

“I am Disgusted by Your Proposal”: The Effects of a Strategic Flinch in Negotiations

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Abstract To flinch in negotiations refers to verbal or physical displays of shock, disgust, or disbelief made in response to an opening offer. We investigated the impact of advising negotiators to strategically flinch in distributive bargaining. In experiment 1, negotiators who flinched claimed significantly more value than negotiators who did not flinch. Targets of a flinch, however, viewed the negotiation relationship less positively than negotiators in a control condition. Yet, flinching appeared to have no effect on the target negotiators’ perceptions of how well they did. In experiment 2, the notion that a subtle flinch might still facilitate value claiming but without imperilling the bargaining relationship was supported. Implications for negotiation theory and practice, and directions for future research, are discussed.

Keywords Negotiation · Strategic flinch · First offer · Distributive · Bargaining

1 Introduction

“Quite frankly, this is a[n]... insult to our union. We have not signed an agreement anywhere with any major employer anywhere close to this, not even in the same ballpark.” Buzz Hargrove, president of the Canadian Autoworkers Union, uttered these words in response to a proposal made by Dehaviland Aerospace Inc. during collective bargaining (Barna-Alper Productions 1995). Such a reaction in negotiations is not uncommon, given that people are often advised to achieve better results by flinching or wincing in

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response to an opening offer (e.g., [Dawson 1995](#)). More recently, Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives John Boehner responded in the following way to an initial White House proposal in the context of a looming 2013 deadline that has come to be known as the ‘fiscal cliff’: “We’re nowhere. I was flabbergasted. Three weeks have been wasted” (*Globe & Mail*, Dec. 3, 2012, p. B1). US President Barack Obama in turn described the first official proposal from Boehner to avoid the ‘fiscal cliff’ as “...out of balance. When you look at the math, it doesn’t work” (*Globe & Mail*, Dec. 5, 2012, p. B9). People employ a similar tactic when they complain in response to a plumber’s quote for fixing a leaky faucet, or when children allege that their parents’ discipline is ‘unfair.’

In this research, we refer to verbal or physical displays of shock, disgust, or disbelief made in response to an opening offer in negotiations as a flinch. Despite the fact that the potential for such behavior exists in every negotiation, the ramifications of this behaviour used strategically or disingenuously remain largely unexplored and thus poorly understood. To shed light on the consequences of a strategic flinch, we investigated whether it affects a variety of important outcomes in negotiation, including the actual distribution of value, the perception of subjective value, and perceptions of the quality of the bargaining relationship.

2 Claiming Value: Cognitive and Emotional Drivers

Distributive bargaining literally refers to the act of claiming, allocating, or distributing value through negotiation. Single-issue negotiations are mainly about value claiming because they are intrinsically zero-sum: A gain for one side implies an equivalent loss for the other side. Distributive bargaining therefore involves the distribution of a fixed pie. The pie, or zone of possible agreement (ZOPA), refers to the overlap in what is minimally acceptable to each party. It is normatively appropriate for negotiators to determine what is minimally acceptable with reference to the consequences that they will face if no agreement is reached. When a negotiator’s walk-away point reflects this consideration, this point is referred to as a reservation price ([Raiffa 1982](#)). An overlap, if any, in negotiators’ reservation prices defines the ZOPA and therefore the range within which a settlement would be mutually beneficial ([Lax and Sebenius 1986](#)).

Locating the ZOPA is a judgment made under uncertainty because negotiators typically do not know their counterparts’ reservation prices or their counterparts’ internal reference points from which the reservation prices were fashioned ([Blount et al. 1996](#); [Kristensen and Garling 2000](#)). Consequently, negotiators may be compelled to rely on information (e.g., [Galinsky et al. 2002](#)) obtained from their counterparts to make this judgment.

A positive response from one’s counterpart to an opening offer may indicate that the opening offer was within or near the ZOPA and that few concessions will be necessary to obtain an agreement. A neutral or impassive reaction is ambiguous as to the magnitude of concessions that will be required for agreement and may potentially hinder the development of rapport between negotiators ([Drolet and Morris 2000](#)). A flinch, however, provides clear and immediate negative feedback to a negotiator with

respect to the acceptability of his or her opening offer. A flinch creates the impression that the opening offer was ambitious if not unreasonable and has fallen outside the ZOPA. As a result, a flinch may affect a counterpart's information processing (e.g., [Forgas and George 2001](#)), thereby providing a negotiator who is in a position to make large concessions with the motivation to do so. The concessions induced by a flinch could occur either overtly via a revised proposal or psychologically even before the flinching negotiator requests a concession or makes a counter offer. In short, a flinch may lead the target to literally negotiate with themselves.

