Results

**Preliminary analyses.** As expected, participants who wrote an essay about a time when their lives were unfair felt significantly more wronged ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than did participants who wrote about a time when they were bored ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ),  $t(109) = 9.52$ ,  $p < .001$ . As in the previous study, we excluded participants who wrote essays incongruous with their condition. Because in this study we directly asked participants how wronged they felt by the event described, we were able to use participants' own determinations of whether they were wronged instead of our own. We excluded two participants who did not feel wronged by the experience they described in the unfair essay (i.e., people who gave a rating of 1 labeled *not at all* to the question asking how wronged they felt by the event they described) and four participants who felt quite wronged by the experience they described in the bored essay (i.e., people who gave a rating of 5 or greater to that question—in other words, anywhere above the midpoint of this 7-point scale), leaving 105 valid participants.

No participant guessed the full hypothesis, and unlike in Experiment 1, where the help-request dependent variable sometimes raised suspicion, there was no major deception to raise participants' suspicions in this study. Therefore, we did not remove any other participants.

**Selfish behavioral intentions.** Consistent with the decrement in helping (or increase in selfishness) observed in Experiment 1, participants in Experiment 2 who wrote about a time when their lives were unfair were significantly more likely to report that they would engage in the selfish behaviors ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) than were participants who wrote about a time when they were bored ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .73$ ),  $t(103) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .03$ .

**Entitlement.** As predicted, participants in the wronging condition also reported more feelings of entitlement ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) than did participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $t(103) = 2.12$ ,  $p = .04$ .

**Mediation by entitlement.** When both condition and entitlement were entered into a linear regression model predicting selfish behavioral intentions, condition was no longer significant ( $b = .28$ ,  $SE b = .16$ ),  $t(102) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .09$ , whereas entitlement was a significant predictor of selfish intentions ( $b = .23$ ,  $SE b = .09$ ),  $t(102) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .01$ . The Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrapping technique (with 10,000 iterations) produced a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect that ranged from .0036 to .2175, which does not include zero. Thus, entitlement significantly mediated the relationship between condition and selfish behavioral intentions.

Anger, frustration, and the mean of the negative affect words from the PANAS were not mediators for the effect. Although people who wrote about a time when their lives were unfair did report being more angry after writing the essay ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than did people who wrote about a time when they were bored ( $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = .77$ ),  $t(103) = 3.64$ ,  $p < .001$ , the effect of anger was not significant in a mediation model predicting selfish intentions from condition and anger ( $b = .04$ ,  $SE b = .08$ ),  $t(102) = 0.48$ ,  $p = .63$ . Similarly, people who wrote about a time when their lives were unfair were more frustrated ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than were people who wrote about a time when they were bored ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(103) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .03$ , but the effect of frustration was not significant in a mediation model predicting selfish intentions from condition and frustration ( $b = .09$ ,  $SE b = .07$ ),  $t(102) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .21$ . Finally, there was not a significant difference in the mean of the negative affect words on the PANAS between participants in the wronging condition ( $M = 1.70$ ,  $SD = .54$ ) and control condition ( $M = 1.55$ ,  $SD = .53$ ),  $t(103) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ .

**Behavioral results.** The number of candies eaten was about the same for people in the wronging condition ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) and control condition ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ),  $t(94) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .67$ . However, 11 participants engaged in selfish behaviors other than eating the candies: Five left their trash on the table, five took the experimenter's pen, and one knocked down a small sign on the desk and did not fix it. Nine of the 55 participants in the wronging condition engaged in these selfish behaviors, whereas only 2 of the 50 participants in the control condition did. This difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 105) = 4.27$ ,  $p = .04$ .

## Discussion

Consistent with Experiment 1, participants who recalled a time when their lives were unfair reported being significantly more likely to engage in selfish behaviors in future situations and less likely to inconvenience themselves than did participants who recalled a time when they were bored. Furthermore, a larger proportion of participants in the wronging condition than in the control condition were coded as engaging in actual selfish behaviors (e.g., leaving trash, taking off with the experimenter's pen). Although we certainly would not want to make too much of this last result, given how few participants were coded as engaging in selfish behaviors, we mention it because of its suggestive nature.

