



The advantages of being unpredictable: How emotional inconsistency extracts concessions in negotiation [☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Emotional inconsistency and unpredictability make recipients comply in negotiation.
- ▶ Emotional inconsistency induces recipients to concede more than express anger.
- ▶ This effect occurs because recipients feel less control.
- ▶ Emotional inconsistency was manipulated by alternating between emotions.
- ▶ The results speak to research on emotions and to theories on unpredictability.

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ABSTRACT

Integrating recent work on emotional communication with social science theories on unpredictability, we investigated whether communicating emotional inconsistency and unpredictability would affect recipients' concession-making in negotiation. We hypothesized that emotional inconsistency and unpredictability would increase recipients' concessions by making recipients feel less control over the outcome. In Experiment 1, dyads negotiated face-to-face after one negotiator within each dyad expressed either anger or emotional inconsistency by alternating between anger and happiness. In Experiment 2, participants received angry and/or happy messages from a simulated negotiation opponent. In Experiment 3, participants read a scenario about a negotiator who expressed either anger or emotional inconsistency by alternating between anger and disappointment. In all three experiments, emotional inconsistency induced recipients to make greater concessions compared to expressing a consistent emotion. Further, in all three experiments, the effect of emotional inconsistency was mediated by recipients' feeling less control. These findings qualify previous research on anger in negotiation and demonstrate the importance of feelings of control for negotiation outcomes.

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Introduction

In dealing with foreign powers, Queen Elizabeth I exhibited “baffling” displays of emotional inconsistency. During her negotiations, she showed “endless short-term shifts that every historian of Elizabethan foreign policy has charted... Yet, it is worth noticing how often these negotiations succeeded in achieving the desired objectives” (Loades, 2006, pp. 307–308). According to this historical account, communicating emotional inconsistency and unpredictability helped Elizabeth I secure greater concessions from opponents in conflict and negotiation. Interestingly, other leaders practiced this strategy of communicating emotional inconsistency, believing this would make recipients concede in conflict

and negotiation, among them Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and French President Charles de Gaulle (Gaddis, 2005). Negotiators, these leaders believed, “must project an aura of mystery” through their emotional reactions to obtain compliance (Gaddis, 2005, p. 298). Appearing inconsistent and unpredictable has even become part of contemporary U.S. military strategy: a report from the U.S. Strategic Command (1995, p. 7) suggests that it is deemed as essential to deterrence. Indeed, both conflict theorists (Schelling, 1960) and negotiation practitioners (Koren & Goodman, 1992) have proposed that appearing inconsistent and unpredictable yields compliance in competitive interactions. Yet, despite the abundant anecdotal evidence and theorizing, there is little empirical evidence for the relationship between communicating emotional inconsistency and others' compliance.

Across three experiments, we investigated whether emotional inconsistency and unpredictability would affect recipients' concessions in negotiation. We also investigated a mechanism behind this effect, testing whether the recipients' feeling less control over the outcome

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would mediate their making concessions to emotionally inconsistent negotiators.

Emotional communication in negotiation

Negotiation often involves the communication of emotions (Elfenbein, 2007; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010). These communicated emotions typically bear important social consequences (Frijda, 1986; Morris & Keltner, 2000) as they offer crucial information about intentions and what behavior to expect from the expresser (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Indeed, people are quite adept at noticing the discrete emotions communicated by others in social interactions (Frijda, 1986). Thus, negotiators draw inferences from a counterpart's emotional communication as they try to decipher and predict the counterpart's behavior (Van Kleef et al., 2010); for example, an angry expresser is perceived as tough (Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006). Supporting the theory that emotions have a social function in conflict and negotiation (Morris & Keltner, 2000), recent research has documented that people can strategically communicate emotions such as anger to elicit concessions from recipients in negotiation (Kopelman, Rosette, & Thompson, 2006; Lelieveld, Van Dijk, Van Beest, Steinel, & Van Kleef, 2011; Lelieveld, Van Dijk, Van Beest, & Van Kleef, 2012; Overbeck, Neale, & Govan, 2010; Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Steinel, Van Kleef, & Harinck, 2008; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004; Van Kleef et al., 2010; Van Kleef & Côté, 2007).

Emotional inconsistency

To date negotiation research has predominantly explored emotions that were communicated consistently throughout the negotiation. One general finding that has emerged is that anger communication is a highly effective strategy to extract concessions from recipients (Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Van Kleef et al., 2004, 2010).

