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Review

Faking feelings: Emotional deception in negotiation

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Emotional deception – the intentional misrepresentation of emotions – is pervasive in negotiations and everyday interactions. In this article, we review and extend theory and research on emotional deception in negotiations. We argue that emotional deception is a distinct form of deception with important economic, relational, and psychological consequences for both deceivers and their targets. Specifically, we define emotional deception, examine how it is perceived , and review its antecedents and consequences. We conclude by identifying promising directions for future research on emotional deception.

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Introduction

More than a century ago, a character in Mark Twain's [1] *Was It Heaven? Or Hell?* questioned why we treat spoken lies as uniquely deceptive, asking, "Why will you humbug yourselves with that foolish notion that no lie is a lie except a spoken one? What is the difference between lying with your eyes and lying with your mouth?" Through this character, Twain conveys an enduring insight: people deceive others not only by misrepresenting facts (e.g., Ref. [2–8]), but also by misrepresenting their emotions [9–13]. We refer to this pervasive phenomenon as emotional deception.

Although emotional deception occurs in many contexts, it plays a particularly important role in negotiation [9,11–13]. Negotiators exaggerate anger to gain concessions, conceal excitement to avoid revealing how much they value an offer, and display confidence they do not genuinely feel to influence counterparts' beliefs and decisions. Because emotions communicate information about preferences, intentions, and bargaining positions and influence targets' emotions (for a discussion, see Ref. [9,11]), emotional deception can substantially influence the negotiation process and outcomes.

In this article, we review and integrate theory and research on emotional deception in negotiation. We define emotional deception, examine how negotiators perceive it, and review its antecedents and consequences, with particular attention to its complex effects on deceivers and their targets. We also identify opportunities for future research on emotional deception in negotiations and interpersonal interactions. In all, our review suggests that emotional deception is a distinct and consequential form of deception – one that is more permissible than informational deception yet still carries profound economic, relational, and psychological consequences for deceivers and their targets.

Definition of emotional deception

We define *emotional deception* as the intentional misrepresentation of emotions (see also [11]). People can misrepresent emotions through both explicit claims (e.g., "I'm outraged!") and emotionally diagnostic cues (e.g., furrowing their brow to feign frustration). In negotiation, emotional deception exploits targets' reliance on emotional expressions as a source of information (e.g., about others' limits or intentions) and their tendency to experience emotions in response to others' emotional displays (e.g., strategically expressed anger can elicit fear; see Ref. [14–16]). In this article, we focus on *self-interested* emotional deception – a particularly problematic form of deception intended to benefit deceivers and harm targets [10].

Types of emotional deception

Emotional deception can take many different forms in negotiations. In early research, Barry [9] identified specific tactics that negotiators use to strategically misrepresent their emotions in negotiation (see also [17]). For instance, negotiators can express false disappointment, strategically simulate anger, or pretend to be bored during the negotiation interaction [9].

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More recently, Kang and Schweitzer [18] distinguished between *up-displays* of emotion and *down-displays* of emotion. In contrast to up-displays of emotion, which involve the exaggeration or fabrication of emotion, down-displays of emotion involve the suppression of emotion.

Interestingly, how people typically misrepresent their emotions in negotiations differs from how they misrepresent their emotions in non-negotiation contexts [18,19]. For instance, negotiators may strategically up-display outrage (in an attempt to extract concessions from a counterpart) or down-display happiness after receiving a generous offer (in an attempt to avoid having to make negotiation concessions). In contrast, in non-negotiation contexts, people often up-display positive emotions and down-display negative emotions [19].

Perceptions of emotional deception

Studies indicate that emotional deception is perceived as more permissible than informational deception (for a discussion, see Ref. [11]). For instance, Fulmer et al. [17] found that individuals perceive emotional deception as more ethically appropriate than informational deception. Even so, negotiators who genuinely express emotion are perceived as more moral than those who use emotional deception [20].