Experiment 2 also supports more conclusively than Experiment 1 our hypothesis that entitlement mediates the effect. Feeling wronged causes individuals to feel entitled, and as a result, they behave selfishly. These data also suggest one way in which the entitlement disposition could develop. If someone feels wronged over and over again, the constant activation of the entitlement mindset could lead to a more lasting sense of entitlement, which could explain the relationship between unfair negative life events and chronic entitlement observed by Freud and other clinical psychologists in their case studies (e.g., Bishop & Lane, 2000, 2002; Freud, 1916; Shabad, 1993).

These data also constitute evidence against a plausible alternative explanation for our effect. Not surprising, people who wrote about a time when they were wronged felt more angry after describing the event than did people who wrote about a time when they were bored. This is consistent with other research showing that people get angry after experiencing an unfair event (e.g., Austin & Walster, 1975; Mikula et al., 1998). Austin and Walster (1975) and Moschetti and Kues (1978) proposed that anger mediates the relationship between being a victim of an inequitable money allocation and later allocating money selfishly, but we did not find anger to be the mediator of the relationship between recalling an unfair event and increased selfish behavioral intentions. Frustration also did not mediate the relationship of interest, as might be predicted from the frustration–aggression hypothesis (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). We instead found support for our hypothesis that entitlement is the mediator.

### Experiment 3: Claiming a Bigger Piece of the Pie

In Experiments 1 and 2, participants who recalled an unfair life experience showed higher entitlement and more selfish behavior than control participants who recalled a boring experience. Although we believe that this effect was due specifically to participants' sense of unfairness in the experimental condition, the unfair and boring experiences that participants recalled may have differed in other meaningful ways. To isolate the role of perceived unfairness, we arranged Experiment 3 so that the same bad event (losing at an online game) befell all participants, with only the implied fairness of the loss differing between conditions. In the experimental "unfair loss" condition, participants were led to believe that they lost (and missed out on a monetary prize) because of a glitch in the game that was no fault of their own, whereas in the control "fair loss" condition, participants were led to believe that they lost the game because their performance was below threshold.

The design of Experiment 3 differed from Experiments 1 and 2 in two further critical ways, with the goal of providing additional support for our central hypothesis that being wronged leads to a sense of entitlement, which, in turn, leads to selfish behavior. First, to increase the generalizability of our findings, we arranged for participants in Experiment 3 to actually be wronged in the present during the study, rather than asking them to look back at a time when life was unfair. Second, to increase the reliability of our measurement of entitlement and better relate our findings to past literature, we used the full Psychological Entitlement Scale (Campbell et al., 2004) in Experiment 3.

## Method

**Participants.** One hundred forty-four Internet users from a United States-wide subject pool (86 women and 57 men, 1 unreported,  $M$  age = 33.5 years) participated in this online study in exchange for a \$5 gift card.

**Procedure.** Participants were told that they were taking part in a study on perceptual speed and personality. They were informed that they would see 10 matrices of random letters. For each matrix, they would have 15 s to find and click on a particular letter. If they found the specified letter in all 10 matrices within the allotted time, they would earn an extra \$3.<sup>2</sup> Participants then saw eight matrices of varying sizes (from  $5 \times 7$  to  $8 \times 19$ ) with target letters that were easy to find in 15 s. Each time they correctly clicked on a target letter, the matrix disappeared, and they were told that they correctly found the letter. When they got to the ninth letter matrix, what they saw varied by condition. In the *unfair loss* condition, participants were presented with a fairly small matrix ( $6 \times 10$ ), and they were able to find the specified letter as easily as in previous matrices. However, when they clicked on it, nothing happened, as if there were a bug in the program preventing them from submitting their answer, and participants could only helplessly watch the timer count down to zero. In the *fair loss* condition, on the other hand, participants were presented with a very large matrix ( $9 \times 24$ ) that did not actually contain the letter they were asked to find. The matrix was designed to be so large that participants could not thoroughly scan all of the letters within 15 s, thus encouraging them to think that they simply were unable to find the letter in that particular matrix. For both groups, the time ran out and they moved on to the tenth matrix, which was solvable. Participants then were taken to the last screen and were given a report showing which matrices they solved and which matrices they failed to solve. They were told that because they did not solve all 10 matrices, they were not able to earn the extra \$3.

