

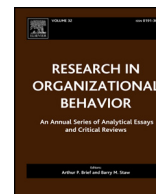


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# The promise and perversity of perspective-taking in organizations

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### ABSTRACT

Successful managers and leaders need to effectively navigate their organizational worlds, from motivating customers and employees to managing diversity to preventing and resolving conflicts. Perspective-taking is a psychological process that is particularly relevant to each of these activities. The current review critically examines perspective-taking research conducted by both management scholars and social psychologists and specifies perspective-taking's antecedents, consequences, mechanisms, and moderators, as well as identifies theoretical and/or empirical shortfalls. Our summary of the current state of perspective-taking research offers three important contributions. First, we offer a new definition of perspective-taking: the active cognitive process of imagining the world from another's vantage point or imagining oneself in another's shoes to understand their visual viewpoint, thoughts, motivations, intentions, and/or emotions. Second, we highlight that although perspective-taking has many positive benefits for managers and leaders, it also carries with it the potential for perverse effects. Third, we argue that previous theoretical lenses to understand perspective-taking's goal are insufficient in light of all the available evidence. Instead, we offer a new theoretical proposition to capture the full range of perspective-taking's positive and negative effects: perspective-taking helps individuals effectively navigate a world filled with mixed-motive social interactions. Our mixed-motive model of perspective-taking not only captures the current findings but also offers new directions for future research.

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Open any management book or examine the syllabus of any leadership course, and it quickly becomes apparent that to be a successful manager or leader requires a host of interpersonal capacities, from understanding what drives customers and employees to negotiating with clients and vendors to managing diversity to minimizing the conflict that might arise in and among these relationships. This is an incredibly daunting list and highlights the difficulty of becoming a successful manager and leader. In the current review, we consider how perspective-taking might be a

promising psychological process that can help managers navigate these varied organizational challenges.

Perspective-taking has long been studied in developmental and social psychology, with more recent work conducted within the management literature. Despite the abundant evidence on what perspective-taking is, how it functions, and its consequences, much of this research exists in disciplinary silos. In particular, a significant amount of research relevant to managers and organizations has been conducted by social psychologists who focus less on organizational relevance and practical impact. Similarly, perspective-taking research by management scholars may not have fully integrated the theoretical and methodological advances garnered in social psychology.

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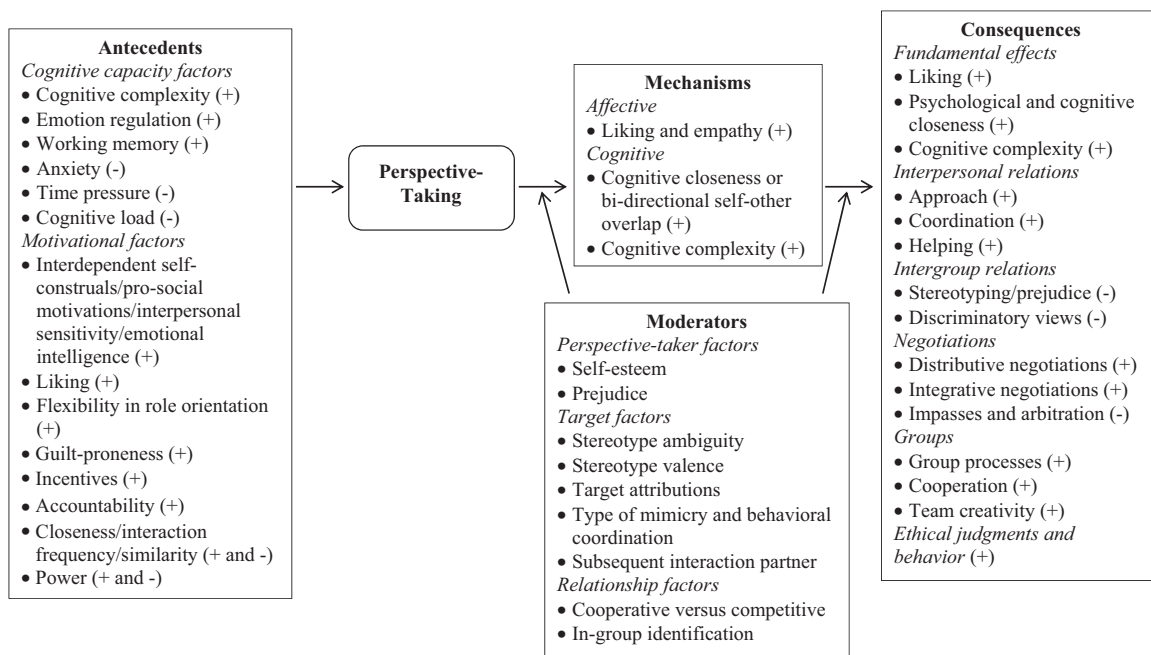


Fig. 1. Organizing framework for the antecedents, consequences, mechanisms, and moderators of perspective-taking. Parenthetical signs (+/-) indicate the direction of effects.

We critically review the current state of perspective-taking research across the social psychological and management traditions and integrate these disparate findings into an organizing framework (see Fig. 1) that captures the antecedents, consequences, mechanisms, and moderators of perspective-taking. We also highlight theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature. In so doing, our discussion provides a synthesis of current organizationally-relevant perspective-taking research and highlights that perspective-taking carries hidden costs, i.e., it can have perverse consequences that harm the self and/or others.

Based on our review, we offer an updated definition of perspective-taking and also suggest that previous theoretical lenses cannot explain the full range of perspective-taking's effects. For instance, although Galinsky, Ku, and Wang (2005) suggest that perspective-taking is geared toward creating, maintaining, and strengthening social bonds, this theoretical lens does not capture many recent findings where perspective-taking results in other-harming effects. To account for emerging findings that demonstrate both the promises and perversities of perspective-taking, we offer a new theoretical proposition: the mixed-motive model of perspective-taking. This new model specifies that perspective-taking is a tool designed to facilitate navigation across a mixed-motive world. We believe our mixed-motive account more accurately captures perspective-taking's diverse effects, conceptualizes what perspective-taking is, and provides a more unifying compass for future research.

We begin with a definition of perspective-taking, distinguishing it from related constructs. Second, we present different perspective-taking measures and

operationalizations to provide a more complete understanding of how researchers can empirically examine perspective-taking. Third, we discuss antecedents that encourage or prevent perspective-taking. Fourth, we examine the range of positive consequences that perspective-taking produces, while discussing the mechanisms for these effects. Fifth, we consider moderating factors that turn perspective-taking from a beneficial tool into one that can be detrimental. Finally, based on our review, we update our definition of perspective-taking and discuss our new theoretical lens.

## 1. Defining and differentiating perspective-taking

Perspective-taking has been defined as “the process of imagining the world from another's vantage point or imagining oneself in another's shoes” (Galinsky et al., 2005, p. 110). Parker, Atkins, and Axtell (2008) offer another definition: perspective-taking is an active process that “occurs when an observer tries to understand, in a non-judgmental way, the thoughts, motives, and/or feelings of a target, as well as why they think and/or feel the way they do” (p. 151).

A key element of perspective-taking is that it involves an active, cognitive process—perspective-takers mentally simulate what it would be like to be someone else and to see the world from that person's viewpoint. This emphasis on cognition is consistent with how perspective-taking has been discussed since the 18th century: philosopher Smith (1759) and sociologist Spencer (1870) considered perspective-taking an individual's cognitive, intellectual reaction to another's experiences, i.e., their ability to understand the other. Similarly, Piaget (1932) viewed perspective-taking

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