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Review

When and why are negotiators overly pessimistic? The psychology of under-trust in negotiation

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Research on negotiation has devoted considerable attention to the risks of misplaced trust, particularly the possibility that negotiators may be exploited by deceptive counterparts. Less attention has been given to the opposite form of trust miscalibration: under-trust, and particularly, unwarranted pessimism regarding counterparts' honesty. This review focuses on such undue distrust and proposes a misperceived motivations account to explain its emergence. According to this account, negotiators' excessive distrust stems from an asymmetry between the motives that negotiators attribute to their counterparts and the motives that actually guide those counterparts' behavior. When deciding whether to behave honestly, negotiators are driven not only by self-interest but also by concerns about moral self-image and anticipated moral emotions, which constrain dishonesty. However, when deciding whether counterparts are honest, negotiators assume that their counterparts are primarily motivated by self-interest and fail to foresee the constraining moral-identity concerns. We integrate evidence from the literature on negotiation, trust, and moral psychology to explain why pessimism is especially likely to emerge and persist in competitive bargaining contexts, highlight circumstances that may attenuate or amplify it, and identify implications for theory and research, alongside practical inferences for fostering truthful disclosure and credible honesty in negotiation.

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Introduction: expectations of honesty in negotiation

Trust plays a central role in shaping negotiation processes and outcomes [1,2]. Here, we focus on integrity-based trust (see Ref. [3] for a detailed discussion of trust bases), centering on the facet of honesty. Honesty is particularly important in negotiation contexts where asymmetric information is common and withholding or misrepresenting private information can confer strategic advantages [4–7]. Negotiators frequently need to rely on information from their counterparts about preferences, reservation prices, constraints, or outside alternatives [2,8]. When negotiators believe that their counterpart is communicating honestly, they are more willing to share information, explore mutually beneficial trade-offs, and pursue integrative agreements [8,9]. Conversely, when negotiators expect deception, they often adopt defensive strategies that restrict information exchange and reduce the likelihood of efficient outcomes [10,11].

Conceptually, it has long been acknowledged that both excessive trust (i.e., naïvety) and insufficient trust (i.e., undue pessimism) can distort social interactions [12]. However, empirical research on trust in negotiation has predominantly focused on excessive trust [13,14], emphasizing deception dynamics and strategies to help negotiators detect deception and protect themselves from exploitation (e.g., Refs. [5,8,10,15,16]). This emphasis is consistent with the prevailing assumption that competitive negotiation settings incentivize the use of dishonest tactics to strengthen one's bargaining position whenever expedient. Yet, in contrast to this predominant assumption, emerging evidence suggests that even in negotiations, a substantial proportion of individuals refrain from deception despite its potential to increase their payoff [17,18]. Consistent with this evidence, we focus on the relatively understudied case of insufficient trust and ask: When and why are negotiators overly pessimistic about their counterparts' honesty?

Our central argument is that the motivations that drive negotiators' own honest behavior differ from those they attribute to their counterparts, leading to a discrepancy between actual and expected honesty. When deciding whether to be honest, negotiators are influenced not only by self-interest, which promotes deception, but

also by moral-identity concerns, such as wanting to maintain a positive self-image and avoiding feelings of guilt, which constrain it. In contrast, when assessing their counterparts' honesty, negotiators tend to assume that others are primarily motivated by self-interest and therefore overestimate the likelihood of dishonesty.

Throughout this review, we use the terms under-trust and excessive pessimism in a descriptive, calibration-based sense. The relevant benchmark is counterparts' actual rate of honest behavior in comparable circumstances: under-trust occurs when the expected rate of honesty is lower than the rate of honesty that actually occurs, whereas excessive trust or naïveté occurs when expected honesty exceeds actual honesty. This calibration benchmark concerns the accuracy of negotiators' beliefs, not necessarily whether relying on a counterpart is the optimal behavioral response in a particular negotiation. That decision may also depend on the relative costs of trusting a dishonest counterpart versus failing to trust an honest one; accordingly, a cautious response may sometimes be reasonable even when negotiators underestimate counterparts' honesty. Our focus is therefore on systematic miscalibration in expectations of honesty, while recognizing that the optimal level of behavioral trust is context dependent.

Moral constraints on deceptive behavior

According to the standard rational economic model, individuals' decisions to deceive should be driven by a weighing of expected costs and benefits [2,19]. This assumption has been increasingly challenged by research in moral psychology and behavioral ethics, showing that people often refrain from dishonest behavior even when deception is unlikely to be detected and would increase their payoff [20–22]. These findings suggest that lying is affected, not only by external incentives, but also by intrinsic psychological concerns (e.g., Ref. [19]). A growing body of evidence indeed suggests that individuals are constrained by internal moral considerations that shape their willingness to engage in dishonest behavior. One key source of such constraint is concerns about moral self-image. People desire to maintain a positive moral self-image [20,21,23]. Accordingly, people often refrain from unethical conduct to preserve their moral sense of self [20,24].

