

## Research Article

# Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent

## The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Strategic Interactions

Adam D. Galinsky,<sup>1</sup> William W. Maddux,<sup>2</sup> Debra Gilin,<sup>3</sup> and Judith B. White<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Northwestern University; <sup>2</sup>INSEAD; <sup>3</sup>Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada; and <sup>4</sup>Dartmouth College

**ABSTRACT**—*The current research explored whether two related yet distinct social competencies—perspective taking (the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual's viewpoint) and empathy (the ability to connect emotionally with another individual)—have differential effects in strategic, mixed-motive interactions. Across three studies, using both individual difference measures and experimental manipulations, we found that perspective taking increased individuals' ability to discover hidden agreements and to both create and claim resources at the bargaining table. However, empathy did not prove nearly as advantageous and at times was detrimental to discovering a possible deal and achieving individual profit. These results held regardless of whether the interaction was a negotiation in which a prima facie solution was not possible or a multiple-issue negotiation that required discovering mutually beneficial trade-offs. Although empathy is an essential tool in many aspects of social life, perspective taking appears to be a particularly critical ability in strategic interactions.*

In October 1962, the United States and the former Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear war in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Yet in the middle of this harrowing conflict, President John F. Kennedy managed to devise a strategic plan to prevent potential annihilation—a plan that also did not sacrifice his country's long-term interests. While publicly refusing to remove any of America's missiles placed near the Soviets (i.e., no quid pro quo on missile removal), Kennedy offered that if all nuclear weapons were

removed from Cuba, the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba in the future. This deal allowed Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to declare that he had saved Cuba from attack, and therefore satisfied his core interests of saving face and retaining power.

This example illustrates the powerful advantage of having a deep understanding of one's opponent. Kennedy's proposal was suggested by an advisor, Tommy Thompson, who had lived with Khrushchev and had intimate knowledge of his fundamental interests. In fact, in disparate domains such as chess, poker, politics, and business, knowing the motives and likely behaviors of an adversary can illuminate strategies to secure personal gain, the downfall of one's nemesis, and even long-term peace (Axelrod, 1987; Findler, 1990; Lopes, 1976; Thagard, 1992). Negotiators, for example, must often understand the other party's interests to obtain the best outcome for themselves (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991; Thompson, 1990; Thompson & Hastie, 1990).

Given that understanding one's opponent is valuable for success in competitive interactions, it seems likely that individual characteristics associated with such understanding would prove advantageous. In this vein, two related but distinct social competences—perspective taking and empathy—have been shown to motivate social understanding across a variety of contexts. Although the terms *perspective taking* and *empathy* are often used interchangeably, there is clear evidence of their differences (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Davis, 1980, 1983; Deutch & Madle, 1975; Hoffman, 1977; Oswald, 1996). Perspective taking is a cognitive capacity to consider the world from other viewpoints and “allows an individual to anticipate the behavior and reactions of others” (Davis, 1983, p. 115). Empathy, in contrast, is an other-focused emotional response that allows one person to affectively connect with another. Sometimes labeled sympathy or compassion, empathy is often considered to be an emotion of concern experienced when

Address correspondence to Adam Galinsky, Management and Organizations, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Rd., Leverone Hall, Room 389, Evanston, IL 60208, e-mail: agalinsky@kellogg.northwestern.edu.

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witnessing another person's suffering (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987).

There is suggestive evidence that perspective taking and empathy may not have the same effects in strategic interactions. Perspective-taking ability is associated with personality characteristics such as high self-esteem and low neuroticism, whereas empathy predicts emotionality (Davis, 1980, 1983). Perspective taking, but not empathy, predicts the tendency to mimic other people's nonverbal behaviors (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), a behavioral tactic that can be helpful in negotiations (Maddux, Mullen, & Galinsky, in press). Perspective takers are able to step outside the constraints of their own immediate, biased frames of reference (Moore, 2005) and reduce egocentric perceptions of fairness in competitive contexts (though not at the expense of their own self-interest; Epley, Caruso, & Bazerman, 2006). Empathy, however, leads individuals to violate norms of equity and equality and to provide preferential treatments (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). Whereas perspective-taking tendencies predict extracting concessions from one's opponent (Neale & Bazerman, 1983), and considering an opponent's alternatives can counter the anchoring effects of the opponent's first offer (Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001), empathy is associated with cooperating in prisoner's dilemma games (Batson & Moran, 1999), even when the empathizers know that their opponent defected previously and therefore that cooperation is likely to be to their own detriment (Batson & Ahmad, 2001). Although this panoply of research suggests that perspective taking and empathy are distinct constructs, no research has systematically explored their unique influences in strategic, mixed-motive social interactions.