A flinch may also affect value distribution by preventing an opening offer from being perceived as an anchor. A first offer may act as a guidepost, or an anchor ([Tversky and Kahneman 1974](#)), from which the process of estimating the ZOPA is commenced ([Kristensen and Garling 2000](#)). Anchoring in this way occurs despite the fact that an opening offer may be an unreliable indicator of the location of a negotiator's reservation price and ultimately the ZOPA ([Whyte and Sebenius 1997](#)). [Galinsky and Mussweiler \(2001\)](#) found that the anchoring effects of an opening offer were eliminated when the recipient of the first offer generated information that was inconsistent with the first offer before making a counteroffer. Similarly, if a negotiator flinches in response to an opening offer, the opening offer may be less likely to be perceived as an anchor.

In addition to the effects of a flinch on the target's cognition in negotiation, a flinch may affect behavior through other routes. For instance, a flinch is a strategic display of emotion ([Kopelman et al. 2006](#); [Van Kleef et al. 2010](#)). Emotions convey information about the sender's intentions and perceptions of the relationship ([Ames and Johar 2009](#); [Knutson 1996](#); [Manstead et al. 1999](#); [Van Kleef et al. 2004](#)). This is consistent with the notion of emotions as social information ([Van Kleef et al. 2010](#)) in that individuals rely on the emotions of others to bring clarity to uncertain environments. The affect infusion model ([Forgas 1995](#)), for example, suggests that positive emotions may signal the desire for cooperative behaviors (e.g., [Forgas 1998](#)).

A flinch potentially communicates a variety of emotions, but the emotion of disgust is central. Disgust likely has origins in the functional response of rejecting spoiled food and thus avoiding disease ([Rozin et al. 2000](#)). It has also been suggested that the violation of moral norms such as fairness might induce revulsion or disgust (e.g., [Rozin et al. 1999](#); [Sanfey et al. 2003](#); [Chapman et al. 2009](#)). The paucity of attention paid to disgust in negotiation research is surprising, given the obvious parallels between the distaste elicited by the presentation of a plate of spoiled food and the negative reactions induced by an unfair offer. Because disgust motivates rapid withdrawal, whether from an unpleasant taste or an unattractive offer, and evokes a characteristic and easily recognizable facial expression, this emotion likely plays a significant role in negotiation processes and outcomes ([Chapman et al. 2009](#)). Consistent with [Kopelman et al. \(2006\)](#), the primary concern in this research is not whether the expression of disgust communicated by a flinch is perceived by the target as genuine or contrived. The primary concern is whether the use of a flinch changes behavior during negotiations and has important consequences for negotiators.

Regarding the potentially related role of the emotion of anger in value claiming, some research suggests that negotiators are less likely to make concessions to angry than to happy counterparts ([Kopelman et al. 2006](#)). Evidence also suggests that

negotiators concede more value to angry counterparts because they believe that angry counterparts are more ambitious (Van Kleef et al. 2004) or tougher (Sinaceur and Tiedens 2006). Whether expressions of anger elicit competition or cooperation (e.g., Friedman et al. 2004; Kopelman et al. 2006; Sinaceur and Tiedens 2006; Van Kleef et al. 2004) appears to depend on the observer's relative power and on the appropriateness of the anger display (Kleef and Cote 2007).

It is certainly possible for an observer to confuse disgust and anger. The word "disgusting," after all, is sometimes used in reference to situations that cause anger or irritation (Nabi 2002). Disgust, however, differs from anger in that disgust induces the motivation to withdraw and turn away from an offer, and may conceivably extend to the desire to avoid the individual who made the offer. Anger, in contrast, induces the motivation to approach the anger's source (Harmon-Jones 2003). Consequently, a response to an opening offer that conveys disgust may serve as a means of persuasion (e.g., Forgas 2001). Such a response signals that a problem exists in the relationship, or that some standard of socially acceptable behavior has been violated (Avrill 1982; Daly 1991; Van de Vliert 1985). Negotiators who receive a flinch may thus infer not only that they asked for too much or offered too little, but also that they have offended their counterparts. When people believe that they have given offence, self-regulation theory suggests that they may be motivated to try to restore the relationship to its former state by conceding to or demanding less of their counterparts than they might have otherwise (e.g., Baumeister et al. 1994, 1998; Greenberg 1988; Hassebrauck 1986). Similarly, negative emotions are negative reinforcers of behavior, thereby calling for a behavioral adjustment (Cacioppo and Gardner 1999; Fischer and Roseman 2007). In short, a flinch may affect the distribution of value because of both cognitive and emotional factors.

3 Study 1: Flinching in Distributive Bargaining

At least three related hypotheses derive from this discussion. The first suggests that a strategic flinch will facilitate value claiming:

Hypothesis 1 Negotiators who flinch will claim more value in distributive bargaining than negotiators who are not advised to flinch.

