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Review

Negotiation across the social sciences: An interdisciplinary review

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Psychological investigations have generated numerous insights into how two parties bargain. To build on this literature, we review recent research across multiple disciplines, focusing on aspects of negotiation that have received relatively little attention, namely individual differences, multiparty negotiations, and contextual factors. Insights into individual differences are observed in the developmental psychology, artificial intelligence, and social psychology literature. Investigations in these domains show that young children can think strategically about exchange, that individual differences shape the information negotiators obtain and how they utilize information, and that situational factors can constrain or facilitate the expression of individual differences. Insights into multiparty negotiations emerge from the social networks and political science literature. Investigations in these domains explore novel multiparty dynamics, highlighting the importance of structural position in bargaining, and demonstrating that relationship history can shape coalition formation. Insights into contextual factors emerge from the economic and public health literature. Investigations in these domains challenge assumptions about core negotiation concepts such as power and alternatives. Overall, an interdisciplinary perspective on negotiation complements and enriches psychological understanding, and provides implications for interventions, future theoretical development, and empirical research.

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Introduction

Psychological research on negotiation relies on a dominant paradigm: two-party scorable games featuring a single issue or a multi-issue payoff matrix [1–3]. This paradigm frames negotiation as a task with a quantitative outcome and shows how dyads can claim value or create it through logrolling, or making efficient trade-offs across issues [4,5]. Despite the advances made, the dominance of this paradigm means that multiple features of real-world negotiations are left underexamined. In this review, we highlight three of these underexamined features: individual differences [6], multi-party processes [2], and contextual factors [6]. We identify these themes in disciplines that study negotiated exchange without predominantly relying on scorable games, including: developmental psychology, artificial intelligence, social psychology, social networks, political science, economics, and public health. Better understanding these features should enrich the theory and methodology of negotiation research.

Insights into individual differences in negotiation

Individual differences include readily visible characteristics like age and gender, and deep-level traits like ability, which serve as inputs in multiple phases of negotiation. They can set expectations for the self and others as well as influence behavior [7]. Research reviewed in this section reveals how the capacity to negotiate develops, how an emerging technology intersects negotiators' efforts to plan and approach negotiation, and how advances in theory and methodology aids in understanding the role of individual differences.

Developmental psychology

Negotiation capacity emerges early in childhood and develops with age. When given a choice, more than 50% of three-year-olds prefer to engage in logrolling over selfish, inefficient, or generous options, and older children prefer logrolling to a greater extent [6]. Young children (2–7 years old) can make counteroffers in response to a parent's proposal, and bargaining can occur if parents are attuned to the child's needs [8]. Seven-year-olds recognize the structure of a social dilemma game and can maximize gains from it and exercise attractive alternatives [9]. For older adolescents (13–18 years old), having a non-confrontational partner

encourages negotiation efforts [10], suggesting that choice of conflict behavior can be influenced, and does not always stem from innate preferences.

Other research explores behavioral and socialization differences between girls and boys, complementing adult studies of gender gaps in negotiation [11]. Girls ask for less compensation than boys following a real effort task, with the difference driven by lower perceived competence rather than differences in performance [12]. When girls try to negotiate, they are judged as having more negative (e.g., aggressive) agentic traits compared to boys and girls who do not negotiate [13]. These findings show that the capacity to understand exchange situations and social influences around exchange emerge early in development and raises the possibility that negotiation and conflict interventions could have a positive impact well before secondary or undergraduate education.

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has seen explosive growth in use [14], with evidence that it is being used for negotiation [15–18]. Because it is a general purpose tool, it can play a role in every phase of negotiation—planning, bargaining, and implementation [19,20]. Negotiators use AI in planning [18], and individual differences can shape the nature of the information AI generates. For example, demographic factors affect the content of AI responses. AI suggests a slightly but significantly higher salary for male than female candidates, and for STEM than humanities graduates [21]. Such effects could be moderated by knowledge of AI bias [22]. Along different lines, AI can provide negotiation coaching at scale [23], but benefits from such efforts favor people who can monitor and regulate their thinking [24], and have more accurate appraisal of their abilities [25].

Individual differences could shape how negotiators interact with AI, which in turn can determine psychological outcomes from the process. A salient source of subjective value in human negotiations is the quality of behavior displayed by the self and counterpart [26]. Negotiators do not act in ways that foster subjective value when bargaining with AI; they act in more value claiming ways [27], and behave less ethically with it [28]. Unsurprisingly, negotiators report lower levels of subjective value and trust after bargaining with AI than with humans [29,30], which is notable since trust is critical for cooperation in human negotiations [31]. Such effects may be conditional on human directives: AI instructed to be collaborative results in greater subjective value than when instructed to be competitive [16]. Understanding individual differences that shape AI inputs, the interpretation and utilization of AI output, and the directives given to AI promises to generate novel insights in future research.

