

Individual Differences in Negotiation: A Nearly Abandoned Pursuit Revived

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Abstract

The commonsense notion that personal characteristics influence how effectively we negotiate has presented researchers with a mystery: Throughout the decades, scholars have concluded that there are few reliable findings to support it. In this article, I review existing research as well as new research in which my colleagues and I join a growing minority revisiting this nearly abandoned topic. The categories of individual differences previously studied include background characteristics, abilities, personality traits, motivations, and expectations and beliefs. Reviewing this work presents an optimistic conclusion: The strongest and most reliable predictors of negotiation performance are also the most open to personal change. Namely, positive expectations and comfort with negotiation consistently predict better performance. Another consistent finding is that abilities such as cognitive intelligence and creativity help for win-win agreements. Results suggest promise for a topic that is important to researchers, educators, organizations, and the public alike.

Keywords

negotiation, bargaining, individual differences, personality, traits, abilities

We negotiate constantly, not just over big-ticket items, such as cars and job offers, but also over daily issues, such as who will do household chores, who will pay utility bills, who will care for elder family members, and even who needs to stay late at work. Given the importance of negotiating, a question naturally arises: What kinds of people are effective negotiators? Somewhat surprisingly, the answer has been elusive to researchers trying to understand the influence of individual differences. These are any characteristics that can differ from one person to another, including everything from age and sex to height, personality, intelligence, and even attitudes. Conventional wisdom suggests that these kinds of factors can help explain why some people are more successful than others in the art of negotiation. However, over the decades, researchers have had difficulty validating this commonsense notion.

Indeed, large-scale review articles have expressed pessimism about finding individual characteristics that are linked with negotiation success (Lewicki, Saunders, & Barry, 2014; Thompson, 1990) and have concluded either that these factors play a minimal role or that their role is something of a mystery. An early review by Rubin and Brown (1975) was particularly influential in justifying this conclusion. It covered the scant research on individual

differences available at that time and made strongly worded conclusions that further pursuit was misguided. The majority of pessimistic conclusions cited this work, or they cited work that cited this work (Sharma, Bottom, & Elfenbein, 2013). In this way, the book had a chilling effect on research about individual differences, and for decades the topic was largely abandoned.

Resurging Interest and New Approaches

Interest in the topic has been resurging (Barry & Friedman, 1998). Many researchers continued to be inspired by the intuition that individual differences matter and kept studying the topic regardless of its popularity. My colleagues and I joined a growing minority who argue that it is worth reviving the pursuit on a large scale. We have taken multiple approaches, reviewing existing research and conducting new research on a wide range of characteristics (Elfenbein, Curhan, Eisenkraft, Shirako,

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& Baccaro, 2008). We have also conducted a meta-analysis, using statistical techniques to summarize past work (Sharma et al., 2013).

Existing research has typically looked at how performance in one negotiation can be predicted by a specific characteristic or set of characteristics. For example, some studies look at abilities, whereas other studies look at ethics. We tried to depart from this work in several ways. The first stage was to step back from identifying specific characteristics and to document first whether individual differences mattered at all (Elfenbein et al., 2008). This required having people take part in multiple negotiations. Groups of four were assigned to “round robins,” in which each person took turns working with each other person, like teams in a sports conference (Kenny, 1994). We found that negotiators’ performance was very consistent from one encounter to the next. This is an important finding because, otherwise, individual-level characteristics could not logically predict the outcomes of two-person interactions. We concluded that individual differences do matter at a basic level, and now the job is to find out which ones.

The next stage was to search through the widest range of existing research to generate a list of all the various characteristics we could find that had been studied before. Table 1 summarizes this list into five broad categories, which are described one by one below. Note that this list describes only existing research and should not limit the imagination about what research could exist in the future. The categories are listed roughly in order of how changeable they are—for example, we can change our expectations and beliefs more easily than our cultural backgrounds or age. Some factors vary fleetingly from moment to moment—notably, our emotions and motivations. These are individual differences only to the extent that people can have average tendencies. Note that factors within each category vary in their changeability and that this description is not perfect. It is important to note, as discussed below, that individual characteristics can influence performance regardless of how changeable they are.

We conducted two projects involving this list. First, when collecting new data, we attempted to be as comprehensive as possible by including factors from each category (Elfenbein et al., 2008). The round-robin design allowed us to conduct a more precise test, because measuring performance based on three negotiations gives more information than one. Second, our meta-analysis examined a large range of characteristics related to personality, abilities, and beliefs (Sharma et al., 2013). It included just about every individual difference we could find, except for sex and culture, which had already been studied extensively (e.g., Bowles & McGinn, 2008; Gelfand & Brett, 2004). We tried to be comprehensive,

looking for relevant information in nearly 5,000 articles and asking researchers for unpublished work. The final set of only 75 articles reflected the near abandonment of the topic.