In the studies reported here, we both measured and manipulated perspective taking and empathy to explore their influence in two negotiation tasks that represent common and challenging barriers to understanding: conflicting positions that mask the compatibility of underlying interests (Studies 1 and 2) and differing preferences and priorities (Study 3). We sought to answer the following question: For individuals involved in mixed-motive situations, is it more effective to empathize with an opponent (have the opponent inside their heart) or to understand the opponent's thoughts and perspective (get inside the opponent's head)?

We predicted that perspective taking would be a more valuable strategy than empathy in strategic interactions. First, we believe perspective talking helps negotiators find the necessary balance between competition and cooperation, between self-interest and other-interest. Focusing only on self-interests tends to lead to excessive aggression and obstinacy, whereas focusing only on other-interests encourages excessive concession making, to the detriment of one's own outcomes. A balance of attention to both self- and other-interests is critical for facilitating creative problem solving in negotiations (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Second, we contend that for purposes of securing economically efficient outcomes, cognitive appreciation of another person's

interests is more important than an emotional connection with that person. Adam Smith (1759/2002) suggested that looking at things from an outside perspective allows individuals to override passions, such as excessive sympathy, that can impair the ability to achieve efficient outcomes. Perspective taking should allow individuals both to discover efficient, but hidden, solutions and to capture more value for themselves. In contrast, we predicted that empathy would be less effective, and might even tip the balance too far in favor of the other side's interests, leading individuals to miss opportunities for efficient exchange while also sacrificing their own potential gains.

It is important to note that the current research is the first to investigate the differential impact of perspective taking and empathy in competitive, mixed-motive interactions and the first to explore the effect of these social competencies in a negotiation task involving conflicting positions that require discovering hidden agreements. Although previous research has explored the effects of perspective taking and empathy separately in negotiations and prisoner's dilemmas (Batson & Moran, 1999; Kemp & Smith, 1994; Neale & Bazerman, 1983), none of these studies compared perspective taking with empathy, and some conflated these two constructs, both theoretically and empirically, making it difficult to pinpoint which is more important for negotiators' success. By independently manipulating and measuring perspective taking and empathy, we sought to document the differential effects of these two social competencies in strategic interactions.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 involved a negotiation over the sale of a gas station. A deal based solely on sale price was impossible. Specifically, the buyer's reservation price (the maximum he or she was authorized to pay) was lower than the seller's reservation price (the minimum he or she was willing to accept), resulting in a negative bargaining zone for sale price. However, the two parties' underlying interests were compatible: The buyer wanted to hire managers to run the station, and the seller needed help financing a sailboat trip and also needed to obtain employment after returning from the trip. Thus, the parties could agree to a sale price below the seller's reservation price, but with a stipulation of future employment. To reach a successful deal, participants had to discover this alternative solution themselves during the course of the negotiation. We predicted that, compared with participants high in empathy, those high in perspective taking would be more likely to reach an agreement that met both parties' interests.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 70 full-time M.B.A. students (51 males, 19 females) who were enrolled in a negotiations course.

*Procedure*

Participants were randomly assigned to dyads, playing the role of either buyer or seller in a dyadic negotiation involving the sale of a gas station (Goldberg, 2000). They were given confidential role instructions 1 week prior to the negotiation and were allowed 50 min to negotiate a deal face-to-face. Negotiations took place in separate rooms during class.

The main dependent measure was whether or not dyads were able to negotiate a deal based on the parties' interests. An outcome was considered successful if the sale price was not greater than the buyer's reservation price and the deal involved at least one additional term, such as a job for the seller upon return. An outcome was considered unsuccessful if it involved only the sale price of the station or if the parties reached an impasse. Thus, the outcome measure was a dichotomous variable (successful vs. unsuccessful or no deal) that was coded at the dyadic level.

*Measures of Perspective Taking and Empathy*

One week later, participants completed an on-line personality inventory, which included Davis's (1980) reliable and widely used seven-item perspective-taking and seven-item empathy scales. Items on these scales ask about tendencies toward perspective taking (e.g., "I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both") and empathy (e.g., "Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems," reverse-scored). We averaged the responses to items to arrive at a single score for each participant for each construct. Given that the main dependent variable was at the dyadic level, perspective taking and empathy were also averaged for each dyad. In addition, we assessed the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1985), using the 10-item inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), to ensure that any observed effects were independent of other major personality variables.