Social psychology

Recent social psychological research highlights the need for new theoretical perspectives and methodological innovations in investigating individual differences. The personality factor of agreeableness predicts how extensively negotiators searched for information in the planning phase [32], but constraints limit the expression of this trait. Such findings show the need to adopt an interactionist perspective that considers how situational factors can enhance or inhibit individual differences in expression, rather than assuming they are uniformly expressed throughout the process [33]. Other studies investigated person-level effects, with a round-robin study showing people exhibit consistent behavior and outcomes across multiple negotiations [33], and distinct combinations of turn taking, pausing, and speaking time predicting outcomes [34]. These findings suggest future research adopt a multivariate approach to examining individual differences.

Insights into multiparty processes

The vast majority of empirical studies examine negotiation at the smallest scale possible, namely between two parties [2]. This design choice excludes understanding coalition formation processes central to real-world negotiations. Research reviewed in this section shows how relationships outside of a negotiating dyad can influence the negotiation process.

Social networks

Social network analysis provides a quantitative framework for studying multiparty relationships. Such analyses show that the structure of relationships predicts behavior and outcomes. For example, two negotiators having a common contact (i.e., triadic closure) increases problem solving behavior whereas competing for shared resources in a network decreases it [35]. This has implications for dyadic situations; interventions that increase trust could promote integrative negotiation, consistent with existing research [31]. Other findings show that the number of ties to others, or network centrality, can predict negotiation performance among MBA students [36]. An additional result reveals that network centrality mediates the relationship between gender and outcomes, suggesting that some of the gender gap in negotiation performance can be attributed to network positions.

In state-level negotiations, social network methods show that actions prior to bargaining predict coalition formation. Examining each country's speech during UN climate negotiations reveals that large carbon emitters were mentioned less, with the exception of Germany, reflecting its leadership in clean energy technologies [37]. In addition, a country is more likely to mention another if they are already connected in their extended network [37]. Coalitions in the field are not arbitrarily

formed, but emerge from existing relationships. Further incorporating social network analysis methods in negotiation research stands to enhance understanding of negotiations which extend beyond two-party situations.

Political science

Political science investigations highlight the multiparty and multilevel nature of negotiation, which often requires significant coordination to navigate. An edited volume of participant accounts at the Paris Agreement [38] shows that third parties, such as think tanks, can play a coordinating role by providing a common vocabulary for parties to use in their discussions [39]. These proceedings highlight the importance of factors difficult to model in two-party scorable games. In a crowded conference, being physically visible is of considerable importance for small coalitions as it increases their influence [40].

Coalitions are complex and dynamic entities. Across the 2000s and 2010s, the EU offered membership to Central and Eastern European nations to foster peace [41]. The new members exploited their membership and hindered EU processes, which led the EU to only offer partial membership for similar purposes. Joining a coalition is not a binary matter, because the form of joining can be more complex in practice. Outside of formal institutions, efforts by Zimbabwe's informal economy workers to negotiate a structural policy shift to allow continued survival were undermined by a fragmented constituency, a lack of perceived legitimacy, a limited window of opportunity to negotiate, and the ability of political elites to co-opt representatives [42]. These findings emphasize the need to model conceptual and physical coordinating mechanisms, expand the concept of coalition formation, and incorporate political standing as a factor in multiparty situations. Such factors influence who can negotiate with whom in the first place and the quality of the coalitions they are able to form.

Insights into contextual factors

Negotiations that affect large constituencies and stakeholder groups occur in the context of organizations, institutions, and polities [43,44]. Contextual factors such as the action of stakeholder groups and structural inequities, loom large in such negotiations but are rarely investigated in empirical research [2]. Economics and public health research show how these factors affect negotiation processes and outcomes.

Economics

Bureaucratic capacity and political dynamics are long-theorized, but rarely examined aspects of negotiation [45,46]. Countries with greater bureaucratic capacity—characterized by professionalized, coordinated, rule-based, and expert administrative systems—are more effective in translating preferences into negotiated outcomes [47]. This reframes bargaining power as a function of internal state competence that allows clear expression of preferences, a form of intraorganizational bargaining [45] that deserves greater attention for research that aspires to generalize to organizational settings. The EU–India free trade negotiations illustrate why. Indian representatives, who lacked support from domestic business constituencies, faced constraints on their flexibility in negotiating key issues in the deal, contributing to prolonged deadlock [48]. Similarly, changes in the administration and domestic coalitions in the US reopened, contested, and reshaped the renegotiation of NAFTA [49]. These findings reflect propositions that negotiations can feature hidden accountabilities or agendas [46]. These studies suggest that bargaining power is more than having a favorable alternative; it can also be derived from institutional capacity and managing political support. Contextual factors outside the scope of the negotiating parties can materially affect large constituencies affected by the outcome.