The comparison referred to in H1 is directly relevant to situations in which negotiators occupy a role that does not traditionally make but is required instead by perhaps custom or norm to wait for an opening offer (e.g., the buyer of residential real estate). Moreover, H1 conservatively tests the effects of the flinch because it contrasts the performance of those whom are instructed to flinch with those negotiators that are not advised to flinch but may nonetheless do so. That is, negotiators who are not counselled to flinch may engage in the tactic naturally. This comparison arguably sets a low standard for the flinch tactic to meet in terms of value claiming for two reasons. First, there is some evidence that making the opening offer is advantageous in terms of value claiming (e.g., Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001). Second, it is conceivable that those who are not inclined to make the opening offer are in general less competent at value claiming.

A more widely applicable benchmark therefore against which to assess the effects of a flinch is to compare the value claimed by those who flinch with the value claimed by those whom do not receive this advice. The latter category will include both those negotiators who make the opening offer but also those who do not:

Hypothesis 2 Negotiators who flinch will claim more value than negotiators who are not so advised and have the option to make or receive an opening offer.

The comparison referred to in Hypothesis 2 makes sense from the practical perspective of whether it is helpful to counsel negotiators to engage in a flinch, but it is not the most conservative test of this tactic's efficacy. The most stringent test is to compare the performance of negotiators in distributive bargaining who flinch versus those who make the opening offer. These tactics are mutually exclusive. Because some evidence suggests that negotiators who make the opening offer dominate those who do not (e.g., [Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001](#)), any evidence consistent with the view that flinching neutralizes the effects of making the opening offer would provide further clarity regarding when it makes sense to make one.

Hypothesis 3 Negotiators who make the opening offer will claim less value than negotiators who flinch.

3.1 Subjective Value

An important criterion variable in negotiations research is people's perceptions about how well they have done ([Galinsky et al. 2002](#); [Kwon and Weingart 2004](#)). When negotiators believe they have won or done well, they are likely to be committed to the resolution and thus highly motivated to proceed with its implementation. Negotiators, in contrast, who are dissatisfied with an agreement or perceive it to be unfair may be reluctant to implement it and may even be inclined to walk away from it ([Adams 1965](#); [Greenberg 1988](#)). Consequently, many tactics exist in negotiations that are intended not only to increase value claimed, but also to leave one's counterpart feeling better about the result. For example, asking for more than one aspires to get can lead to getting more while leaving room for the granting of concessions and the creation of goodwill. Similarly, accepting a first offer even if very good is often advised against because negotiators perceive outcomes less favourably when their counterparts agree too quickly ([Galinsky et al. 2002](#)). It may therefore be more effective, instead of accepting a first offer, to ask for a bit more. Not only might you get it, but also such a tactic reduces the chances that one's counterpart will feel that they offered too much.

A flinch unambiguously signals to the target the need for substantial concessions to reach an agreement. Negotiators in receipt of a flinch may therefore in response simply make larger concessions than they initially anticipated would be required. Such concessions alone could leave negotiators with more negative perceptions about their performance than negotiators who did not make large concessions in response to a flinch.

Alternatively, flinching might induce in the target positive feelings about the outcome despite diminished performance, in much the same way that rejecting the first offer or asking for more than one expects to receive can enhance assessments about the quality of an inferior result. A flinch ensures that one's counterpart will be unlikely to believe that he or she initially offered too much by creating the impression that an opening offer was ambitious if not clearly unreasonable. Negotiators who receive confirmation that their opening offer was repellent to their counterpart are unlikely to believe that they should have offered less.

Prior research on the appraisal tendency framework (Lerner and Keltner 2000, 2001) suggests that, all else being equal, negative information and emotions have a stronger influence on people than positive information and emotions (Lerner and Keltner 2001; Taylor 1991). Relatedly, losses are more psychologically salient than comparable gains (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1984). The net effect of receiving a flinch on a negotiator's perceptions of subjective value is thus likely to be negative.

Hypothesis 4 All else being equal, recipients of a flinch will perceive that they have done less well in a negotiation than negotiators who were not the target of a strategic flinch.

3.2 Attitudes Regarding the Relationship Between Negotiators

Skilled negotiators ensure that the bargaining relationship is enhanced, or at the very least not damaged, by the process of negotiation (e.g., Loewenstein et al. 1989; Thompson and DeHarpport 1998; Tinsley et al. 2002; Valley et al. 1995). This is because an improved relationship increases the chances of productive interaction in the future, should such an opportunity arise. A damaged relationship, in contrast, leaves people reluctant to negotiate in the future (Lax and Sebenius 1986; Thompson 2005). When evaluating the effect of a negotiation on the quality of the relationship between or among negotiators, issues such as whether or not negotiators liked their counterpart(s), or would look forward to working with them in the future, are likely to be important considerations.

Analogous to the hypothesized effects of a flinch on the target's subjective perception of the value of the agreement, negotiators in receipt of a flinch may perceive the bargaining relationship less favorably than negotiators who did not receive a flinch. Although flinching may in some settings be common and thus expected (Bazerman and Samuelson 1983), a flinch may also suggest a negotiator's inflexibility and unwillingness to compromise. Such negative perceptions of one's counterpart would potentially have consequences for the quality of the relationship between negotiators (e.g., Allred et al. 1997). Presumably, the likelihood and magnitude of these negative consequences would depend in part on the severity of the flinch and the context in which it was used.