Interestingly, some forms of emotional deception are perceived as more permissible than other forms of emotional deception. For instance, Kang and Schweitzer [18] found that observers consistently perceive down-displays of emotion as more permissible than corresponding up-displays. Their studies show that the direction of emotional misrepresentation is a critical dimension shaping perceptions of emotional deception, supporting the broader finding that passive forms of deception are viewed as more permissible than active forms (see Ref. [21]).

Antecedents of emotional deception

Negotiators are motivated to use emotional deception to advance both their economic and relational goals. For example, negotiators may misrepresent emotions to extract concessions or improve deal terms, as well as to build rapport and influence interpersonal perceptions (e.g., feigning laughter in response to a counterpart's joke; [22–24]).

Emotional intelligence may play an important role in shaping the use of emotional deception [9,13]. In a recent paper, Gaspar, Methasani, and Schweitzer [13] proposed a theoretical model to understand the interplay between emotional intelligence — the ability to perceive and express, understand, regulate, and use emotions [25,26] — and deception in strategic interactions. In contrast to prior research portraying emotional intelligence as uniformly beneficial, Gaspar et al. [13] argue that emotionally intelligent negotiators are more likely to use emotional deception — and to use it effectively. For instance, negotiators with strong emotion regulation abilities may be particularly effective at down-displaying their emotions to mislead counterparts.

Consequences of emotional deception in negotiation

Emotional and inferential responses to emotional deception

Prior theory and research suggest that emotional deception can profoundly influence the emotions of targets and their inferences (for a discussion, see Ref. [11]). Specifically, targets may experience either the misrepresented emotion (through emotional contagion) or a complementary emotion [11,15,27]. Targets may also use the misrepresented emotions of others as a source of social information, making inferences about negotiators' preferences, limits, and intentions (e.g., Ref. [9,11,14,16,27,28]). Together, these emotional reactions and social inferences shape their negotiation decisions and outcomes. These processes are consistent with the Interpersonal Emotion Deception Model (IEDM; [14]) and emotion-as-social-information (EASI) perspective [15].

Consequences of (Un)detected emotional deception

In general, undetected emotional deception tends to benefit deceivers and harm targets. For instance, negotiators can strategically express anger to extract concessions and improve their negotiation outcomes (e.g., Ref. [16,29–31]). Negotiators may also misrepresent general positive emotions to increase the likelihood of reaching an agreement [28], sadness to elicit concern and secure concessions [32], or gratitude to build trust and increase cooperation.

In contrast, detected emotional deception tends to harm deceivers. Detected emotional deception undermines interpersonal trust [33], and trust that is damaged by deception is difficult to repair [19,34,35], particularly if deception is interpreted as a reflection on the negotiator's moral character (for a discussion on moral character, see Ref. [36]). Detected emotional deception may also elicit negative emotional reactions (such as moral outrage) in targets and increase their desire for retaliation or retribution. Experimental studies reveal that people routinely punish those who use self-interested informational deception [37–39] — even when punishment is personally costly [40].

Toward a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of emotional deception

Other research provides a more nuanced understanding of the consequences of emotional deception. First, the self-interested benefits of emotional deception depend critically on the characteristics of the negotiation structure and process. For instance, misrepresenting anger to extract concessions and increase negotiation outcomes [16,30,31] is effective only when (1) targets have no possibility of responding with deception themselves and (2) the consequences of rejecting deceivers' offers are high (e.g., weak outside options; [30,31]). Further, strategically expressing sadness to elicit concern and secure concessions is effective only when the negotiation provides targets with reasons to experience other-concern for the expressor (e.g., when targets perceive the expressor as low power or construe the relationship as collaborative; [32]).

Second, although undetected emotional deception can improve the economic outcomes of deceivers, it may also impose psychological costs on deceivers. In a recent study, Hunsaker, Zhang, and Rees [41] find that feigning anger reduces deceivers' subjective evaluation of the negotiation process and outcome ([42]; see also [43]). They also find that this effect is driven by guilt, such that feigning anger increases feelings of guilt and, in turn, diminishes deceivers' self-concept and subjective value [41].