Findings Across Individual Differences

This section briefly reviews negotiation research about the categories outlined in Table 1. Excellent comprehensive reviews are listed in the Recommended Reading section. Table 1 includes citations to specific sources for all findings discussed below.

Personal background characteristics

This category covers a heterogeneous set of factors. Sex and culture have rich and complicated relationships with negotiation behaviors and outcomes, as described in large-scale reviews (see Table 1). A noteworthy finding is that background characteristics can invoke stereotypes in partners even when they do not characterize the negotiator’s own behavior. Little research exists about social characteristics such as economic class, education level, or religion, or about physical characteristics such as attractiveness, age, or masculinity. In some cases, background factors change negotiators’ behavior—for example, men with wider faces show increased cheating behavior (Haselhuhn & Wong, 2012). In other cases, background factors change partners’ judgments—for example, partners feel worse when competing against older or more attractive people (Elfenbein et al., 2008). In general, these types of factors provide a frontier for unique new research contributions.

Abilities

Multiple abilities have been studied, including cognitive intelligence (what people commonly call “IQ”), emotional intelligence, creativity, and cultural intelligence (Fulmer & Barry, 2004; Imai & Gelfand, 2010; Kurtzberg, 1998). Each tends to improve win-win outcomes. Surprisingly, however, the notion that greater ability improves individual performance has not been validated to date.

Personality traits

Personality has been defined as any characteristic involving consistent patterns in thought, behavior, and feelings, whether the causes of these patterns are visible or hidden (Funder, 2012).¹ Psychologists talk about the “Big Five” personality variables of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Most studies have found no effects of these

Table 1. Categories of Individual Differences That Can Influence Negotiation Performance

Types of individual differences	Examples	Some key findings about performance	Sample references
Personal background characteristics	Sex, culture, formal negotiation experience, age, appearance, socioeconomic status, educational level, height, birth order, religion, masculinity	Findings tend to be complex. Background categories can influence not only negotiators' own behavior but the way others treat them, the way others feel about them, and whether they even negotiate at all. Little is known about the influence of many of these characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, educational level, height, birth order, masculinity), and future research is encouraged.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex: Bowles and McGinn (2008); Small, Gelfand, Babcock, and Gettman (2007); Mazei et al. (2015) • Culture: Aslani, Ramirez-Marin, Semmani-Azad, Brett, and Tinsley (2013); Gelfand and Brett (2004) • Formal negotiation experience: Amanatullah, Morris, and Curhan (2008); Elfenbein, Curhan, Eisenkraft, Shirako, and Baccaro (2008) • Age, attractiveness: Elfenbein et al. (2008) • Facial width-to-height ratio: Haselhuhn and Wong (2012) • Cognitive intelligence: Fulmer and Barry (2004); Sharma, Bottom, and Elfenbein (2013) • Emotional intelligence: Fulmer and Barry (2004); Mueller and Curhan (2006); Sharma et al. (2013) • Creativity: Kurtzberg (1998) • Cultural intelligence: Imai and Gelfand (2010)
Abilities	Cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, creativity, cultural intelligence	Greater abilities appear to be valuable for boosting win-win outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and neuroticism: Barry and Friedman (1998); Dimotakis, Conlon, and Ilies (2012); Ma and Jaeger (2005); Sharma et al. (2013) • Self-esteem: Amanatullah et al. (2008) • Machiavellianism: Barry and Friedman (1998); Volkema, Kapoutsis, and Nikolopoulos (2013) • Maximization and regret proneness: Iyengar, Wells, and Schwartz (2006) • Unmitigated communion: Amanatullah et al. (2008); Ames (2008) • All personality traits listed here: Elfenbein et al. (2008)
Personality traits	Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, self-esteem, Machiavellianism, trait positive affect, trait negative affect, maximization and regret proneness; unmitigated communion	Most personality traits appear to have a minimal influence on objective performance, but they exert a strong influence on how negotiators feel. Extraversion and agreeableness tend to be a liability in strictly competitive situations. People who typically experience higher amounts of positive emotion and lower amounts of negative emotion tend to do better. Surprisingly, conscientiousness has had no documented influence, but most research has been in laboratory settings where preparation is constrained.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about oneself and one's negotiation partner (i.e., prosocial, competitive, and individualistic motivations), need for cognition, cognitive complexity, risk propensity • Self-efficacy, feelings of appropriateness, implicit beliefs that negotiation skills can be learned, expectations about consequences, ethics
Motivations	Concern about oneself and concern about one's negotiation partner (i.e., prosocial, competitive, and individualistic motivations), need for cognition, cognitive complexity, risk propensity	In cooperative settings, prosocial concerns help to create better win-win agreements, but only when it isn't possible just to walk away. Being concerned about one's outcome leads to better outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about oneself and one's negotiation partner: De Dreu, Weingart, and Kwon (2000); Elfenbein et al. (2008) • Need for cognition: Carnevale and De Dreu (2006) • Cognitive complexity: Tetlock (1985) • Risk propensity: Volkema et al. (2013)
Expectations and beliefs	Self-efficacy, feelings of appropriateness, implicit beliefs that negotiation skills can be learned, expectations about consequences, ethics	Feeling better about oneself and about the situation helps negotiators to perform well. People who endorse questionable ethics perform no better but are less satisfied.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-efficacy and comfort with traditional negotiation tactics: Sullivan, O'Connor, and Burreis (2006); Robinson, Lewicki, and Donahue (2000); Volkema et al. (2013) • Feelings of appropriateness to engage in negotiation: Elfenbein et al. (2008) • Implicit negotiation beliefs: Kray and Haselhuhn (2007) • Expectations about consequences: Ames (2008) • Ethics: Cohen and Morse (2014); Robinson et al. (2000)