Hypothesis 5 Targets of a flinch will evaluate the bargaining relationship more negatively than negotiators who are not so targeted.

4 Methods

4.1 Participants

Full-time MBA students ($N = 222$) enrolled at a large Canadian university participated in this experiment as part of a class exercise. Mean age of participants was 29.6 years ($SD = 5.2$), and they had an average of 6.4 years ($SD = 4.9$) of full time work experience. Males comprised 68% of the sample. Twelve dyads failed to provide sufficient information to warrant inclusion in data analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 198 participants.

4.2 Experimental Design and Procedure

The experiment was conducted during the first class of a course on managerial negotiations in partial fulfilment of course requirements. Participants were told that they were going to conduct a two party, single issue negotiation with another member of the class. General information was then given to all participants that described in detail the context of a negotiation to determine the amount of a lump sum payment. The payment was a voluntary transfer between a representative of a real-estate developer (role A) and a mayor's representative (role B).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two roles and were also randomly assigned to a counterpart to form a dyad. Individuals assigned to role A received confidential role-specific instructions authorizing them as developers' representatives to pay up to but not more than \$700,000. Individuals assigned to role B received confidential role-specific instructions informing them as mayors' representatives to accept a payment as low as but not lower than \$300,000. The bargaining zone or ZOPA thus extended from \$300,000 to \$700,000. Any agreement within this range was better for both negotiators than no agreement.

Dyads were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the experimental condition, one participant in either role A or role B in each dyad was instructed to wait for his or her counterpart to make the opening offer, and then to pause for several seconds before responding dispassionately with the following phrases:

"Quite frankly, this is an insult...You're not even close...You're not even in the ballpark...We're so far apart that I can't believe what I'm hearing...I'm shocked and appalled by your offer."

Participants were further advised to be silent after uttering these phrases and to wait for their counterparts' response. Participants were then free to make a counteroffer or request a second offer.

In the control condition, no instructions were given to participants about whether to wait for the opening offer, or about how to respond to their counterparts' opening offer. As a result, negotiators in the control condition were unconstrained from utilizing a spontaneous flinch if they chose not to make the opening offer.

Prior to conducting the negotiation but after being assigned to a role and a counterpart, participants were given approximately 30 min to read the general and role

specific negotiation instructions, and to plan and prepare for the upcoming meeting with their counterpart.

Participants were next asked to meet with their counterpart and were given a deadline of 30 min within which to try to reach an agreement. Participants in both roles were told that negotiations terminate after exactly 30 min. Participants in the role of mayor's representative (role B) received confidential instructions that if they were at an impasse after 30 min, they would be obliged in lieu of an agreement with the developer's representative to accept a payment from a third party for \$300,000. Participants in the role of developer's representative (role A) received confidential instructions that if they were at an impasse after 30 min, they would be obliged in lieu of an agreement to pay \$700,000 to offset the costs associated with an impasse. At the end of the 30 min, a number of measures were administered to participants and are discussed below.

4.3 Dependent Measures

4.3.1 Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was conducted at the conclusion of the negotiation by asking participants the following question: "How negative was your counterpart's initial response to your first offer?" The manipulation check and all remaining questions were answered on an 11-point Likert-type scale (e.g., 0 = extremely negative; 5 = neither negative nor positive; 10 = extremely positive).

4.3.2 Subjective Value

Participants evaluated their settlement using a three-item scale developed for this study ($\alpha = 0.81$). The three items assessed how well participants felt they did in the negotiation (e.g., Galinsky et al. 2002; Kwon and Weingart 2004), how satisfied they were with the settlement (e.g., Greenberg 1988), and how committed they were to implementing the deal (e.g., Levine and Thompson 1996). The commitment question was omitted from the measure for participants who did not reach a settlement.

4.3.3 Perceived Quality of the Bargaining Relationship

To evaluate perceptions of the bargaining relationship, participants responded to a five-item scale developed for this study ($\alpha = 0.74$). The five items asked participants to evaluate the following: (1) how much they liked their negotiation counterpart (e.g., Druckman and Broome 1991); (2) how much they would look forward to negotiating with their counterpart in the future (e.g., Lax and Sebenius 1986); (3) how much the process of negotiation damaged their relationship (reverse scored); (4) how cooperative their counterpart was; and (5) how competitive their counterpart was (reverse scored).

5 Results

5.1 Manipulation Check

A planned comparison assessed participants' perceptions of their counterparts' reaction to an opening offer. Results confirmed that negotiators who were instructed to flinch were perceived as having a more negative initial reaction to the opening offer ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 2.31$) than negotiators receiving a first offer in the control condition [$M = 3.47$, $SD = 2.52$; $t(81) = 2.35$, $p < 0.05$]. These results indicate that the flinch manipulation was successful.