One exception to the focus of negotiation research on communicating consistent emotions is a qualitative study suggesting that contrasting positive and negative emotions elicit compliance (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991). However, the field setting of that study makes it difficult to separate emotions from moves, such as the offers being made. Also, emotions were broadly defined (e.g., “positive emotions” included approval, respect, and empathy). Although not in the domain of emotions, experimental work also suggests that contrasting positive (cooperative) and negative (competitive) stances across encounters, as in the good-cop/bad-cop strategy, elicit compliance (Hilty & Carnevale, 1993; see Harford & Solomon, 1967). However, in this earlier work, arguments were not independent of offers, making it difficult to infer whether the contrast effect was due to the offers being made or the arguments being expressed. And, the arguments expressed involved little or no emotion. The current research further departs from this prior work by exploring inconsistency rather than contrast. By “inconsistency”, we mean *oscillating or fluctuating* between different psychological states over the course of a single encounter (Barrett, 2009; Frijda, 1986). Accordingly, we emphasize a mechanism of a different nature – feelings of control – that departs from perceptual contrast where prior behavior serves as a reference point against which later behavior is judged (Hilty & Carnevale, 1993).

Emotional inconsistency represents an important, though understudied, phenomenon. The predominant focus of negotiation research on communicating consistent emotions in a given situation (Van Kleef et al., 2010) precludes more intricate configurations of emotion, such as emotional inconsistency or fluctuation over the course of a single encounter (Frijda, 1986). Indeed, inconsistency in emotions over time may often be typical (Barrett, 2009; Kuppens, Oravecz, & Tuerlinckx, 2010; Larsen, Augustine, & Prizmic, 2009; Scherer, 2009), particularly so in the domain of conflict and negotiation (Morris & Keltner, 2000; Rothman & Wiesenfeld, 2007). Emotion theorists have noted that people often *oscillate* between opposite emotions

over time (Larsen et al., 2009). In particular, emotional communications may briskly change from positive to negative and vice-versa, especially when new information (such as offers in a negotiation context) is brought in (Frijda, 1986). For example, expressions of aggressive emotions such as anger may turn into expressions of contentment such as happiness over the course of a single exchange and vice-versa.

Emotion theorists have even argued that emotions are essentially characterized by their shifting and dynamic nature (Russell, 2009) and that “our lives are characterized by affective ups and downs, changes and fluctuations”, rather than by emotional consistency (Kuppens et al., 2010, p. 1042). Some have even proposed that emotions have a signaling function *because* they are inconstant (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 2009). Drawing from these arguments, we propose to move beyond the focus of negotiation research on the consistent communication of emotions. We suggest that negotiators' alternating between communicating different emotions over the course of a single exchange (such as alternating between anger and happiness) can affect concessions from recipients.

Inconsistency and unpredictability in competitive interactions

In conflict and negotiation, one primary social effect that emotional inconsistency could have is conveying a sense of unpredictability to opponents. In general, conflict theorists have argued that strategies that project inconsistency essentially create a sense of unpredictability and surprise in opponents (Ellsberg, 1959; Schelling, 1960). Importantly, inconsistency reduces an opponent's ability to gain intelligence about one's past strategy, thus preventing them from deducing tell-tale regularities (Schelling, 1960). In negotiation, emotional inconsistency can make it hard for opponents to anticipate one's future behavior (Ellsberg, 1959; Frank, 1988).

Conflict theorists have long theorized that being seen as inconsistent and unpredictable will thus increase recipients' compliance in competitive interactions (Frank, 1988; Schelling, 1960). This assertion resonates with arguments across the social sciences. For example, sociologists speculate that recipients yield more before actors who appear inconsistent and unpredictable in their reactions (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980). Clinical psychologists have observed how unexpected, surprising moves can make recipients open to change (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Extending these arguments, cognitive scientists theorize that unpredictable, non-contingent behavior increases outcomes in competitive contexts. “Irreducible uncertainty,” they propose, cannot be learned by competitors, so organisms should behave with some inconsistency before competition (Glimcher, 2003).

Despite these arguments, empirical research on the effects of inconsistency and unpredictability in competitive interactions has been scant. Although several lines of argument suggest that a negotiator's emotional inconsistency and unpredictability might increase recipients' concessions, the current research is the first to directly test this relationship.

Feeling little control over outcomes

One reason why emotional inconsistency and concomitant unpredictability could have positive effects on concessions, we propose, is that it is likely to make recipients feel little control over the outcome of the negotiation. By “control”, we mean the belief that one possesses oneself a response that can causally influence outcomes, for example, that one's own actions will determine outcomes (e.g., Litt, 1988; Stevens, Bavetta, & Gist, 1993). Social psychological research suggests indeed that when people face inconsistency and unpredictability, they often feel a lack of control, which is a potent force that drives their reactions (Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009; Menon, Sheldon, & Galinsky, under review; Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010; Waytz et al., 2010; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). For example, when people face inconsistency and unpredictability they over-attribute causal influence to opponents

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