Participants then moved on to the survey part of the study. Participants first filled out, using a 1 (*strong disagreement*) to 7 (*strong agreement*) scale, items from the Psychological Entitlement Scale mixed in with filler items including the fillers from Experiments 1 and 2, as well as the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). The mean of the nine Psychological Entitlement Scale items was used as the measure of entitlement ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Participants then reported on a 5-point scale the extent to which, at the present moment, they felt the five positive and five negative emotions that compose the short form of the PANAS (Mackinnon et al., 1999). *Angry* and *frustrated* were again added.

After this, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following three statements about the game on a 7-point scale (1 = *strong disagreement*, 7 = *strong agreement*): "The letter search game was fun"; "The letter search game was hard"; and "The letter search game was a fair assessment of my perceptual speed." Then participants got to the dependent variable, which

<sup>2</sup> On the basis of debriefing comments from some of the early participants, we clarified the initial directions to the letter search game halfway through the study. Analyses revealed that this minor change did not affect our dependent variables, nor did it interact with the manipulation, so we do not discuss it further.

measured their preference for a selfish money allocation. They were told the following:

We are thinking of running a future study in which two participants compete against each other on the letter search task. We would divide \$6 of reward money between these two participants. Please help us determine the best way to split the money. Imagine that you played the game against someone else and you found the letter faster than your opponent 7 out of 10 times. How should the experimenter allocate the money?

Participants were given options to allocate money in whole dollar amounts from “\$6 to me, \$0 to my opponent” to “\$0 to me, \$6 to my opponent.” We wanted to see if the entitlement mindset would make participants more likely to act selfishly, given a legitimate rationale to do so. We intentionally did not provide participants with an easy answer. They were told that they were faster than their opponent 70% of the time, so legitimate claims could therefore be made for equal allocations (\$3/\$3 [50% to the self]) as well as for the two payoffs that came closest to reflecting the participant’s superior performance (\$4/\$2 [67% to the self] and \$5/\$1 [83% to the self])—and maybe even for a “winner-take-all” allocation reflecting the participant’s overall besting of his or her opponent (\$6/\$0 [100% to the self]). Given these multiple legitimate claims, it was predicted that the entitlement mindset would make participants more likely to opportunistically act on the more self-serving ones. It was predicted that entitled individuals would selfishly take advantage of the situation when they could.

Finally, participants reported demographic information, commented on the letter search game, and went through a funnel debriefing. Participants received the extra \$3 at the end of the study if they correctly solved the nine solvable matrices.

## Results

**Preliminary analyses.** One participant was excluded from the analyses because computer problems prevented her from clicking on any of the letters. We excluded four other participants who did not seem to focus exclusively on the study, a necessary precaution with online experiments: three took much longer than everyone else to complete the study (>3.5 standard deviations above the mean), and one gave all of the money to his opponent in the hypothetical allocation task (whereas all other participants took at least \$3 for themselves), leaving 139 participants.

No participant guessed the full mediation hypothesis. We excluded six participants who were somewhat suspicious of the letter game (i.e., who thought that we may have intentionally had it break or that the letter may not have been present) and who also thought that their response to losing at the game was what we were interested in. However, the results reported below are the same whether we remove the suspicious participants or leave them in.