5.2 Testing of Hypotheses

A t test was conducted to explore Hypothesis 1, which predicted that negotiators who flinched would claim more value than negotiators who were not advised to flinch. The maximum amount of value that could have been claimed in the simulated negotiation was \$400,000, which represents the overlap in reservation prices between the developer and the mayor roles. Potential value claimed thus ranged between \$0 and \$400,000. Negotiations that ended in impasse were not included in analyses of the distribution of value.¹ Negotiators who flinched claimed significantly more value ($M = \$250,163$, $SD = \$103,225$) than negotiators who did not make the first offer in the control condition ($M = \$198,094$, $SD = \$134,739$, $t(80) = 1.98$, $p < 0.05$, one-tailed). These findings support Hypothesis 1.

We conducted a series of follow-up t tests to explore potential alternative explanations. To examine whether differences in profitability between the control and experimental conditions could be attributed to differences in opening offers, we conducted a t test between conditions using dyads in which both negotiators reported the same value for the opening offer. Consistent with our measure of profitability, the difference between negotiators' opening offers and the ZOPA were used as the measure of opening offer. No significant difference in opening offers between the flinch condition ($M = \$384,934$, $SD = \$902,481$) and the control condition ($M = \$530,185$, $SD = \$965,598$) was discernible [$t(71) = 0.65$, ns]. Differences in profitability between conditions therefore cannot be attributed to differences in opening offers.

To assess whether the flinch instructions might have primed participants to offer more aggressive counteroffers, we conducted a t test between experimental conditions using dyads in which both negotiators reported the same value for the counteroffer. Similar to the analysis of opening offers, the difference between negotiator's counteroffers and the ZOPA were used as a measure of counter offer to allow for comparisons between negotiators in different roles. The results indicated that the relationship between flinching instructions and aggressiveness of counteroffers was not significant [$t(64) = 0.81$, ns] between the flinch condition ($M = \$135,000$, $SD = \$584,056$,

¹ An impasse was defined as any negotiation in which the participants did not reach a settlement within the allotted time. All but four negotiations produced a settlement, and all four impasses occurred in the control condition.

and control condition ($M = \$40,370$, $SD = \$192,659$). Thus, there was no significant difference in aggressiveness of counteroffers between those negotiators whom were instructed to flinch and those whom were not.

We further conducted a t test between assigned roles to explore whether counterbalancing by role affected participants' capacity to claim value. This notion was not supported. The profitability of negotiators who flinched in role A ($M = \$246,304$, $SD = \$95,136$) did not differ significantly from the profitability of negotiators who flinched in role B [$M = \$259,167$, $SD = \$123,244$; $t(48) = 0.40$, ns].

Hypothesis 2 predicted that negotiators who flinched would claim more value than negotiators in the control condition, independent of whether the latter negotiators made or received the opening offer. Because the ZOPA was worth \$400,000, the average value claimed by negotiators in the control condition is by definition half of that value or \$200,000. A statistical average cannot be generated without violating the assumption of independence of observations. Consequently, we used the absolute value of \$200,000 to test H2. In a one-sample t test, negotiators who flinched claimed significantly more than half of the value available for distribution in the negotiation [$t(49) = 3.44$, $p < 0.05$]. These findings support Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that negotiators who make the opening offer will claim less value than their counterparts who flinch. One sample t tests revealed that negotiators who made the opening offer in the experimental condition claimed significantly less value than negotiators who flinched [$M = -\$100,325$, $SD = \$206,449$, $t(49) = 3.43$, $p < 0.01$]. Negotiators who made the opening offer in the control condition, in contrast, claimed neither significantly more nor less value than negotiators who received the opening offer [$M = \$3,813$, $SD = \$269,448$, $t(31) = 0.08$, ns]. These results support Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 suggested that recipients of a flinch would feel worse about the outcome than negotiators who were not the target of a flinch, all else being equal. Recipients of a flinch, however, perceived the value of their settlements no differently from negotiators in the control condition when the value claimed by negotiators is held constant [$F(1,79) = 0.23$, ns]. Recipients of a flinch also perceived the value of their settlements ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.6$) no differently from negotiators in the control condition [$M = 7.07$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(81)$] even when they claimed significantly less. These results suggest that receiving a flinch does not make the recipient feel worse about objectively worse outcomes. Expressed more positively, a flinch appears to have no negative impact on the recipient's subjective perceptions of value claimed even when associated with objectively poorer outcomes.

Hypothesis 5 suggested that targets of a flinch would perceive the bargaining relationship less positively than negotiators in the control condition. A t test indicates that negotiators who received a flinch perceived the overall negotiation relationship to be significantly less positive ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.51$) than negotiators in the control condition [$M = 6.82$, $SD = 1.46$, $t(81) = 2.40$, $p < 0.05$]. This effect is present even when the objective value of the settlement is held constant [$F(1,79) = 5.21$, $p < 0.05$]. These findings support Hypothesis 5.

