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Reports

Getting stuck or stepping back: Effects of obstacles and construal level in the negotiation of creative solutions

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ABSTRACT

Difficult issues in negotiation act as interfering forces but their effects on negotiation processes and outcomes are unclear. Perhaps facing such obstacles leads individuals to take a step back, attend to the big picture and, therefore, to be able to craft creative, mutually beneficial solutions. Alternatively, facing obstacles may lead negotiators to focus narrowly on the obstacle issue, so that they no longer consider issues simultaneously, and forego the possibility to reach high quality, integrative agreements. Three experiments involving face-to-face negotiation support the "getting stuck" hypothesis, but only when negotiators are in a local processing mode and not when they are in a global processing mode. Implications for the art and science of negotiation, and for construal level theory, are discussed.

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When negotiating agreement, people oftentimes run into issues that are difficult to settle. Facing such obstacles may create conflict and frustration, and at least temporarily block progress. Yet the more long-lasting impact of facing obstacles is less obvious. Work on social cognition suggests that obstacles lead people to step back, to consider the bigger picture, and to generate creative solutions. Ironically, obstacles may thus facilitate the development of mutually beneficial agreements. However, this notion contrasts sharply with work indicating that one should begin with easy issues first, to create optimism and a sense of locomotion facilitating dealing with more difficult issues later on. In other words, obstacles may undermine constructive negotiation and the development of integrative agreements. Our goal was to examine whether and why obstacles help or hinder integrative negotiation.

Obstacles help constructive negotiation

Obstacles are *interfering forces* (Higgins, 2006) that impede the standard course of action, can make the individual feel stuck, and motivate him or her to ignore, overcome, or get around them in order to move closer to some desired end-state or object. Lewin (1935) argued that obstacles require an initial movement away from the direct path to the goal in order to attain it. The solution to such a detour problem occurs by means of "restructuring" the field and perceiving the total situation "of such a kind that the path to the goal becomes a unitary whole" (p. 82 f). Obstacles thus force the individual to "step back" in order to see the big picture and how to reach the goal. Such a global processing style (i.e., seeing the forest rather than the trees) fosters creativity, whereas a local processing style (i.e., seeing the trees rather than the forest) helps analytical problem solving (Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004).

That obstacles trigger a shift towards global processing and promote creativity is consistent with work on temporary impasse in negotiation. Such impasses lead parties to realize that their current (competitive) strategy is unsuccessful and may result in not reaching an agreement at all. Because such would be undesirable, parties reflect on alternative approaches and switch to a more cooperative, integrative approach. As Walton and McKersie (1965, p. 179) noted: "it is possible for distributive bargaining to escalate into a deadly encounter [...]. It is at this point [...] that integrative bargaining may emerge". Similarly, Pruitt and Carnevale (1993, p. 114) noted that: "joint-concern and integrative behavior often develop as a result of insight into the fact that one is in a hurting stalemate". Indeed, Harinck and De Dreu (2004) showed that temporary impasses reduce competition, increase problem solving, and thereby facilitate the development of integrative agreements.

Obstacles hinder constructive negotiation

In their analysis of the Oslo talks between Israel and the PLO in the early nineties, Pruitt, Bercovitch, and Zartman (1997) note that "Each side agreed ... that the best way to proceed was to draft a

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declaration of principles ... This document specified that Israel would completely withdrawn from Gaza within two years ... that there would be a Marshall Plan for Gaza; and that the final status of Jerusalem, borders, and the settlements, would be negotiated at a later date" (p. 179). Thus, parties postponed discussions about the most difficult obstacles – Jerusalem and settlements – and they focused first on easier issues.

This practice during the Oslo talks reflects a common strategy among negotiators to talk about easy issues first and deal with obstacle issues later.[2] Moving obstacles towards a later point in time is common advice given by negotiation experts (e.g., Cohen, 1980; Nieremberg, 1968). The idea is that once a certain amount of investment in time and money is made, the sunk-cost fallacy affects negotiators and they feel obliged to pursue negotiating (Balakrishnan, Patton, & Lewis, 1993). Game–theoretical analyses likewise suggest that "one should bargain on 'easy' issues first if implementation is sequential (Flamini, 2007). Doing so builds 'bargaining momentum' ..." (Busch & Horstmann, 2002, p. 182).

That obstacles hurt is consistent with studies in a variety of domains. Work on social cognition, and goal shielding in particular, showed that the activation of focal goals to which the individual is committed inhibits the accessibility, of alternative goals (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008; Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002; Veling & Van Knippenberg, 2006). Resolving obstacles easily becomes a goal in itself, and through goal shielding leads negotiators to focus on this particular issue to the exclusion of additional issues. Work on social entrainment revealed that both individuals and small groups performed their tasks better when they began with a short time interval and moved on to successively larger time intervals, than when they began with longer and moved to shorter time intervals (e.g., Kelly & McGrath, 1985). This suggests that initial success facilitates subsequent performance, and that facing obstacles early on blocks such early successes and subsequent performance.