Of the remaining 133 participants, 10 did not find the letter in all nine solvable matrices. We did not exclude these 10 participants, because in the fair loss condition, they should have still felt that the game was hard and that they lost fairly, and in the unfair loss condition, participants’ comments about the game suggested that they reinterpreted their inability to find the letter in the other matrices as being unfair in some way as well.

**Perceptions of the game.** As predicted, participants in the fair loss condition thought the game was a fairer assessment of their

perceptual speed ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) than did participants in the unfair loss condition ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ),  $t(131) = 3.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, participants in the fair loss condition thought the game was harder ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) than did participants in the unfair loss condition ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ),  $t(131) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .001$ . Finally, participants in the fair loss condition thought the game was about as fun ( $M = 5.97$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) as did participants in the unfair loss condition ( $M = 5.85$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $t(130) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .60$ .

**Selfish money allocation.** Participants in the unfair loss condition said that they should get significantly more money in a future task ( $M = \$3.93$ ,  $SD = \$0.94$ ) than did participants in the fair loss condition ( $M = \$3.64$ ,  $SD = \$0.72$ ),  $t(131) = 1.99$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, as predicted, participants in the unfair loss condition claimed more of the shared money for themselves. Examining the results in another way, two choices (\$6 or \$5) involved taking more than they deserved on the basis of equity (i.e., \$4.20), and the other two choices involved taking just under (\$4) or less (\$3) than the amount they deserved. In the fair loss condition, only 8% (5/66) took advantage of the situation and claimed more money than they deserved on the basis of equity, whereas this number more than doubled to 19% (13/67) in the unfair loss condition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 133) = 3.97$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Entitlement.** As predicted, participants in the unfair loss condition reported significantly higher entitlement ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than did participants in the fair loss condition ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ),  $t(131) = 2.87$ ,  $p < .01$ . Note that in contrast to previous studies, Experiment 3 showed this difference with the full, well-validated Psychological Entitlement Scale.

**Mediation by entitlement.** When we entered both condition and entitlement into a linear regression model predicting money allocated to the self, condition was no longer significant ( $b = .21$ ,  $SE b = .15$ ),  $t(130) = 1.41$ ,  $p = .16$ , whereas entitlement was a significant predictor of the money allocation ( $b = .18$ ,  $SE b = .08$ ),  $t(130) = 2.24$ ,  $p = .03$ . The Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrapping technique (with 10,000 iterations) produced a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect that ranged from .0037 to .1784, which does not include zero. Thus, entitlement significantly mediated the relationship between condition and a selfish money allocation.

As in Experiment 2, anger, frustration, and the mean of the negative affect words from the short-form PANAS were not mediators for the effect. Although people in the unfair loss condition reported being more angry after losing at the game ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) than did people in the fair loss condition ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = .85$ ),  $t(131) = 3.28$ ,  $p = .001$ , the effect of anger was not significant in a mediation model predicting selfish behavior from both condition and anger ( $b = .10$ ,  $SE b = .07$ ),  $t(130) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ . The participants in the unfair loss condition were about equally as frustrated ( $M = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ) as were the participants in the fair loss condition ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(131) = 1.26$ ,  $p = .21$ ; they also did not differ significantly in overall negative affect ( $M = 1.66$ ,  $SD = 0.76$  vs.  $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $t(131) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .17$ .

## Discussion

In Experiment 3, losing at a game for an unfair reason (it appeared broken), compared with losing at a game for a fair reason

(the game was hard), led people to feel higher entitlement, which led, in turn, to more selfish money allocations. Thus, we found support for the same mediation model demonstrated marginally in Experiment 1 and significantly in Experiment 2 using a different manipulation of wronging (losing a game unfairly, rather than reflecting on a past unfair experience), a more reliable measure of entitlement (the full Psychological Entitlement Scale), and a new dependent variable that was unambiguously self-serving. Moreover, in Experiment 3, the control and experimental conditions involved the same negative outcome (losing the same amount of money in the same game), ruling out an alternative interpretation, according to which the results of Experiments 1 and 2 were due to the events recalled in the wronging condition being simply more negative than those in the bored condition.