6 Discussion

The results of study 1 demonstrate that the use of a flinch has some important consequences in distributive bargaining. Negotiators who flinched claimed greater value than negotiators in a control condition, regardless whether these latter negotiators made the opening offer. This result does not appear to be related to the aggressiveness of either first or counter offers. Moreover, recipients of a flinch perceived the subjective value of the outcome no more negatively than those in the control condition despite having claimed on average objectively less value than those in the control condition.

Not all of the findings, however, were positive with respect to the utility of flinching. Negotiators on the receiving end of this tactic perceived the bargaining relationship more negatively than negotiators in the control condition, even when controlling for objective performance. The additional value claimed in the short term by those who flinch in distributive bargaining may therefore come at the expense of long term gains. Although flinching leads to enhanced value claiming, the findings suggest that this tactic may diminish the desire of others to negotiate with us in the future. If so, future opportunities to reach agreements and to create value will be lost.

The findings of study 1 indicate that flinching has both benefits and costs. An obvious question thus arises: Is it possible to minimize the costs of flinching while still enjoying the benefits? Perhaps a subtle versus a blatant negative reaction to a counterpart's opening offer will still facilitate value claiming while inflicting only minimal or no damage to the bargaining relationship. Exploring this issue was the primary goal of study 2.

7 Study 2: Flinching with Restraint

Although we define a flinch as a show of shock, disgust, or disbelief in response to a first offer in negotiation, the flinch employed in study 1 is a relatively potent example of this type of behavior. As found in study 1, one risk associated with using a potent flinch is that the recipient may perceive the negotiation relationship less positively than before. Presumably, this risk arises in proportion to the intensity of the flinch. For example, a blatant flinch may be more likely to induce the perception that the individual who uses it is uncooperative, competitive, and even angry. These perceptions if they exist are likely to be salient when the target of a flinch evaluates the state of the bargaining relationship. One possible way to manage this risk is to use a milder version of this tactic. Study 2 was thus designed to explore the notion that the use of a relatively subtle flinch might still facilitate value claiming, but without putting the bargaining relationship and future negotiations in peril.

Hypothesis 1 in this study is as follows:

Hypothesis 1 Negotiators who use either a subtle or a blatant flinch will claim more value in distributive bargaining than negotiators who are not advised to flinch.

The potential effects of flinching on perceptions of subjective value are similar in the case of either a subtle or a blatant flinch.

Hypothesis 2 Recipients of either a subtle or a blatant flinch will perceive less subjective value than negotiators who are not the target of a flinch.

Hypothesis 3 in this study is based on the notion that the damage sustained to a bargaining relationship by a blatant flinch may be mitigated by the use of a less obvious flinch.

Hypothesis 3 Recipients of a subtle flinch will evaluate the bargaining relationship more positively than recipients of a blatant flinch.

A related question motivating study 2 is whether a flinch needs to communicate anger to be effective. Although the raising of objections can convey a variety of emotions or be done dispassionately, perhaps only a flinch that conveys anger will facilitate value claiming. Evidence suggests that the perception of anger alone is sufficient to influence the distribution of value in negotiations (e.g., Kleef and Cote 2007; Van Kleef et al. 2004) and decrease the desire for future interaction (Allred et al. 1997). Perceptions of anger may therefore be an alternative explanation for some of the findings in study 1, but is a less credible explanation for these effects if they still occur in the context of a subtle flinch. If the recipient of a flinch perceives no anger, the notion that anger mediates the relationship between flinching and negotiation outcomes would be difficult to sustain.

Hypothesis 4 Perceptions of anger will mediate the relationship between a flinch and the outcomes of a negotiation.

8 Methods

8.1 Participants

First year graduate and senior undergraduate business students ($N = 152$) enrolled at a large Canadian university participated in this experiment as part of a class exercise. On average, participants were 25.4 years of age ($SD = 5.5$) and had 4.5 years ($SD = 3.7$) of full time work experience. Males comprised 52% of the sample.

8.2 Experimental Design and Procedures

Study 2 participants used the same negotiation simulation as in study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to one of either role A or role B and were also assigned a counterpart for the negotiation to form a dyad. Dyads were randomly assigned to one of three conditions.

The first experimental condition in study 2 was identical to the experimental condition in study 1. Whereas a blatant flinch was used in the first experimental condition, a more subtle flinch was used in the second experimental condition. In the second experimental condition, either role A or role B in each dyad was instructed to wait for their counterpart to make an opening offer, and then to pause for several seconds before responding dispassionately with the following phrases:

I am shocked and very disappointed by your offer. It is not even within the realm of possibility. I am incredulous. Your offer is completely unacceptable to me.

9 Results

9.1 Manipulation Check

A pilot study indicated that individuals would perceive the more restrained flinch ($M = 8.24$, $SD = 1.48$) less negatively than the blatant flinch used in study 1 [$M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.94$, $t(20) = 5.67$, $p < 0.05$]. The control condition in study 2 was identical to the control condition used in study 1.