**Results and Discussion**

Overall, 24 of the 35 dyads (68.6%) reached a successful deal in this exercise.

*Dyad-Level Analyses*

Using simultaneous logistic regressions, we examined the effects of dyadic levels of perspective taking and empathy, the Big Five traits, and gender on the likelihood of negotiating a deal. Only dyads' perspective-taking tendencies acted as a significant predictor of whether or not a successful deal was reached (see Table 1). Consistent with our prediction that empathy might impede discovery of mutually beneficial opportunities, results showed a negative relationship between empathy and discovery of a deal, but this effect was not significant.

*Individual-Level Analyses*

We also examined perspective taking and empathy separately for each role (again controlling for the Big Five factors and gender). Results indicated that the buyer's chronic level of

**TABLE 1**

*Logistic Regression Results for Study 1: Individual Difference Variables as Predictors of Whether or Not a Deal Was Reached*

Predictor variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald(1)	<i>p</i>
Perspective taking	0.486	0.248	3.851	.050
Empathy	-0.232	0.140	2.740	.098
Gender	-3.103	1.958	2.511	.113
Extraversion	0.090	0.239	0.142	.707
Neuroticism	-0.526	0.419	1.576	.209
Openness to experience	0.429	0.258	2.774	.096
Conscientiousness	-0.875	0.493	3.157	.076
Agreeableness	-0.653	0.409	2.552	.110

**Note.** Individual difference variables were averaged for each dyad. Gender was coded according to the number of males in the dyad (0 for both female, 1 for one male and one female, 2 for two males).

perspective taking significantly predicted whether or not a deal was reached,  $b = 0.37$ ,  $Wald(1) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .023$ , whereas the seller's chronic level of perspective taking did not significantly predict the outcome,  $p > .91$ . Chronic levels of empathy for either role did not predict the outcome,  $ps > .34$ . In analyses of the Big Five traits, the only trait that significantly predicted whether or not a deal was reached was the station owner's openness to experience,  $b = 0.30$ ,  $Wald(1) = 5.91$ ,  $p = .015$ .

Perspective-taking tendencies (particularly in the buyer) increased negotiators' ability to arrive at a creative solution that met both parties' needs. Empathy, in contrast, did not prove effective in the negotiations. The advantages of perspective taking were independent of the Big 5 personality variables—evidence that perspective taking contributes unique explanatory variance in negotiations.

Although we had not predicted that the advantages of perspective taking would differ between buyers and sellers, only the buyer's perspective-taking tendency made a difference in producing a deal. However, this result is consistent with recent research showing the importance of the buyer's role in soliciting information in this gas-station negotiation (Maddux et al., in press). Although the seller needs to reveal personal information (not surprisingly, the seller's openness to experience mattered in the current study), a deal cannot be achieved unless the buyer plays an active role in soliciting and appreciating the value of the seller's disclosures. Thus, only the buyer's perspective-taking ability predicted deal making.

**STUDY 2**

We designed Study 2 to offer the first empirical manipulation contrasting perspective taking and empathy in a negotiation setting. In addition, we measured each participant's satisfaction with how the other side treated him or her during the negotiation, to further elucidate the likely benefits of each social competency in negotiations.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 152 full-time M.B.A. students<sup>1</sup> who were enrolled in a negotiations course at a business school.

### Experimental Manipulations

Participants were given confidential role instructions (with experimental manipulations) the same day they negotiated. Because buyers' perspective-taking ability proved crucial in reaching a deal in Study 1, we experimentally manipulated perspective taking (and empathy) for buyers only, using the same negotiation exercise from Study 1.

Buyers assigned to the *control condition* were simply told to focus on their own role. Buyers in the *empathy condition* were given the following instructions:

In preparing for the negotiation and during the negotiation, take the perspective of the service-station owner. Try to understand what they are *feeling*, what *emotions* they may be experiencing in selling the station. Try to imagine what you would be *feeling* in that role.

Buyers in the *perspective-taking condition* were told:

In preparing for the negotiation and during the negotiation, take the perspective of the service-station owner. Try to understand what they are *thinking*, what their *interests and purposes* are in selling the station. Try to imagine what you would be *thinking* in that role.