Public health

Negotiation as a mechanism used in public health to manage uncertainty, reconcile competing stakeholder interests, and address inequality. In public health negotiations, preferences, payoffs, and even issues are masked by uncertainty, asymmetric information, and budget constraints [50–52]. For example, negotiations over the introduction of new health technology involves uncertainty over the technology's benefit and the revenue it may generate, necessitating a credible third party to mediate the process [50]. Asymmetric information and uncertainty pose challenges when health systems attempt to negotiate drug prices. Some benchmarking data exist in the form of published prices, but these are subject to unpublished discounts and rebates, making them unreliable [53]. Some governments publish prices they pay for particular drugs, but health system negotiators must still decide which countries to treat as valid comparators, then determine a formula for aggregating prices across them [53]. Best alternatives are constructed dynamically, and are not fixed options as often operationalized in simulation designs.

Structural inequities can reveal themselves in negotiation. Research on COVID-19 vaccine procurement shows low income countries only received 1% of doses in the first year of production [51]. Middle income countries manufactured vaccines for the drug companies, but were forced to accept disadvantageous terms, such as advance payments with no delivery guarantee [51]. One means to address such inequities is health diplomacy, or an interdisciplinary effort to coordinate actions across borders and institutions, for which negotiation is a key

competency [54]. These findings show a need to consider uncertainty and structural inequity in negotiation theory and research.

Conclusions

We review research across multiple disciplines to highlight findings on aspects of negotiation overlooked in existing psychological research. Research in developmental psychology, AI, and social psychology show a greater need to theorize about how and why individual differences influence negotiation. Social networks and political science investigations suggest a need to consider third parties and coalition formation mechanics. Economics and public health research explore underappreciated organizational and political factors. A richer understanding of negotiation requires building on theories and findings from across the social sciences.

CRediT author statement

Daisung Jang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Project administration.

Christopher Welker: Writing - Original Draft.

Dai Quy Le: Writing - Original Draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

6. * Investigates the age at which children can engage in mutually beneficial exchange. Children as young as 3 years old prefer a mutually beneficial exchange over selfish or generous options.

12. ** Investigates gender differences in initiating negotiation among girls and boys between 6 and 12 years old. When negotiating after completing a real effort task, girls asked for less compensation compared to boys, driven by the perception they were less competent, despite no difference in competence.

13. * Examines how girls and boys are perceived by adults when they attempt to negotiate. Adults judged video stimuli of children and

evaluated girls who negotiated as having highest levels of both positive (e.g., assertive, intelligent) and negative (e.g., aggressive, bossy) agentic characteristics.

14. ** Documents the prevalent use of AI: 45% of the US population aged 18–64 have used generative AI, 27% have used AI for work in the past wee.k

16. * Examines the effect of AI counterparts instructed to be collaborative vs. competitive; collaborative AI generates greater subjective value, but competitive agents claim more value for themselves.

21. * Examines how LLMs give salary advice across demographic categories. Large language models suggest small but significantly larger salaries to men compared to women and greater salaries for STEM compared to humanities graduates.

22. * Outlines how bias can be introduced throughout the stages of machine learning, and methods to mitigate such biases.

34. * Examines conversational dynamics in negotiated simulations conducted online and found that negotiators who spoke faster and more achieved more favorable outcomes, while those who interrupted less and showed greater similarity to their counterpart achieved greater relational outcomes.

42. * Examines how workers in the informal economy sector attempt to negotiate with governments to continue their operations. Highlights numerous barriers and pressures, including a fragmented constituency, finding representatives with legitimacy, a limited window of opportunity to negotiate within the political cycle, and focus on narrow issues instead of structural reform efforts.

49. * Examines how the original NAFTA agreement was reopened, contested, and transformed into the USMCA on unequal terms. Mexico accepted a deal that reduced the security of its market access, reflecting greater US preference for protectionism. This highlights how the change in the domestic political landscape affects international economic negotiation.

51. ** Analyses negotiation documents and contracts to show how South Africa was unable to secure a binding commitment for a supply of COVID-19 vaccines or timelines for delivery in bilateral negotiations with multiple pharmaceutical companies. This was despite the country producing the vaccines under discussion.

52. ** Discusses how the negotiation process for a pandemic treaty reflect not only a technical debate over preparedness and response models, but also a deeper struggle over the kind of health governance parties want to achieve: one centered on equity and international solidarity, or one that perpetuates the logics of market forces and national sovereignty.