Because flinching was found to significantly increase the profitability of negotiators who flinched in study 1, we used the difference in value claimed between the flinching and control conditions as an implicit manipulation check in study 2. Similar implicit measures have been used in the study of emotion and its role in decision making (e.g., Estrada et al. 1994; Isen et al. 2004). As discussed below, the flinching manipulation appears to have been successful.

9.2 Hypothesis Testing

An omnibus ANOVA indicated that the flinch manipulations had a significant effect on value claimed by negotiators [$F(2,67) = 3.64$, $p < 0.05$]. Negotiations that ended in impasse were not included in analyses regarding the distribution of value.² Follow-up t tests indicated that negotiators who used a relatively subtle flinch claimed significantly more value ($M = \$240,090$, $SD = \$127,397$) than negotiators in the control condition [$M = \$168,019$, $SD = \$112,037$, $t(49) = 2.15$, $p < 0.05$]. Similarly, negotiators who used a blatant flinch also claimed significantly more value ($M = \$249,500$, $SD = \$117,742$) than negotiators in the control condition [$t(43) = 2.36$, $p < 0.05$]. These results indicate that both flinch manipulations were successful. No significant differences in profitability, however, were found between the two flinch conditions [$t(42) = 0.25$, ns]. These results support Hypothesis 1.

We conducted a series of follow-up t tests to explore potential alternative explanations. To examine whether differences in profitability between the control and both experimental conditions could be attributed to differences in opening offers, we compared opening offers across conditions in which negotiators reported identical values for the opening offers. No significant differences in opening offers between the blatant flinch condition ($M = \$102,343$, $SD = \$197,390$), the subtle flinch condition ($M = \$316,562$, $SD = \$729,349$), and the control condition ($M = \$226,000$, $SD = \$401,817$) were apparent [$F(2,58) = 0.81$, ns]. Differences in value claimed between both experimental conditions and the control condition are therefore not due to differences in opening offers.

² One impasse occurred in the mild flinch condition, three impasses occurred in the intense flinch condition, and no impasses occurred in the control condition.

We next assessed whether the flinch instructions primed participants to make more aggressive counteroffers. For all dyads in which negotiators reported identical counteroffers, an omnibus ANOVA indicated that the relationship between the flinch instructions and counteroffer values was not significant between the blatant flinch condition ($M = \$106,428$, $SD = \$203,141$), the subtle flinch condition ($M = \$84,438$, $SD = \$303,017$) and the control condition [$M = -\$50,359$, $SD = \$208,524$; $F(2,54) = 2.40$, *ns*].

A *t* test was conducted to assess whether the counterbalancing of role affected the value claimed by negotiators. Results demonstrate that negotiators in role A who flinched did not claim significantly more value ($M = \$256,231$, $SD = \$136,069$) than negotiators in role B who flinched [$M = \$240,486$, $SD = \$117,637$, $t(42) = 0.45$, *ns*].

With regard to Hypothesis 2, neither recipients of a blatant flinch ($M = 6.84$, $SD = 1.78$) nor recipients of a more subtle flinch ($M = 7.63$, $SD = 1.48$) perceived the subjective value of their settlement differently from negotiators in the control condition [$M = 7.96$, $SD = 1.68$; $F(2,71) = 2.88$, *ns*], despite having claimed significantly less value. These findings also apply even when the objective value of settlement is held constant [$F(2,66) = 1.08$, *ns*].

Hypothesis 3 is central to study 2 because it concerns the effects of the type of flinch on the bargaining relationship. An omnibus ANOVA indicated that the type of flinch used significantly affected perceptions of relationship quality [$F(2,71) = 8.32$, $p < 0.05$]. Follow-up *t* tests indicated that recipients of a blatant flinch, consistent with the findings in study 1, perceived the bargaining relationship ($\alpha = 0.73$) significantly more negatively ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 1.63$) than negotiators in the control condition [$M = 8.18$, $SD = 1.36$; $t(46) = 3.84$, $p < 0.01$]. In contrast, however, recipients of a more subtle flinch did not perceive the bargaining relationship any differently ($M = 7.82$, $SD = 1.40$) from negotiators in the control condition [$t(50) = 0.93$, *ns*]. Targets of a blatant flinch also evaluated the bargaining relationship significantly more negatively than targets of a subtle flinch [$t(46) = 2.97$, $p < 0.05$]. The notion that flinching imposes costs on the bargaining relationship was therefore supported in the case of a blatant flinch, but not in the case of a more subtle flinch. These findings also apply even when the objective value of the settlement is held constant [$F(2,66) = 5.43$, $p < 0.05$]. These results thus support Hypothesis 3.

Finally, to explore the notion that a display of anger might mediate the effects of flinching, we assessed perceptions of anger in response to the making of an opening offer. Participants were asked, "How angry did your counterpart appear in response to your first offer?" The measure of anger used an 11-point Likert-type scale (0 = not at all angry; 5 = moderately angry; 10 = extremely angry).