Following the exercise, participants indicated how satisfied they were with the way they were treated during the negotiation. Responses were made on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 7 (*extremely satisfied*).

## Results

A chi-square analysis revealed that the percentage of successful deals varied as a function of experimental condition,  $\chi^2(2, N = 76) = 6.79, p = .03$  (see Fig. 1). Dyads with a perspective-taking buyer were more likely to achieve a deal (76%) than were dyads in the control condition (39%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 6.7, p = .01$ . In contrast, empathizers (54%) had no advantage in deal making compared with control participants,  $\chi^2(1, N = 51) = 1.06, p = .30$ . The predicted advantage of perspective taking over empathizing was in the expected direction, but not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 53) = 2.89, p = .089$ .

Condition also affected the station owners' satisfaction with how the buyers treated them,  $F(2, 73) = 12.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$ . Sellers who negotiated with a buyer in the control condition had the lowest level of satisfaction ( $M = 5.0, SD = 1.0$ ), followed by sellers who negotiated with a perspective taker ( $M = 5.7, SD = 0.85$ ); sellers who negotiated with an empathic buyer expressed the most satisfaction ( $M = 6.3, SD = 0.70$ ). All

<sup>1</sup>Participants' sex was not recorded in Studies 2 and 3; the student population was approximately 70% male.

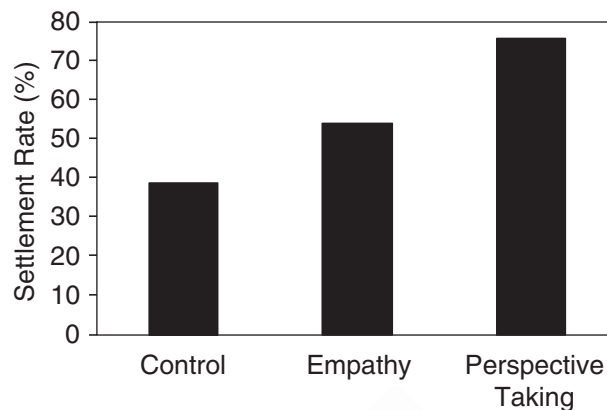


Fig. 1. Percentage of dyads reaching an agreement in Study 2 as a function of experimental condition.

three means differed significantly from each other,  $t(73)s > 2.4, ps < .02$ . Being empathized with led to the highest level of satisfaction with the negotiation process.

In Study 2, buyers' perspective taking increased the probability that a dyad would arrive at a solution that met both sides' needs. In addition, perspective taking and empathy on the part of buyers both led sellers to be more satisfied with how they were treated. Although empathy had immediate affective benefits for the other side, empathizers did not have an advantage over control participants in producing deals that would provide long-term value for themselves and their opponents. In contrast, perspective takers secured the most agreements and did so with sufficient satisfaction on the part of their opponents.

## STUDY 3

The first two experiments investigated whether perspective taking and empathy would help negotiators discover the compatibility of underlying interests in the face of seemingly conflicting positions. Oftentimes, however, a negotiation explicitly involves multiple issues for which negotiators have different priorities; negotiators can improve their outcomes by conceding on their low-priority issues in exchange for getting what they want on their high-priority issues, a technique called logrolling (Froman & Cohen, 1970). Mere compromise, or simply "splitting" all issues down the middle, results in less efficient agreements compared with making mutually beneficial trade-offs (Thompson, 1990, 2001; Tripp & Sondak, 1992).

Multi-issue negotiations highlight a dilemma negotiators face: how to find a balance between capturing value for oneself (value claiming) and maximizing the available resources for both parties (value creating; Lax & Sebenius, 1986). To be most effective, negotiators must both create as large a "pie" of resources as possible (to produce the most economically efficient agreements) and claim as much of that pie as possible (to satisfy their self-interest).

In Study 3, we manipulated perspective taking and empathy to explore how these social competencies affect the amount of both joint (i.e., dyad-level) and individual gain. We predicted that perspective taking would be more effective than empathy both in creating value and in claiming more of that increased value. In addition, we predicted that empathy might even decrease individual gain, a measure of how well negotiators protect and pursue their own interests.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 146 full-time M.B.A. students who were enrolled in a negotiations course.