traits on negotiation effectiveness. A notable exception is that extraversion and agreeableness tend to be liabilities in strictly competitive situations (Barry & Friedman, 1998; Dimotakis, Conlon, & Ilies, 2012). Even without influencing actual performance, traits can influence people's feelings about their negotiations (Elfenbein et al., 2008). Another important aspect of personality concerns emotions. Many studies have examined moment-to-moment feelings in negotiations, but others have examined person-to-person differences in average feelings. Negotiators who generally experience more positive affect and less negative affect tend to perform better (Elfenbein et al., 2008).

Motivational styles

People can be categorized as prosocial toward others, competitive against others, or individualistic because they care only about their own outcomes regardless of how others perform. Prosocial negotiators tend to achieve better win-win outcomes, but only if they cannot just walk away (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000). Concern for one's own outcomes predicts stronger performance (Elfenbein et al., 2008).

Expectations and beliefs

To the extent that negotiation is a mental game, mind-set matters. The single best predictor of negotiation performance is positive expectations. Self-efficacy, or confidence that one can succeed (Bandura, 2001; Sullivan, O'Connor, & Burris, 2006), has the strongest effect of any single variable tested across all types of individual differences (Sharma et al., 2013). Likewise, negotiators do better when they believe that it is appropriate to engage in negotiation and use traditional negotiation tactics (Elfenbein et al., 2008; Robinson, Lewicki, & Donahue, 2000) or that negotiation skills can be learned (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007). Machiavellianism, or the endorsement of cynical tactics, does not predict performance, but it predicts feeling bad after negotiating. Likewise, endorsing ethically questionable tactics also does not benefit performance and leaves negotiators less satisfied (Elfenbein et al., 2008).

Using These Findings to Increase Effectiveness

The types of characteristics described above are diverse, and research findings vary substantially across the categories and within them. However, a clear and optimistic conclusion emerges about the strongest and most reliable predictors of negotiation performance: They are also the most open to personal change. Holding positive expectations and beliefs about negotiating was the single best and well-replicated factor in our work and the work of

others. This is not to say change is easy—adjusting attitudes is not as simple as making a resolution. To increase comfort and confidence in advocating for oneself requires new mental frames and habits.

Educators who conduct negotiation training have developed activities aimed at influencing these attitudes. Popular sessions tend to incorporate experiential learning with role-playing exercises, providing exposure to help increase comfort and reduce anxiety. Informally, my students often report having been initially nervous but ultimately finding it fun to practice in a safe environment. These experiences feed back into greater comfort levels and feelings that what they are doing is appropriate.