Third, deceivers may be unexpectedly influenced by the emotions that they misrepresent. In a series of studies, Campagna et al. [27] identified a "blowback" effect whereby negotiators who misrepresent their emotions actually experience these emotions themselves. Specifically, they found that negotiators who feign anger subsequently experience genuine anger, and those who feign happiness subsequently experience genuine happiness. These emotions, in turn, can influence their own negotiation decisions and outcomes (e.g., Ref. [27]).

Fourth, though early research suggests that detected emotional deception undermines trust [33], more recent research suggests that it can actually increase trust. In a series of studies, Levine and Wald [44] showed that observers who recognized that professionals were strategically feigning happiness in the face of personal hardship nevertheless perceived them as more competent and trustworthy (see also [20]). This finding is consistent with evidence that, in some occupations, using (informational) deception can signal competence [45].

Finally, the emotional responses that targets experience are not entirely predictable. Although deceivers may intend to elicit a specific emotion, targets do not always respond as expected. In some cases, targets may experience complementary emotions; in others, they may mirror the misrepresented emotion (e.g., feigned anger elicits anger). Empirical findings on the strategic expression of anger illustrate this variability. For instance, whereas Van Kleef, De Dreu, and Manstead [16] find that expressed anger can induce fear in counterparts, Campagna et al. [27] show that it can provoke anger.

Conclusion and future research

In this article, we review and extend theory and research on emotional deception. In this process, we advance our understanding of the characteristics, causes, and consequences of emotional deception in negotiations.

Future research should more systematically examine the characteristics of emotional deception. In particular, scholars should develop integrative frameworks that classify emotional misrepresentation along multiple dimensions such as direction (up-vs. down-displays), valence (positive vs. negative), intensity (subtle vs. extreme), and intent (self-interested vs. prosocial). Such frameworks would clarify the structure of emotional deception and enable more precise predictions about its use and consequences.

Future research should also employ diverse methodological approaches to more fully capture the consequences of emotional deception. In particular, field research is critical for understanding real-world outcomes, such as reputational effects, and may reveal patterns that diverge from existing experimental findings. For example, although experimental research suggests that emotional deception can reduce subjective value by inducing guilt in deceivers [41], in practice, the positive emotion associated with negotiating a highly favorable outcome — such as securing an exceptional deal on a new luxury SUV after strategically misrepresenting anger — may offset or even outweigh these psychological costs (e.g., "cheater's high"; [46]).

Future research is also needed to examine how deceivers monitor their targets. We propose that emotional deception belongs to a broader class of monitoring-dependent deception (see Ref. [47]), in which deceivers benefit from monitoring their targets' reactions to their deception. Consequently, we expect the effectiveness of emotional deception to depend on deceivers' ability to accurately interpret those reactions and adapt their emotional displays and behavior in response. Understanding when and how deceivers monitor, interpret, and adapt to their targets' reactions represents an important opportunity for future research.

CRediT author statement

Joseph Gaspar: Conceptualization; Writing - Original Draft. **Redona Methasani**: Conceptualization; Writing - Original Draft. **McKenzie Rees**: Conceptualization; Writing - Review & Editing.

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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Further information on references of particular interest

2. * This paper demonstrates that the economic and relational consequences of deception (e.g., interpersonal trust) differ depending on the relative frequency with which individuals use deception.

20. * This research shows that negotiators who use emotional deception are perceived to be less moral, but that the use of deception can increase perceived competence, leading to tradeoffs in how targets are selected as partners or opponents in future negotiations.

22. * This paper examines humor as a pervasive and influential managerial tool that can shape communication, trust, cooperation, and organizational dynamics. The authors develop a framework for studying organizational humor, distinguish it from broader social humor, and identify key research gaps and barriers that have limited humor scholarship.

24. * This paper introduces Humor Intelligence (HI) as a distinct form of intelligence, separate from both general intelligence (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EI). It conceptualizes HI as comprising three components (production, perception, and prediction) and develops a measure to assess the ability to generate humor.

39. ** This chapter conceptualizes negotiation as a dynamic social interaction. It outlines key phases of negotiation and highlights how factors such as emotion, communication, and situational dynamics influence negotiation processes and outcomes.