The results of this experiment further demonstrate that feeling wronged does not lead to selfish behavior solely because of increased negative affect. Paralleling the results of Experiment 2, people who lost unfairly felt angrier than did people who lost for a fair reason, but anger did not mediate the effect on money allocations. Furthermore, frustration and overall negative affect did not mediate the effect; rather, entitlement was again the mediator.

### General Discussion

In three experiments, we found support for our hypothesis that people feel entitled to behave in selfish ways after experiencing or being reminded of experiencing an unfair event. In Experiment 1, participants who were reminded of a time when their lives were unfair were less likely to help the experimenter, and this effect was marginally mediated by entitlement. In Experiment 2, participants who were reminded of a time when their lives were unfair reported being more likely to engage in various selfish behaviors, and their sense of entitlement significantly mediated the effect. Experiment 2 also showed that feelings of anger, frustration, or other negative affect after recalling the unfair event did not mediate the effect. Finally, in Experiment 3, participants who lost their opportunity to win extra payment in an online game because of an apparent computer glitch subsequently felt more entitled and, as a result, claimed a larger piece of the pie, saying that they would allocate more money to themselves (and less to an opponent) in a future task.

Taken together, these experiments support a model in which feeling wronged leads to a sense of entitlement, which, in turn, produces selfish behavior or intentions. Distinguishing our work from past research, we found that one's sense of entitlement can change from moment to moment—increasing when one is wronged or remembers being wronged—and that it can yield selfish behavior or intentions, even in domains unrelated to the original wronging. Therefore, entitlement can be thought of as a dynamic mindset, susceptible to situational cues, with effects on behavior that can cross domain boundaries. We also captured the effect using a range of outcomes, such as actually refusing to help an experimenter (Experiment 1), expressing more selfish behavioral intentions (Experiment 2), and claiming a larger piece of the pie (Experiment 3).

### Alternative Explanations

**Social modeling.** Social modeling could explain past research showing a relationship between being the victim of selfish behavior and acting selfishly in the same domain (e.g., Austin & Wal-

ster, 1975; Moschetti & Kues, 1978; Zitek et al., 2007); perhaps people who have been the victims of uneven monetary distributions, for example, simply imitate such unfair behavior when it is their own turn to distribute money or believe that such behavior is more normative. We found, however, that when people pondered times when life was unfair to them—recalling slights in a wide variety of domains—they were subsequently less likely to help an experimenter with an additional task, even though none of them had recalled a time when they asked for help but did not receive it. One might argue that thinking about a past wrong increases people's perceptions of domain-general selfishness in the social world and that it is this more general norm that is imitated in subsequent behavior, but this cannot account for the results of Experiment 3, in which victims of an impersonal computer bug (involving no selfishness) reported a greater sense of entitlement and claimed more money for themselves in a later hypothetical task.

**Equity with the world.** Some theorists have proposed that people strive to maintain equity across their relationships overall, such that if they are wronged in one relationship, they may compensate by wronging selfishly in another relationship (Austin & Walster, 1975; Moschetti & Kues, 1978). Again, however, our results in Experiment 3 are inconsistent with this explanation: Participants who suffered at the hands of an impersonal computer bug could not sensibly be interpreted as restoring equity in their social relationships when they later allocated money selfishly. Rather, we believe, as supported by the mediation by entitlement, that these participants felt they had simply suffered enough and were entitled not to make sacrifices to help other people.

**Frustration–aggression.** The frustration–aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al., 1939) suggests that when people are frustrated, they will aggress against other individuals, including people who were not the source of the frustration (Holmes, 1972; Konecni & Doob, 1972; see also Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000, for a meta-analysis). One might argue that being wronged frustrates people and that this consequently leads them to act aggressively in their own self-interest. However, in our Experiments 2 and 3, self-reported frustration and anger did not mediate the relationships between wronging and selfish behavior (whereas self-reported state entitlement did). Moreover, Berkowitz (1989) interpreted the writings of Dollard and colleagues as referring to hostile aggression (the primary objective of which is to do harm), but our dependent variables did not involve overt, hostile aggression against other people. It seems that our participants, rather than aiming to aggress against others, simply felt that they deserved a break from their normal communal duties.

