Bartering as a blind spot: A call to action from COVID-19

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Abstract

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, the current paper suggests that an understanding of bartering would significantly enhance our understanding of negotiation in general, even if and when the pandemic subsides. Two, broad research questions illustrate the importance of better understanding bartering, with important theoretical, pedagogical, and practical implications.

Key words: Bartering, negotiation, trading, COVID-19, research

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The negotiation literature studies 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 & 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.

The current paper suggests that, to remain relevant and to understand the timeless aspects of negotiation, the negotiation literature may wish to take up the topic of bartering. After defining bartering and describing its relevance to negotiation, we enumerate why the pandemic probably has and will make 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. Ultimately, this discussion suggests that understanding bartering will prove important for theorizing about and studying negotiation in general, not just negotiation during the 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 & 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 & Sabourian, 1994).

Since these conditions are difficult to satisfy, economists have characterized bartering as primitive (e.g., Brough, 1894; Humphrey, 1985; Humphrey & Hugh-Jones, 1994; Roberts, 2011; Thomas, 1994). 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 & Hugh-Jones, 1994; Roberts, 2011).

Although few would dispute the monetary foundation of many modern economies, this view omits the fact that bartering *trades* remain common. For example, individuals in emerging, isolated, inflationary, and recessionary economies commonly barter (e.g., Fisher & Harte, 1985; Humphrey, 1985; Marin & Schnitzer, 2002). Even in stable economic settings, public and private sector organizations often include bartering terms in cross-border deals (e.g., Hammond, 1990; Khoury, 1984). 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, fabrication labs) barter by vocation (Hoffman & 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). Bartering fits well with this definition, as it 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 & Sabourian, 1994; although the magnitude of a person's short-term need may influence how readily they can do that). Yet, their 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 & 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 (vs. 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 Activity 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 this 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% in March and April of 2020 (Tomky, 2020), and person-to-person bartering of packaged goods is expected to increase 50% 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 1/1/20 to 4/30/20 increased 24% in March-April 2020 (score = 68.82) vs. January-February 2020 (score = 55.62), with the most searches on 4/16/20 and no comparable pattern in 2019. In addition to heightened online attention to bartering, this pattern would suggest heightened offline attention (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2013). Complementing these patterns is a variety of popular press reports, which highlight and seek to explain the increased prevalence of bartering during COVID-19 as a function of factors like supply chain challenges, monetary shortages, or fit with family and community contexts (e.g., Ax & Trotta, 2020; Baldonado, 2020; Brandus, 2020; Conklin, 2020; The Guardian, 2020; Guynn, 2020; Hirsch, 2020; Huber, 2020; Kharif, 2020; Leffler, 2020; Lerman, 2020; Tomky, 2020; Yucatan Times, 2020). We now organize the reasons bartering activity may have increased in prevalence 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 & Harte, 1985; Humphrey, 1985; Marin & 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 since they already participate in aspects of the sharing economy that resemble bartering (e.g., couch-surfing[1], ride-sharing, exchanging online content; Conklin, 2020) and make use of technologies that enable the more efficient swapping of resources and information (e.g., Facebook, Nextdoor, 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).

[1] Which may be increasingly necessitated by evictions

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 (e.g., cleaning products), conserve the cash they have for essential purposes (e.g., rent), or access new lines of credit (e.g., via a bartering club; Brandus, 2020). A lack of cash and a shortage of necessary commodities has prompted individuals, in particular, to search for other sources of value (e.g., marketable talents or valuable but superfluous items) that they could trade to obtain such commodities (Ax & Trotta, 2020). Even employed but quarantined individuals may have begun to engage in bartering to the extent it allows them to transform any other items they started producing (e.g., sourdough; Leffler, 2020) into something they need, or to access luxury items that would otherwise remain out of reach (e.g., 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 businesses and other arms-length settings. Yet, families and community members still experience partially conflicting interests and need to allocate scarce resources. Both the anthropological work (e.g., Humphrey & Hugh-Jones, 1994) and the popular press articles (e.g., Lerman, 2020) above suggest that bartering is more communal 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 supplies for those without cash (Lerman, 2020).

Challenges with Supply and Demand

COVID-19 has apparently led many organizations and individuals to barter out of necessity, as supply chain disruptions mean they have not been able to find what they need from suppliers or stores (Lerman, 2020). Shortages have ranged from the essential (e.g., PPE, food) to the desired (e.g., video games, garden supplies) and originated from a combination of panic buying and supply chain disruptions (e.g., illnesses at meatpacking plants; Guynn, 2020). 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 and governments, too, may have to started to barter because of supply issues (e.g., organizations to move excess inventory and governments to obtain sufficient 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 have expressed a preference to minimize grocery store visits or consume food from known sources such as locally grown produce (Kharif, 2020). Likewise, with homeschooling now established and the trajectory of COVID-19 uncertain, some may 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. 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 (for example; 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 above-noted 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 & Hugh-Jones, 1994), this idea would benefit from careful examination by negotiation scholars. Compelling support for a fundamentally different approach to bartering negotiations might not only extend our knowledge about bartering; it could also broaden our general understanding of negotiation.

For example, decades of research have shown that negotiators display fixed pie bias and competitive behavior (e.g., Bazerman, Magliozzi, & Neale, 1985; Bazerman & Neale, 1992; De Dreu, Koole, & Steinel, 2000; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). Many of these findings, however, come from studies of negotiations revolving around monetary transactions (e.g., De Dreu, 2003; De Dreu et al., 2000; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). Are fixed pie bias and competitive behavior a feature of all negotiations, or only of 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 & Pierce, 2009), and market-oriented (Caruso, Vohs, Baxter, & Waytz, 2013) as well as the anthropological idea 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 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, mean 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 approach, 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 & 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 (e.g., 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 may even offer a tangible, real-world glimpse into the "interest-based" bargaining originally envisioned in *Getting to Yes* (Fisher et al., 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 & 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, Gu, McRuer, Medvec, & Galinsky, 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 & 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 the COVID-19 era but even after.

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 paper 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 (https://new.negotiationexercises.com/) or The Bartering Market (https://www.negotiationandteamresources.com/). Alternatively, students might be asked to "collect data" from friends, neighbors and classmates on actual barters and how they are conceptualized by the barterers. 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 paper 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 et al., 2000).

Finally, the current paper 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, the negotiation literature stands to better understand not just a common form of negotiation in the COVID-19 era, but negotiation fundamentals in general and after the pandemic subsides. With these possibilities in mind, we hope this call to action prompts the literature to better understand barter.

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