



Challenge and threat responses to anger communication in coalition formation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 22 October 2012

JEL classification:

DO3
C72
C78
C92

PsycINFO classification:

3020
2540

Keywords:

Bargaining theory
Psychophysiology
Negotiation
Motivation and emotion
Anger

ABSTRACT

Research on multiparty negotiation has investigated how parties form coalitions to secure payoffs but has not assessed the underlying self-regulatory and physiological principles. Integrating insights from research on the social functions of emotions and the bio-psychosocial model as proposed by Blascovich and colleagues, we assessed threat and challenge responses to anger communication in a three-player coalition setting. Depending on condition, participants were confronted with an angry message from either their initially-preferred coalition partner or from both their preferred and not-preferred coalition partner. Results showed that this manipulation had an impact on the cardiovascular (CV) response of participants and their subsequent behavior. In the “preferred player angry” condition participants displayed a CV-pattern indicative of challenge while in the “all player angry” condition participants displayed a CV-pattern indicative of threat. Moreover, compared to threatened participants, challenged participants were more likely to switch coalition partner. We discuss the implications of these results for theorizing on emotions, coalition formation, and the BPSM.

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1. Introduction

Negotiation is a useful and often non-violent way to resolve conflict. It can be defined as the process in which two or more parties try to resolve a (perceived) divergence of interest by exchanging offers and counter offers (Lewicki, Saunders, & Barry, 2006). When two parties negotiate, they face the difficult task of reaching an agreement; they may succeed, or may fail. When three parties negotiate it becomes more complex. Now, two parties may reach an agreement whereas the third party may not be included in the deal. This process of coalition formation is what is central in the current paper. We draw attention to the fact that negotiation is often a heated process which may give rise to intense negative emotions (Allred, 1999) and test how coalition bargainers respond to anger (Van Beest, Van Kleef, & Van Dijk, 2008). We build on prior research that has addressed the interpersonal effects of anger in negotiation (for review see Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2010), but note that this research has overlooked the precise self-regulatory processes that are caused by anger. More specifically, by integrating negotiation research with principles derived from the biopsychosocial model (BPSM; Blascovich, 2008a,b), we examine how angry messages from potential coalition partners induce cardiovascular indices of *challenge* or *threat* motivational states, and how these states affect the decision to form a specific coalition.

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2. Coalition formation

Early theorizing about coalition formation has its roots in game theory, assuming that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest (for a review of this approach see, e.g., Kahan & Rapoport, 1984; Komorita, 1984; Komorita & Parks, 1995; Murnighan, 1978). In line with this assumption one of the most replicated findings is that individuals rather share payoffs with few others in a small coalition than with many others in a large coalition, leaving excluded parties often with zero outcomes as well as negative feelings (e.g., Swaab, Kern, Medvec, & Diermeier, 2009; Van Beest & Williams, 2006; Williams, 2007).

More recent theorizing has taken a different approach to study coalition formation. In contrast to comparing the predictive outcome of various coalition theories to the actual outcome of a coalition game, this approach is more focused on the underlying psychological processes by varying structural aspects of the situation (Polzer, Mannix, & Neale, 1998; Van Beest, Van Dijk, & Wilke, 2004a,b) and by stressing that individuals differ in what they value during negotiations (Ten Velden, Beersma, & De Dreu, 2007; Van Beest, Van Dijk, De Dreu, & Wilke, 2005; Van Beest, Wilke, & Van Dijk, 2003). Adding to the assumption that people may be motivated by self-interest, this line of research assumes that people are concerned how their actions affect the outcomes of those who are included and excluded from a deal (Van Beest & Van Dijk, 2007).

A relevant example of this latter approach is the work by Van Beest et al. (2008) who considered how coalition behavior is affected by anger communication. Inspired by the social-functional account of emotions (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Morris & Keltner, 2000; Oatley & Jenkins, 1992; Parkinson, 1996; Van Kleef et al., 2010) Van Beest et al. reasoned that coalition bargainers may adjust their offers when confronted with potential coalition partners who communicate anger about the offer that is on the table. In contrast to research on bilateral negotiations documenting that anger communications may increase the payoffs of those that communicate anger because individuals want to avoid costly impasse (e.g., Sinaceur & Tiedens, 2006; Sinaceur, Van Kleef, Neale, Adam, & Haag, 2011; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004a,b; Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006; for a review see Van Kleef, Van Dijk, Steinel, Harinck, & Van Beest, 2008) results showed that anger may seriously hurt the bargaining outcomes of those who communicate it (Van Beest et al., 2008). In three studies it was shown that coalition bargainers simply do not want to form a coalition with angry coalition partners. Coalition partners who express anger are excluded from the coalition and therefore end up with inferior payoffs.

In summary, research on coalition formation has shifted from the more rational economic view to a more dynamic and interactive view, in which interpersonal concerns have a more prominent place. However, this more interactive view may have gone somewhat at the expense of the more intrapersonal motivational and self-regulatory processes underlying behavior in such situations. In the current work we aim to fill this void by integrating work on the interpersonal aspects of bargaining with a specific self-regulation model, namely the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat (BPSM; Blascovich, 2008a,b). More specifically, we examine whether and when anger communications of potential coalition partners induce a cardiovascular pattern indicative of either threat or challenge motivational states, and how these cardiovascular states affect subsequent coalition behavior.

Note that this psychophysiological approach is quite different from prior research that assessed how angry messages can be interpreted as threatening messages (Sinaceur et al., 2011). The aim of this prior research was to disentangle the effect of anger and threat on concessions in bilateral negotiations. Results showed that participants made more concessions to a counterpart communicating threat messages without emotional content than to a counterpart communicating anger, and that the effect of anger communications on concessions was mediated by self-reported threat. In the current work we built on this previous work and extend it in two important ways. First, we move beyond the concept of threat and also address its motivational counterpart, namely challenge, to be better able to examine in more detail the diverse motivational and behavioral consequences that anger communication during coalition formation might have. Second, as will be explained in more detail below, we measure the motivational states of challenge and threat using cardiovascular indicators.

3. The biopsychosocial model

The BPSM by Blascovich and colleagues (Blascovich, 2008a,b; Blascovich & Mendes, 2010; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) describes specific cardiovascular (CV) markers of the motivational states of threat and challenge during so-called motivated performance situations (e.g., a job interview, bargaining, giving a speech, making an investment decision). The appraisal part of the BPSM describes challenge and threat motivational states as the outcome of an evaluation of the motivated performance situation in terms of the *demands* of the situation (e.g., required effort, danger, uncertainty) and the *resources* the person brings into the situation in order to deal with these demands (e.g., skills, support, dispositions). When demands outweigh resources a threat motivational state emerges, whereas when resources approach or exceed demands a challenge motivational state emerges (Blascovich, 2008a,b).

Importantly, the BPSM also describes how these motivational states can be measured in a continuous, online, and non-reactive way using a combination of four CV-measures: heart rate (HR), pre-ejection period (PEP; an index of left ventricular contractile force), cardiac output (CO; the amount of blood pumped by the heart, in liters per minute), and total peripheral resistance (TPR; an index of net constriction versus dilation in the arterial system). Challenge is marked by increased activation of the sympathetic-adrenomedullary (SAM) axis which—through the release of epinephrine—leads to vasodilation in the large skeletal muscle beds and bronchi resulting in an overall decline in systemic vascular resistance (i.e., a decrease in

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