**Social exclusion.** Research has shown that social exclusion can lead to decreased prosocial behavior (see Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006, for a review). For example, participants who were told that they would end up alone in life (based on a bogus personality test they completed) donated less money to a charitable cause and were less willing to help an experimenter (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Some of the unfair life events that participants thought about in our Experiments 1 and 2 may have involved social exclusion or other forms of low or declining “relational evaluation” (see Leary, 2001, 2005; Leary et al., 2006), such as being treated badly by a friend. But in Experiment 3, we used a type of wronging that could not be construed as social exclusion or a threat to relationships with other people—losing at a privately played online game because of a



glitch in the program—ruling out the possibility that social exclusion could explain our results.

Moreover, social exclusion research differs from the model we tested in at least two other important ways. First, we were specifically interested in cases of victimhood in which a person feels that he or she has been wronged unfairly, whereas when people are socially excluded or rejected in some way, the exclusion can seem justified to the person suffering it—in fact, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Twenge, (2005, Experiment 6) proposed that social exclusion may lead people to think poorly of themselves for having deserved the rejection they suffered (see also Leary et al., 2006; Williams, 2001). Second, we have demonstrated that being wronged unfairly makes people feel a sense of entitlement that, in turn, causes them to behave more selfishly, whereas social exclusion is thought to inhibit prosocial behavior through a reduction in emotional sensitivity in general and in empathic concern for others in particular (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Twenge et al., 2007). Thus, although there may be some conceptual overlap between our work and that on social exclusion, the process driving our phenomenon (i.e., suffering unfairly leading to entitlement) is distinct from that addressed by social exclusion researchers, and reactions to social exclusion cannot explain the results of Experiment 3, in which participants felt wronged by a computer error.

### Entitlement to Hurt Others

In the experiments presented in this article, we found that people who have been wronged feel entitled to behave in selfish ways, such as refusing to help others (Experiment 1) and claiming a bigger piece of the pie (Experiment 3). Our dependent variables did not look at a participant's likelihood of hurting someone else, but some research suggests that being severely wronged can lead people to commit major crimes and seriously hurt others. For example, there is a large body of research showing a "victim-to-victimizer" cycle of sexual child abuse (e.g., Burton, 2003; Burton, Miller, & Shill, 2002; Garland & Dougher, 1990; Glasser et al., 2001; Hilton & Mezey, 1996). Moreover, having suffered childhood sexual abuse is associated with a slightly higher likelihood of committing not only sexual abuse but also general criminal infractions, such as theft, property destruction, and nonsexual assault as adults (Burgess, Hartman, & McCormack, 1987). There is also a relationship between being a victim and being an offender of other hurtful behaviors, such as bullying (Smith & Ecob, 2007). This research is strictly correlational in nature, and there are surely multiple causes that influence these relationships, but the fact that these links have been found so many times is noteworthy in the context of the present experiments. Our finding that people who are wronged feel entitled to behave selfishly might shed some light on these real-world victim-to-perpetrator relationships, particularly because offenders of various crimes often have an exaggerated sense of entitlement (e.g., Beech, Fisher, & Ward, 2005; Beech, Ward, & Fisher, 2006; Foster, 2000; Lamb, 1996; Marziano, Ward, Beech, & Pattison, 2006; Ward & Keenan, 1999). This phenomenon might also operate at a group level. Recent research suggests that groups who are reminded of their victimization are less likely to feel guilty about harm done to other groups; for example, after being reminded of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans reported feeling less guilt about the suffering of Iraqis because of the American invasion of their country (Wohl

& Branscombe, 2008). Future research should delve more deeply into the possibility that individual and collective victims might feel entitled to harm others when it benefits them.