### Negotiation Exercise

Individuals participated in a two-party negotiation exercise involving a job candidate and a recruiter. Eight issues were negotiated, and each negotiator was given a scoring system that detailed how much each issue was worth to him or her and what his or her preferences were on each issue. Two issues were distributive, meaning the parties' preferences were in complete opposition to each other (e.g., the candidate wanted a higher salary and the recruiter wanted to pay a lower salary, and this issue was worth the same number of points to each of them). Two issues were compatible, meaning that the parties' preferences were identical (e.g., both the candidate and the recruiter wanted the candidate to work in San Francisco, and this issue was worth same number of points to each of them). Finally, the remaining four issues were integrative, meaning negotiators had different low- and high-priority issues. For example, the candidate wanted a higher bonus and the recruiter wanted to pay a lower bonus, but the candidate cared more about this issue; that is, bonus was worth up to 4,000 points for the candidate, but only 1,600 points for the recruiter. In contrast, vacation time was worth 4,000 points for the recruiter and only 1,600 points for the candidate. Negotiators could maximize their joint gain by agreeing on the candidate's preferred bonus and the recruiter's preference for fewer vacation days. The maximum joint gain was 13,200 points.

### Procedure

The procedure was similar to that for Study 2 (participants were given their role information and negotiated in the same class session). Participants had 30 min to negotiate.

### Experimental Manipulations

Participants playing the role of the recruiter were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. As in Study 2, participants in the *control condition* were asked to consider their own role carefully. In the *empathy condition*, participants read:

In preparing for the negotiation and during the negotiation, take the perspective of the candidate. Imagine what it would *feel like* to

be in their situation. Try to visualize yourself on the other side of the table, in that different role.

In the *perspective-taking condition*, participants read:

In preparing for the negotiation and during the negotiation, take the perspective of the candidate. Try to understand what they are thinking in their situation. After reading your role, try to visualize yourself on the other side of the table, in that role, thinking as the candidate.

### Dependent Measures

We had three outcome measures. To assess the discovery of mutually beneficial trade-offs, we measured joint gain, the total points each dyad achieved together. We also coded whether dyads reached the maximum of 13,200 points or fell short. To assess individual gain, we analyzed the total points that each person obtained individually.

## Results

### Joint Gain

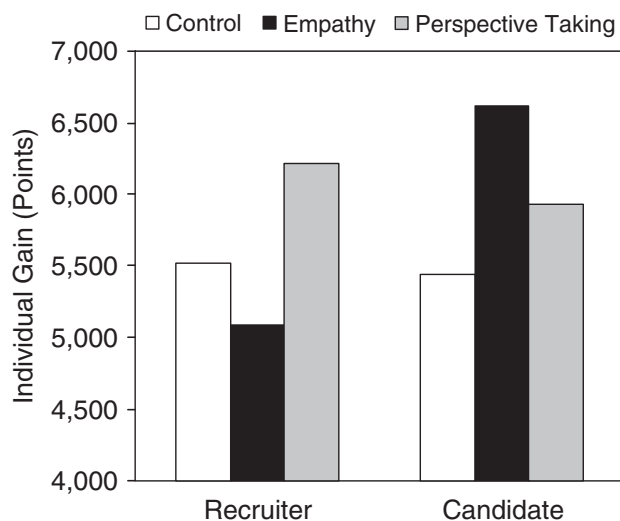
An initial one-way analysis of variance indicated a significant main effect for condition,  $F(2, 72) = 4.51, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = .115$ . Dyads in the perspective-taking condition ( $M = 12,150, SD = 1,064$ ) achieved significantly higher joint gain than dyads in the control condition ( $M = 10,961, SD = 1,614$ ),  $F(1, 45) = 8.10, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .156$ . Additionally, dyads in the empathy condition ( $M = 11,711, SD = 1,292$ ) tended to achieve more joint gain than dyads in the control condition, but this effect did not reach significance,  $F(1, 52) = 3.49, p = .067, \eta_p^2 = .064$ . Joint gain did not differ between the perspective-taking and empathy conditions,  $p = .22$ .

We next examined the proportion of dyads that maximized the overall gain by achieving 13,200 points (the best possible collective outcome). Twelve percent of dyads in the control condition, 22% in the empathy condition, and 40% in the perspective-taking condition achieved this outcome. Although these proportions did not differ overall,  $\chi^2(2, N = 73) = 5.15, p = .076$ , perspective takers were more likely to achieve the maximum joint gain than were participants in the other two conditions,  $\chi^2(1, N = 73) = 4.31, p = .038$ .