Looking at characteristics that are less changeable offers additional insight into improving negotiation outcomes. In doing so, first it is important to emphasize the difference between a state and a trait. A state is how we act or feel in a moment, and a trait is how we tend to act or feel in general (McCrae & Costa, 1987). For example, anyone can talk to strangers, but it is an extravert who consistently does. Traits may be hard to change, but they are not destiny—we can change our behaviors from what is typical when the stakes warrant it. In this sense, motivations and personality traits may influence us, but states are more under our control. Second, people can try to self-select into situations they find comfortable. Dimotakis et al. (2012) found that disagreeable people were more comfortable in strongly competitive situations, whereas agreeable people were more comfortable in situations with cooperative potential. The concept of person-situation fit has been powerful in explaining how a person can fail in one job role but succeed wildly in another (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). People tend to be happiest in the kinds of situations that fit them (Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984), and negotiation should be no different. In formal training programs, instructors often provide feedback about strengths and weaknesses, and negotiators may benefit from self-selection into appropriate roles.

The state-trait distinction and concept of person-situation fit ideas help suggest ways to maximize effectiveness. Negotiators may be able to change their behavior as needed and find their fit—without undergoing a personal transformation. Even abilities are not destiny. Without changing our underlying capabilities, we can try to apply ourselves and use what capability we have. Negotiators can make efforts to prepare, pay more attention, analyze situations carefully, and brainstorm creatively “outside the box.” Although demographic background characteristics can be nearly impossible to change, we are still in control of our own states if not our traits. Negotiators can try to be a force against others' stereotypes by preparing carefully and acting comfortably and confidently.

Workplaces can use these findings. Managers and teammates can try to exercise discretion when selecting

negotiators via the same division-of-labor commonplace for technical skills. Human resource professionals can consider assessments for selection and coaching. Individuals might be steered toward their strengths, and work might be structured so that employees can select into and out of negotiation-intensive roles. Indeed, outside of work, anyone dissatisfied with their outcomes can try enlisting trusted others for teamwork.

Future Research Directions

My colleagues and I hope researchers will bring new energy to the topic of individual differences in negotiation. It is unfortunate that the field allowed this topic to become marginalized based largely on a decades-old book that reviewed few relevant studies. This should serve as a cautionary tale about making firm pronouncements early in an academic field, and about overreliance on few sources.

There are significant research findings for characteristics within each of the five categories, and all categories are promising for further research. Two seem particularly thirsty for new advances. First, the diverse factors within personal background characteristics have rarely been examined, even while attracting increasing attention elsewhere in social and organizational psychology. Second, expectations and beliefs should be mined for further insight, given their uniquely strong predictive power. Even outside these topics, negotiations research should ideally include individual-difference factors as control variables.

This review also emphasizes that negotiation researchers need to expand methodologically. Most studies involve stylized laboratory designs that lack the flexibility to let individual differences shine. Psychologists distinguish between “weak” and “strong” situations (Mischel, 1977), and individual differences are less influential when situations strongly guide our behavior. To the extent that laboratory studies are strong situations, individual differences may matter more than past research has implied. Indeed, personality appears to matter more in real-life than laboratory studies (Sharma et al., 2013). The effects of strong versus weak situations contribute to what researchers call a person-by-situation interaction, which means that personal characteristics matter more in some situations than others (Bowers, 1973). Therefore, researchers need to acknowledge that any finding could be specific to the particular setting. Future work should examine weaker settings—for instance, by incorporating long-term working relationships and real stakes, as well as flexibility in how to prepare, how to choose partners, and even whether to negotiate at all. Psychological outcomes should also be emphasized as much as objective scores in research designs (Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006). Finally, future work should pay more attention to the influence of

negotiators’ individual differences on the performance and subjective experience of their counterparts, which has rarely been examined.

In future decades, reviews of research on individual differences in negotiation are likely to reach qualitatively different conclusions than reviews of decades past. The body of evidence is growing, findings are increasingly reliable and optimistic, and new avenues are open for exploration.

Recommended Reading

- Elfenbein, H. A. (2013). Individual differences in negotiation. In M. Olekalns & W. L. Adair (Eds.), *Handbook of research in negotiation*. London, England: Edward Elgar. A handbook chapter providing a detailed discussion of the wide range of individual differences that have been studied in negotiation.
- Lewicki, R., Saunders, D., & Barry, B. (2014). (See References). A clearly written text that covers many topics in the field of negotiation.
- Olekalns, M., & Adair, W. L. (2013). *Handbook of research in negotiation*. London, England: Edward Elgar. A book providing in-depth academic reviews of a broad range of topics related to negotiation.
- Sharma, S., Bottom, W., & Elfenbein, H. A. (2013). (See References). An article that presents a statistical summary of research findings on many of the individual-difference factors discussed in this review.
- Thompson, L. (2014). *The mind and heart of the negotiator* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Another clearly written text that covers central topics in the field of negotiation.

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Note

1. Although this definition could technically apply to other factors listed below—that is, motivations, expectations, and beliefs—for clarity they are discussed separately.

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