This research, taken together with our findings, suggests that injustice and poor treatment can have a rippling effect that goes far beyond the initial incident: Not only does wronging lead to unhappiness on the part of the victim, but it can potentially hurt a third party if the victim ends up behaving selfishly as a result of the wronging. To the extent that the people affected by the first victim's selfish behavior in turn feel wronged, one can imagine a domino effect of increased selfish behavior (or decreased prosocial motivation) ad infinitum.

### Reactions to Undeserved Good Fortune

On a more positive note, we hope that the reverse phenomenon could also occur, where the perception that one has been the recipient of unfair treatment that actually benefits oneself could lead to greater prosocial motivation. This pattern is commonly described by public figures who express that they have been fortunate and wish to "give back" (implying, of course, that they have received) and is consistent with some experimental evidence. For example, Austin and Walster (1975) also showed that participants who received more money than was equitable often took less than was equitable for themselves when later allocating money between themselves and a new partner. In another study, participants who were helped with a broken computer (sparing them from having to go through a tedious task a second time) by someone they thought was a fellow participant spent more time helping either their benefactor or a stranger by filling out a questionnaire (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). Haidt (2003) has suggested that remembering exemplary moral behavior inspires people to emulate the good deed; besides this modeling effect, we wonder, in line with the work presented here, if being the recipient of blessings that are "unfair" in a *positive* sense (i.e., unearned, or beyond what is expected) might give rise to prosocial motivation. Perhaps, just as being reminded of an unfairly negative event activates the entitlement mindset, being reminded of an unfairly positive event activates an obligation or responsibility mindset—and thus leads to more helping (see Schwartz, 1973).

### Conclusions

Our research has shown that people who have just been wronged or reminded of a time when they were wronged feel entitled to positive outcomes, leading them to behave selfishly. They no longer feel obligated to suffer for others and therefore pass up opportunities to be helpful. By contributing to our general understanding of the determinants of selfishness, this research points toward one possible impediment to people's engagement in charitable behavior. Future research in this vein thus has the potential to identify novel methods to encourage altruism in people who feel wronged, thereby stemming the cycle of suffering-to-selfishness suggested by our research.

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## Appendix

### Behavioral Intentions Questionnaire Used in Experiment 2

#### Selfish and Unselfish Behavior Items

1. Will you donate blood at future blood drives?
2. If there were a water shortage on campus due to a drought and you were asked not to shower for 48 hours, would you comply?
3. After you have graduated, will you donate to Stanford?
4. If you finished a drink and there were no recycling bins in sight, would you throw your bottle in a trash can?
5. Will you attend an Alternative Spring Break trip (where you do a service project and learn to be an advocate of social change) sometime in the future while you are at Stanford?
6. Will you participate in some kind of volunteer work while at Stanford?
7. Suppose your friend was really struggling in a class you had together. You have helped this friend several times before. If this friend asked you to help when you would rather watch a movie at that time, would you help?
8. Suppose that while studying at the library you received a call on your cell phone from a friend you had not spoken to recently. Would you answer your phone if there were other people around?
9. Suppose that you have a bike. If you were running late for class, would you ride your bike on the walkways where bikes are prohibited if it got you there faster?

10. [The main campus eatery] is now offering compostable containers for your food. You can purchase them as a substitute for the styrofoam containers. They cost less than 50 cents. Will you purchase one in the future?
11. Would you purchase a compostable container if they raised the price to \$1?

#### Filler Items

1. Will you try to form a study group in a future class?
2. Will you try to make friends by eating at other dining halls sometime while you are at Stanford?
3. Will you go on a ski trip?
4. If you were given tickets to a Stanford basketball game that would take place the night before you had a test, would you attend?
5. Will you work as a research assistant for a grad student or faculty member?
6. Will you attend a frat party in the future?
7. If your friends were hanging out in your room, would you ask them to leave when you needed to study?

The 18 items were presented in random order (with the two items about compostable food bins together).

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