A related mechanism through which moral considerations operate is the anticipation of moral emotions. When contemplating actions that violate moral norms, individuals often anticipate experiencing emotions such as guilt or shame [25]. These anticipated emotions introduce psychological costs that can offset potential material gains, thereby discouraging unethical behavior [26,27]. Consistent with this account, experimental evidence shows that the expectation of negative moral emotions reduces the likelihood of dishonest conduct [25,28].

Importantly, these moral constraints operate even in competitive contexts such as negotiation. Although bargaining situations often highlight strategic incentives, evidence suggests that negotiators remain sensitive to moral considerations. As underlined by Gaspar & Schweitzer [29], emotions play a key role in negotiations. Negotiators are concerned about how they will feel about their behaviors, and these concerns in turn inform their decisions and actions. Correspondingly, negotiators who engage in deceptive tactics often report experiencing guilt and reduced satisfaction following the interaction [30], and anticipating guilt reduces negotiators' deception toward counterparts who are perceived as trustworthy [6]. In addition, negotiators tend to lie less when directly asked about private information they might strategically wish to conceal. This may be attributed to the fact that answering such direct questions dishonestly requires lying by commission, which is less morally acceptable, and thus intensifies one's moral self-image threat and the related anticipated guilt [6,11,17,31,32].

A key question is whether negotiators recognize these internal moral constraints when predicting their counterparts' behavior.

Expectations about moral concerns in negotiations

Negotiation settings are particularly conducive to distrust, partly due to the fixed-pie bias, which is the tendency to assume that one party's gain necessarily comes at the other's expense [33]. This bias fosters a competitive mindset in which negotiators view counterparts as primarily self-interested and potentially exploitative. Consistent with this view, research shows that negotiators often discount offers simply because they come from the opposing party [34] and evaluate offers from human counterparts more cynically than identical offers generated randomly [35].

Correspondingly, negotiators' expectations of others' honesty are often lower than their own self-reported honesty [18]. Extending this observation, Garber et al. [17] documented an "honesty gap," whereby buyers underestimated sellers' actual honesty in distributive buyer-seller negotiations. The gap was assessed by comparing buyers' expectations that sellers would honestly disclose strategically disadvantageous information with sellers' actual disclosure behavior under the same negotiation conditions. Thus, under-trust refers to buyers expecting lower levels of honesty than sellers actually exhibited. This gap appeared to stem from a misperception of counterparts' motivations: whereas sellers' behavior was shaped in part by concerns about

moral self-image and guilt, buyers assumed sellers were driven primarily by self-interest. Further supporting this account, the honesty gap increased when sellers' moral-identity concerns were situationally activated but decreased when buyers were prompted to consider sellers' concerns about moral self-image and guilt. Together, these findings reveal that under-trust in negotiation arises from a systematic asymmetry: negotiators incorporate moral motivations when deciding how to behave, yet they rely primarily on incentive-based reasoning when predicting others' actions.

Why pessimism persists

Competitive settings are particularly likely to foster distrust because trust exposes individuals to the possibility of intentional betrayal. Research suggests that losses resulting from human betrayal are experienced as more aversive than equivalent losses caused by chance or impersonal risk [36,37]. This phenomenon, referred to as betrayal aversion, can lead negotiators to adopt overly cautious strategies to avoid exploitation, even at the expense of potentially beneficial mutual gains [38,39].

Furthermore, competitive settings foster cynical interpretations of others' behavior and communication. Negotiators who expect their counterparts to be primarily motivated by self-interest may view counterparts' actions, even cooperative or generous ones, as strategic attempts to advance personal interests [40]. Moreover, distrust often precludes the very interactions that could reveal counterparts' trustworthiness. Pessimistic assumptions about counterparts' honesty induce defensive and deceptive communication in negotiation [41]. Because pessimistic assumptions tend to inhibit negotiators' ability to elicit and recognize signals of honesty, once these assumptions emerge, they are difficult to amend. In addition, unlike unwarranted trust, which frequently generates clear feedback when a counterpart proves dishonest, unwarranted distrust often leaves negotiators unaware of the gains they forgo. This asymmetry is particularly pronounced in negotiations, where honesty is difficult to verify because critical information remains private [2,37]. Consequently, opportunities to learn that distrusted counterparts were trustworthy are rare, allowing unwarranted distrust to persist over time.