### Individual Gain

We examined individual gain as a function of experimental condition (see Fig. 2), controlling for the effect of the opposing party's individual gain because each individual was embedded in a negotiation dyad (see Maddux et al., in press).

We first conducted a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on individual gain for participants in the recruiter role (who received the instructions with the experimental manipulation). In this analysis, condition was our independent variable, and the job candidate's (opponent's) individual gain was a covariate. Results showed a significant effect of condition  $F(2, 69) = 4.02,$



**Fig. 2.** Individual gain (number of points) in Study 3 as a function of role and experimental condition. The experimental manipulation was implemented in the instructions given to recruiters.

$p = .022$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ . Perspective takers secured significantly more points ( $M = 6,220$ ,  $SD = 2,284$ ) than control participants ( $M = 5,515$ ,  $SD = 2,365$ ),  $F(1, 43) = 7.33$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .15$ , whereas empathizers ( $M = 5,092$ ,  $SD = 2,377$ ) tended to achieve even fewer individual points than control participants, although this predicted effect was not significant,  $F(1, 50) = 2.19$ ,  $p = .145$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .04$ .

We next conducted a one-way ANCOVA on individual gain for job candidates. Condition was our independent variable, and the recruiter's individual gain was a covariate. There was a significant effect of condition  $F(2, 69) = 4.76$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .12$ . Candidates who negotiated with empathizing recruiters ( $M = 6,619$ ,  $SD = 2,175$ ) achieved higher individual gain than candidates who negotiated with control recruiters ( $M = 5,446$ ,  $SD = 2,091$ ),  $F(1, 50) = 5.82$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .10$ . Candidates who negotiated with perspective-taking recruiters ( $M = 5,930$ ,  $SD = 2,129$ ) also achieved significantly more points than those who negotiated with control recruiters,  $F(1, 43) = 6.84$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .14$ . Candidates' individual gain did not differ between the perspective-taking and empathy conditions,  $F(1, 44) < 1$ ,  $p = .55$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ .

In Study 3, taking the perspective of one's opponent produced both greater joint gains and more profitable individual outcomes, compared with considering one's own role carefully (i.e., the control condition). Perspective takers achieved the highest level of economic efficiency, without sacrificing their own material gains. In contrast, empathizing recruiters received the poorest individual outcomes; the increases in joint gains in this condition went mostly to the empathizers' opponents. Extrapolating from the current data, we propose that the negotiator who achieves the best individual outcome is one who takes the perspective of an opponent who already feels empathy toward him or her.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

These three studies extend current knowledge about the relative benefits of two important social competencies—perspective taking and empathy—for navigating strategic social interactions. Perspective taking consistently resulted in greater success than empathy, regardless of whether these constructs were measured or manipulated. Perspective takers were able to uncover underlying interests to generate creative solutions when a prima facie deal was not possible (Studies 1 and 2) and crafted more efficient deals with greater collective and individual gain than did empathizers and control participants (Study 3). Thus, understanding the interests and motives of opponents in competitive decision-making interactions appears to be more valuable than connecting with them emotionally.

Empathy was generally less useful than perspective taking, and was, at times, a detriment to both discovering creative solutions and self-interest. However, it is possible that the positive interpersonal capital empathizers build up in an initial negotiation (as shown in increased levels of sellers' satisfaction in Study 2) could facilitate future agreements between negotiators, such that the outcome benefits of empathy may emerge over time. By increasing the other side's satisfaction with the negotiation process, empathy may be particularly helpful in types of negotiation other than those examined in the current studies. For example, in disputes, negotiators often come to the table angry and with a desire to be heard, and empathy may help calm them and soften outbursts that can escalate conflict. Similarly, empathy may be particularly valuable in mediation, as negotiators involved in mediation often need to be satisfied with the process before agreeing to a deal.

It is also notable that having a perspective-taking *partner* was advantageous for negotiators in all three studies. Thus, it may be beneficial for negotiators to encourage their partners to do some perspective taking, as well as empathizing. From a practical standpoint, the effects of our perspective-taking manipulations also indicate that individuals can learn to consider other viewpoints. Even brief but active perspective taking while preparing for a negotiation can yield improved individual and joint outcomes.

The current research suggests that in mixed-motive interactions, it is better to “think for” than to “feel for” one's adversaries—more beneficial to get inside their heads than to have them inside one's own heart. Given the current results, the peaceful conclusion of something as volatile as a nuclear standoff between two superpowers seems less like a surprise, and more like a predictable outcome born of effective perspective taking.

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