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The relevance of communication media in conflict contexts and their effectiveness: A negotiation experiment

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ABSTRACT

Conflict negotiation is a communication process in which participants exchange huge amounts of cognitive and emotional information interactively to achieve a mutually acceptable solution regarding previous inconsistency. The present paper approaches this issue from the perspective of intervention in emotional negotiation by examining the moderating effect of communication media on the relationships between conflict contexts and their effectiveness. Given the different effectiveness of emotional delivery between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication, we hypothesize that the choice of communication media will ultimately affect negotiation effectiveness. A negotiation experiment was designed to test our research hypotheses. We find that face-to-face communication functions effectively in the functional conflict context, whereas computer-mediated communication functions effectively in dysfunctional conflict context.

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1. Introduction

Organizational conflict, if poorly managed, could substantially hinder organizational performance (e.g., Bruk-Lee, Nixon, & Spector, 2013; Hon & Chan, 2013; Rahim, 2015; Song, Dyer, & Thieme, 2006). If it is properly managed, however, it could contribute to a significant improvement of organizational performance (e.g., Bradley, Klotz, Postlethwaite, & Brown, 2013; Bradley, Postlethwaite, Klotz, Hamdani, & Brown, 2012; Garcia, 2013). In this light, the proper management of organizational conflict has become an important issue both in academic research and in practice.

Contemporary studies emphasize the importance of communication in successful cognitive and emotional conflict situations, and they cite negotiation as an example (e.g., Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2012; Capes, 2013). Communication is defined as a psychological and social interaction process through which two or more persons exchange current attitudes, emotions, and information to create better mutual understanding (Varey, Wood-harper, & Wood, 2002). In a cognitive negotiation, negotiators exchange their private opinions and information through a readable approach (e.g.,

language or written data) (Capes, 2013; Young, Bauman, Chen, & Bastardi, 2012). Emotional negotiation is not necessarily conducted using a nonverbal approach (Saarni, 2015; Sinaceur, Adam, Van Kleef, & Galinsky, 2013), such as facial expressions. Recent emotion research has revealed that most emotional expressions appear in almost imperceptible patterns that require negotiators to have a high level of empathy to recognize these extremely subtle cues (Preston & De Waal, 2002).

The aim of this study is to offer empirical evidence for emotional negotiation research, which is rare in the current literature. Thus far, the important role of emotional negotiation in communication and conflict negotiation has been long underestimated because of its weak linkage with observable cognitive negotiation results (Retzinger & Scheff, 2000). Despite the tremendous amount of research concerning the relationship between conflict negotiation and communication, we specifically focus on emotional negotiation in terms of the effectiveness of emotional delivery across different communication media (e.g., face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication). The classic categories of functional and dysfunctional conflict are adapted to represent the poles of emotional negotiation with respect to constructive and destructive conflict.

2. Literature review

Conflict primarily results from continuous inconsistencies in the opinions and interests of individuals as they communicate, as such inconsistencies provoke negative emotions (Curseu, Boros, & Oerlemans, 2012; Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Rahim, 2015; Thomas, 1996). Among the numerous types of conflict in cognitive negotiation that have been considered useful to predict consequent performance, the concepts of functional and dysfunctional conflict are frequently mentioned (e.g., Cheng, 2011; de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012) as a result of their extensive applicability to conflict from cognitive and emotional perspectives (Breugst, Patzelt, Shepherd, & Aguinis, 2012; Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2006; Martínez-Moreno, Zornoza, González-Navarro, & Thompson, 2012). Functional conflict involves a conflict among organizational members who have a constructive attitude toward challenging ideas and beliefs, respect for the perspective of others even in the midst of disagreement, and a willingness to undergo consultative interaction involving useful give-and-take processes (Hung & Lin, 2013). Researchers show that individuals engaged in functional conflict are usually task oriented and tend to focus on overcoming differences among members to achieve common objectives in the most effective way (Hung & Lin, 2013; Marcus Wallenburg & Simon Raue, 2011). In contrast, dysfunctional conflict refers to a conflict that includes personal attacks and undermines team effectiveness (e.g., Hurt & Abebe, 2015); these conflicts tend to reduce efficiency and increase organizational costs (Kotlyar & Karakowsky, 2006). Although such conflicts are always difficult to prevent, existing research suggests four major cognitive principles useful in overcoming dysfunctional conflict, including the clarification of conflicts of interest, an emphasis on interpersonal and intergroup levels of analysis, an emphasis on process interventions, and a collaborative managerial perspective (Thomas, 1996).