Finally, distrust in competitive settings is often socially defensible. Negotiators are rarely criticized for overcaution, whereas misplaced trust can carry reputational costs. People often attribute responsibility for deception not only to deceivers but also to deceived parties, who are expected to anticipate the possibility of deception and take appropriate precautions [42]. Thus, individuals may err on the side of distrust because the social costs of being perceived as naïve exceed those associated with being overly distrustful.

Together, these dynamics create a self-reinforcing tendency to underestimate others' honesty, helping explain why negotiators may remain overly pessimistic even when their counterparts are more trustworthy than expected.

Implications for theory, research, and practice

The evidence reviewed here suggests negotiators' expectations about honesty do not necessarily reflect actual behavior. Although strategic incentives undoubtedly influence bargaining conduct, concerns about moral self-image and anticipated moral emotions also shape behavior and often constrain dishonesty. When negotiators underestimate these moral identity constraints, systematic pessimism about their counterparts' honesty may emerge.

Much of the existing literature has focused on excessive trust and the dangers of naivete. While these risks remain important, insufficient trust represents a distinct form of miscalibration that can also undermine negotiation outcomes.

Importantly, suspicion itself is not necessarily detrimental to negotiation. Sinaceur [43] distinguishes between suspicion and distrust. He conceptualizes suspicion as ambiguity about a counterpart's motives and demonstrates that this state can promote information search and, under some conditions, enhance value creation. The problem addressed in our review is therefore not suspicion, but rather unwarranted pessimism about honesty — that is, expectations that fall short of counterparts' actual honesty, which may lead to distrust and thus inhibit information exchange and value creation. Such unwarranted pessimism can shape strategic choices, lead negotiators to misinterpret genuine gestures and favorable offers, discourage information sharing, and reduce the likelihood of reaching mutually beneficial agreements [1,33,39]. Future research may benefit from examining the boundary conditions of the honesty gap. Contextual factors such as stakes, reputational incentives, or repeated interaction may similarly influence both honest behavior and expectations about honesty, potentially lessening the difference between expected and actual honesty. Cultural context may also moderate the gap. Recent cross-cultural work highlights the unique centrality of the "*harmony concern*", the motivation to preserve relationships and avoid conflict, in East Asian cultures [44]. Thus, intra-cultural East Asian negotiations may be characterized by expectations that counterparts are predominantly motivated to pursue harmony, rather than self-interest, which in turn should reduce pessimism. In contrast, in intercultural negotiations, differences in norms and communication styles can make trustworthiness more difficult to assess, thereby intensifying pessimism [45].

A practical implication of our approach is that negotiators should treat trust not only as something to assess, but also as something to actively cultivate. As we emphasized at the outset, trust is a prerequisite for effective negotiation because it enables disclosure, problem solving, and agreement quality. Importantly, trust is co-constructed: both parties contribute to whether trust emerges and whether trustworthy behavior is encouraged or inhibited [42]. This shared-responsibility view shifts attention from merely detecting deception to actively shaping interaction conditions that make honesty more likely. The above review implies that to increase counterparts' truthful disclosure of information, negotiators should place them in situations that evoke moral identity concerns and heighten the extent to which dishonesty would threaten their moral self-image and increase their anticipated guilt. One example is prompting counterparts with direct questions for which dishonesty would require active lying [17,31,32]. Another potentially effective approach is to provide counterparts with multiple opportunities to disclose truthful information. As suggested by Garber et al. [17], repeated opportunities to disclose the truth may heighten anticipated guilt and concerns about moral self-image associated with continued concealment.

Our approach also highlights that to foster honesty in negotiations, it is important to consider the dyadic context and recognize that it is not only the focal negotiators' actual honesty that matters, but also the counterparts' perceptions of their honesty. As advocated by Chaudhry & Wald [46], when dealing with skeptical listeners, honest speakers should be concerned about proving the credibility of their messages. This view also dovetails recent work suggesting that honesty encompasses a broad range of behaviors that include not only revealing true information but also fostering others' understanding of the truth [47].

To summarize, understanding when and why pessimistic expectations arise represents an important step toward developing a more complete account of trust and honesty in strategic interaction. Focusing on underestimation, rather than overestimation, of the likelihood of counterparts' honest behavior, may help foster more efficient and mutually beneficial negotiations, when feasible.

CRediT author statement

Shira Garber: Conceptualization, theoretical framing, literature synthesis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

Yoella Bereby-Meyer: Conceptualization, theoretical framing, literature synthesis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

Simone Moran: Conceptualization, theoretical framing, literature synthesis, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

All authors contributed equally to the conceptual development, theoretical framing, literature synthesis, writing, and revision of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

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

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** of outstanding interest

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