Negotiation research also points to the negative effects of obstacles. First, a number of studies showed that loss-framed issues are more difficult to negotiate than gain-framed issues – negotiators make fewer concessions and less likely settle on issues that are framed as losses than as gains (e.g., De Dreu, Carnevale, Emans, & Van de Vliert, 1994; Okhuysen, Galinsky, & Uptigrove, 2003). Group decision making research likewise shows that group members are less likely to settle when they differ on what options they find aversive, than on what options they find attractive (Nijstad & Kaps, 2008). Finally, work on value versus resource conflicts shows that the former type are more difficult and invasive and are more of an obstacle in reaching agreement (e.g., Rapoport, 1960). Again consistent with the idea that obstacles hurt rather than facilitate agreement, value conflict more often ends in win–lose agreements while resource conflict more often ends in mutually beneficial, integrative agreements (e.g., Druckman, 1994).

The present study: hypotheses and overview

Combining social cognition research and negotiation studies on temporary impasses suggests the "stepping back hypothesis" that facing obstacles lead negotiators to step back, attend to the bigger picture, see more interrelations among issues, and develop more creative, mutually beneficial agreements. Applied work in international and business negotiations combined with game theoretical analysis and findings on goal shielding, social entrainment, and group decision making all point to the "getting stuck hypothesis:" Negotiators focus on the obstacle issue to the exclusion of other issues, fail to see interrelations among issues, and they create negative emotions. This in turn undermines trust and the constructive climate required to negotiate integrative agreements.

To test these two hypotheses, we conducted experiments in which participants negotiated face-to-face about four integrative issues – they could be traded-off against one another to provide high mutual gain – and two distributive issues – both were equally valuable to each negotiator. The task was designed so that one distributive issue had high value, and the other low value, making the high value distributive issue a prominent obstacle. Issues were depicted in a table that showed for each issue and for each agreement level the point value to the individual negotiator (the partner's values were not shown; see also below).

We wanted to manipulate obstacles without altering the objective value of the issues, the structure of the negotiation task, or the (historical and reputation) context within which negotiators worked. To do so, we capitalized on the tendency in (western) society to read from left to right. As a result of this basic tendency, items on the left are noticed, encoded, and retrieved better than items on the right, and are seen as more important and more critical (Dobel, Diesendruck, & Bolte, 2007; Maass & Russo, 2003; Spalec & Hammad, 2005). Thus, by placing the obstacle issue (the high value distributive issue) either in the left-hand or in the right-hand column of the pay-off table (and the low value distributive issue thus in the right or left column, respectively), we increased versus decreased the likelihood that the obstacle issue became prominent in the negotiation. Put differently, we expected negotiators in the obstacle-to-the-left condition to begin with the obstacle issue earlier, and to experience its consequences more than those in the obstacle-to-the-right condition.

Whether an issue is experienced as an obstacle or not may be influenced by whether or not negotiators were, after all, able to settle the issue. Whereas our focus in Experiments 2 and 3 was on the consequences of obstacle placement on negotiation outcomes, we felt it important to establish first whether issue placement affects the perceptions of the issues as obstacles. This was done in Experiment 1.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and design

Undergraduate students (32 male, 42 female) received 5€ (approximately US$6.5) for participation. Participants were randomly assigned to dyads with the restriction that dyad members were unacquainted. Dyads were randomly assigned to the obstacle-to-the-left condition ($N = 19$), or to the obstacle-to-the-right condition ($N = 18$). Participant gender or dyadic gender composition had no effects.[3] Dependent variables were difficulty of the most left (right) issue, the extent to which the issue was deemed an obstacle to reach agreement, and how valuable to issue was.

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[2] This advice contradicts the finding that negotiators achieve integrative agreements especially when they make multi-issue offers rather than single-issue offers and move towards a next issue only when the first is settled (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). However, Druckman (1977, p. 165) notes: "sequential agendas are often hard to avoid. Either the issues are too complex to be handled simultaneously, or they arise and must be resolved at different times". Negotiators avoid multi-issue offering because of beliefs that such "horse-trading" discussions are inappropriate and that each issue should be considered on its own merits, because bounded rationality prohibits them from considering all issues and their interrelations simultaneously, and because sequential offering provides signaling power and strategic advantages (Schelling, 1960).

[3] The experiment followed a study on individual choices; controlling for assignment to conditions in this prior experiment had no influence and this "variable" is further ignored.

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