Conflict issues matter: how conflict issues influence negotiation

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Summary

This dissertation deals with the effects of conflict issues on negotiation processes. Negotiation is a discussion between two (or more parties) aimed at resolving opposing preferences (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Those opposing preferences can be based on three different conflict issues; interests (the division of scarce resources), intellectual issues (what is the right answer?), or evaluative issues (what is good or bad?). Most negotiation research has focused on one type of conflict issue, namely interests. This is unfortunate because negotiations often contain intellectual and evaluative issues, such as different interpretations of information or different personal norms and values. Although some scholars (Deutsch, 1975) acknowledge that different conflict issues affect negotiation processes, little research exists and little is known about the influence of different conflict issues on the subsequent negotiation. This dissertation attempts to fill this void.

In Chapter 1, a typology of conflict issues is presented. A negotiation about interests arises when interdependent individuals or groups have opposing preferences that are based on different personal interests such as the attainment of money, time, personal benefits or other scarce resources. A negotiation about an intellectual issue arises when interdependent individuals or groups have opposing preferences that are based on different interpretations of an objectively verifiable issue. An example is a discussion whether a jail penalty is more effective against recidivism than a monetary fine. Issues like these can be objectively verified, for example by studying the recidivism statistics. A negotiation about an evaluative issue arises when interdependent individuals or groups have opposing preferences that are based on different ideas about an issue that has no single demonstrably correct answer, such as norms and values. An example is a discussion whether a jail sentence is more just than a monetary fine.

The primary focus of the experiments reported in Chapter 2, 3 and 4 was the effect of conflict issues on several aspects of negotiation. A new negotiation paradigm was developed in which students took the role of lawyer or district
attorney. They negotiated about penalties for several offenders. The lawyer always aimed for low monetary fines, and the district attorney always aimed for long jail penalties. The conflict issue was manipulated by altering the underlying reason why the lawyer and district attorney aimed for these penalties. In the negotiation about interests, the preferences for penalties were based upon self-interest in terms of personal career and promotion. In the intellective negotiation the preferences for penalties were based upon different information about the effectiveness of penalties. Effectiveness is an intellective issue because it can be measured objectively. In the evaluative negotiation, the preferences for penalties were based upon different ideas about the justness of penalties. Justness is an evaluative issue because there is no universal standard for justness, justice judgements are based on personal norms and values.

Chapter 2 focused on negotiation communication as a function of the conflict issue. Results showed that conflict issues affected the content of the negotiators' argumentation. Parties were more likely to 'beat around the bush' – avoid talking about the real conflict issue – when the negotiation considered interests rather than intellective or evaluative issues. That is, parties in negotiations about interests did not mention the actual conflict issue, their personal interest in their career, but rather used other kinds of arguments to justify their preferences for a penalty. In negotiations about intellective and evaluative issues, parties were more likely to refer to the actual conflict issue in their arguments for or against penalties. It was further shown that individuals beat around the bush for strategic reasons. Beating around the bush was considered more strategic than talking openly about personal interests. Not beating around the bush was considered honest but not very smart.

At first blush beating around the bush may seem wise in a conflict of interest, because it avoids the negative consequences of revealing self-interest. However, beating around the bush is effective only to the extent that one's opponent does not discover one's position in a negotiation is based upon self-interest rather than the claimed desire to establish fairness or to find the truth. In addition, beating around the bush may hinder integrative negotiation because tradeoffs that would be beneficial to both parties may go unnoticed.
Chapter 3 focused on negotiation perception, negotiation behavior and negotiation outcomes as a function of the conflict issue. Results showed that individuals in negotiations about interests had stronger fixed-pie perceptions (that is, parties in negotiations about interests had stronger tendencies to assume that the other party has opposed preferences) and lower intentions to cooperate than parties in negotiations about evaluative issues, with intellective negotiations taking an intermediate position. Moreover, it was found, in laboratory as well as in field research, that parties in negotiations about interests, despite their lower willingness to cooperate, engaged in higher levels of cooperative, problem solving behavior. As a consequence, parties in negotiations about interests reached higher joint outcomes than parties in negotiations about intellective and evaluative issues.

To explain these seemingly opposed findings, it was argued that individuals in negotiations about interests are more likely to follow a differentiation-before-integration pattern than individuals in negotiations about intellective or evaluative issues. A differentiation-before-integration pattern means that individuals start with competitive distributive behavior but after a while, when costly impasse looms, they switch to integrative behavior and seek mutual, rather than personal, benefit (Walton & McKersie, 1965, see also Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993).

Chapter 4 focused on the influence of conflict issues on this pattern. It was shown that the pattern of differentiation-before-integration was more likely to appear in negotiations about interests than in negotiation about evaluative issues. Parties in negotiations about evaluative issues tend to stuck with distributive forcing behavior. They tried to persuade each other to give in, and did not reconcile each others' interests via tradeoffs.

The switch from distributive forcing behavior to integrative problem-solving behavior seemed to be triggered by temporary impasses. Temporary impasses are moments in the negotiation in which the parties temporarily postpone their negotiation without having reached an agreement. Stepping back from and reflecting upon the negotiation during a temporary impasse may facilitate a switch from competitive, distributive behavior to more
cooperative integrative behavior. In Chapter 4, we showed that higher levels of temporary impasses in early stages of negotiations about interests, especially in combination with high resistance to yielding, were related to higher levels of integrative behavior later in the negotiation.

Results in Chapter 4 also showed that the pattern of differentiation-before-integration and concomitant high joint outcomes in negotiations about interests are restricted to circumstances that promote the use of integrative behavior, namely high resistance to yielding. It was found that parties in negotiations about interests only reached higher negotiation outcomes than parties in negotiations about evaluative issues when they had high resistance to yielding (operationalized as low time pressure), but not when they had low resistance to yielding (operationalized as high time pressure).

This dissertation shows that different conflict issues consistently affect what negotiators say, what they think, what they do and what they get. The effects of conflict issues are found in laboratory as well as in the field, suggesting that the influence of conflict issues is robust throughout different situations. The fact that conflict issues influence so many aspects of negotiation, suggests that different conflict issues trigger different ‘mental models’ of negotiation (Bazerman et al. 2000). Interests trigger a negotiation model of give-and-take and tradeoffs, whereas intellective and evaluative issues trigger a negotiation model of argumentation and persuasion. Thus, conflict issues matter. In fact, they matter a lot.