As mentioned above, current conflict-related studies have largely overlooked the emotional perspective except for the cognitive aspect of different conflict types. That is, in functional conflict, an individual's attitude toward conflict is generally positive, proactive and constructive, whereas dysfunctional conflict involves an attitude that is negative, reserved and withdrawn. In accordance with recent research, negative emotions, including anxiety and perceived uncertainty, are the main factors that destroy the communication process and lead to conflict that is even worse than at the beginning of negotiation (e.g., Maiese, 2005; Sanford, 2012).

In this paper, we use an experimental research design to explore conflict effectiveness from the perspective of the emotional delivery of communication media. Because of the multidimensionality of cognitive and emotional perspectives in a conflict situation, the choice of communication media should naturally include the consideration of information and emotional delivery. In accordance with the aim of this study, we emphasize the emotional aspect of conflict and predict that the use of a communication medium with different levels of emotional delivery efficiency will ultimately affect the effectiveness of negotiation.

Face-to-face communication is a traditional, well-known method of human communication that remains unsurpassed in many respects (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013; Warschauer, 2013). Face-to-face communication requires participants to communicate directly and immediately at the same time and in the same place. This effective medium has the benefit of enhancing socio-emotional conversation, for example, through identification, discussion, and commitment among participants (e.g., Böhlke, 2013; Stryker & Santoro, 2012). Given its advantage in offering synchronized communication, face-to-face communication is undoubtedly an appropriate medium for emotional delivery. However, emotional delivery is not always adequate for conflict negotiation.

In functional conflict, the emergence and delivery of positive emotion can naturally result in a relaxing, open, understanding and attentive communication process that ends in a satisfactory conclusion for each participant (Bobot, 2011; Canary & Canary, 2013). Conversely, in dysfunctional conflict, the presence of anxiety or the impression of a threat or a feeling of a threat can be easily observed through facial expressions and body language; consequently, this perception can encourage others to express exaggerated negative emotions in response (Cheng & Sheu, 2012; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Such negative communication loops can be frequently observed in situations in which one is communicating with strangers who are conceived as external group members.

Hypothesis 1:. Given its capacity to enhance positive emotional delivery, face-to-face communication improves negotiation effectiveness in functional conflict situations.

Given the disadvantages of face-to-face communication, computer-mediated communication is advantageous insofar as it is a less costly and less bounded mode of communication compared with face-to-face communication (Herring, Stein, & Virtanen, 2013; Salaberry, 2013). This advantage is especially apparent in the context of critical decisions in that computer-mediated communication facilitates communication through the efficient sharing of additional resources (Monzani, Ripoll, Peiró, & Van Dick, 2014) and enables the exchange of private information (Thomas, 2013) with specific members of a group through private dialogue windows. Contemporary studies have explored the interpersonal communication of emotions (e.g., anger and happiness) in the context of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004; Steinel, Van Kleef, & Harinck, 2008).

Among the various types of computer-mediated communication, written text is the most significant because it combines the technologies of hypertext (e.g., email, chat, discussion forum; Lin, 2014), written discourse, and spoken discourse (e.g., Marchand, 2013; Walther, 1992, 1996; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & Groot, 2001). Given the absence of nonverbal cues, written text is considered a cold, impersonal, and unsociable medium (Rains, 2015; Walther, Van Der Heide, Ramirez Jr, Burgoon, & Peña, 2015) that can create obstacles to successful communication (Kahai & Cooper, 2003) by encouraging participants to use severe and impulsive language to gain attention (Patton et al., 2014; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), thereby enhancing the likelihood of destructive forms of conflict (Walther, 1996) and increasing the extent of conflict (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Weisband, 1992). Nevertheless, this impersonal nature of written text facilitates computer-mediated communication in that it frees negotiators from emotional and personal effects (Rains, 2015; Walther & Tong, 2014) by diminishing the power gaps across negotiator backgrounds (Fernandez & Martinez, 2002; Walther, 1996). In addition, computer-mediated communication is a task-oriented medium (Sherman, 2003), which further decreases the possibility of violating agreements after negotiation (Bicchieri & Lev-On, 2007; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992). Van Kleef et al. (2004) provide evidence that an angry message will induce fear in its receiver, thereby distracting the receiver's attention from the message sender's experienced emotions; in other words, the experienced and communicated anger in a computer-mediated situation results in the mitigation of angry communication and better negotiation performance.

The majority of communication studies are based on theories such as social presence theory (Baskin & Barker, 2004), media-richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Markus, 1994), task-media fitness theory (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1993), compensatory