An omnibus analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that neither negotiators who flinched subtly ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.63$) nor those who flinched more blatantly ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 2.64$) were perceived as having displayed significantly more anger in response to an opening offer than negotiators who received an opening offer in the control condition [$M = 3.40$, $SD = 2.65$; $F(2,66) = 2.12$, *ns*]. Because neither manipulation of a flinch appeared to be related to outward displays of anger, further tests for mediation were not conducted. Hypothesis 4 was consequently not supported.

10 Discussion

Study 2 demonstrated certain effects of flinching on value claiming that were consistent with those found in study 1, with both the same and a more subtle version of the flinch used in study 1. As predicted, negotiators who engaged in a relatively restrained flinch claimed as much value as negotiators who used a more blatant flinch. Recipients in the more subtle flinch condition, however, rated the bargaining relationship more favorably than recipients in the blatant flinch condition, and no less favorably than negotiators in the control condition.

Study 2 also demonstrated that it is possible to deploy a flinch effectively without the need to simultaneously show anger towards the initial offer or the person who made it. Flinching thus appears to facilitate value claiming in negotiations even in the absence of inducing the perception of anger. It is therefore possible to use the flinch as a tactic in distributive bargaining to positive effect, as long as negotiators prudently moderate the intensity of their display of negative emotion in response to receiving an opening offer.

11 General Discussion

In two studies, we explored the oft-advised but not well-understood tactic of strategically flinching or wincing in response to an opening offer in distributive bargaining. Across both studies, this research found that negotiators who used this tactic in distributive bargaining claimed more value as a result. The findings of this study thus suggest that recipients of an opening offer are not necessarily at a disadvantage (e.g., [Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001](#)), and are not obliged to make an aggressive counteroffer to alleviate the potential disadvantage of receiving the opening offer. In short, the flinch tactic provides a third behavioral opportunity to claim value in distributive negotiations that occurs between the making of a first offer and a counter offer.

Flinching too forcefully, however, had an adverse effect on the recipient's perception of the quality of the bargaining relationship. This suggests that there is a price to be paid for the benefits of using a potent flinch. Whether that price is worth paying depends in part on the future value of maintaining a high quality bargaining relationship. Given that most important negotiations occur between and among individuals and groups involved in long-term interdependent relationships ([Loewenstein et al. 1989](#); [Tinsley et al. 2002](#); [Thompson and DeHarpport 1998](#); [Valley et al. 1995](#)), the costs of flinching intensely could in some circumstances be very high. The findings of study 2, however, suggest that these costs need not be incurred if there is some restraint displayed in the histrionics associated with this behavior.

A flinch deployed in negotiations clearly has risks, but hindering the implementation of a settlement because of any negative effect on negotiators' perceptions of how well they did does not appear to be among them. With and even without controlling for value claimed, targets of a flinch evaluated their settlements just as positively as negotiators in a control condition despite their objectively diminished performance.

11.1 Directions for Future Research and Study Limitations

The findings of the present research serve as a starting point for a line of empirical research on the tactic of flinching and its permutations in negotiation (c.f., [Kopelman et al. 2006](#)). For example, the behaviors and language that constitute flinching, whether potent or otherwise, are likely to depend at least in part on context and on national culture. A flinch, for example, that might be viewed as extreme in a commercial negotiation might be considered routine in collective bargaining. A flinch that might be considered routine in a Middle Eastern bazaar might be seen as the basis for terminating negotiations prematurely if it occurred in Japan. We do not, therefore, claim that the specific types of flinching examined in this research would necessarily have similar effects across cultures and situations. We do, however, on the basis of this research suggest that flinching can have consequences for the most important outcomes of negotiation, even if the constituent elements of an effective flinch may vary across situations and cultures. Research designed to contrast and compare flinching across cultures and contexts is a logical next step.

Negotiations in general are characterized by several distinct processes, including the distribution of value and the interpersonal dynamics that simultaneously occur. Future research should therefore also address whether and the extent to which perceptions of distributive and interactional justice mediate the relationship between flinching and negotiation outcomes. Related to perceptions of justice is the extent to which a flinch is perceived to be sincere. It is possible that a flinch perceived to be disingenuous may still facilitate value claiming yet profoundly negatively affect the recipient's perception of the bargaining relationship. It is also possible that negotiators will be insensitive to the strategic nature of a flinch. Research on lie detection, for example, suggests that even those individuals considered to possess expertise in this domain (e.g., police officers) are unable to detect lies better than would be expected by chance alone (e.g., [DePaulo and Pfeifer 1986](#); [Meissner and Kassin 2002](#); [Vrij and Graham 1997](#)). Future research should therefore address whether perceptions of sincerity, regardless of their accuracy, mediate the relationship between flinching and the outcomes of negotiation.

Another important question for future research that arises in the context of integrative bargaining, but is not relevant to distributive negotiations, is the impact of flinching on the process of value creation. Integrative negotiations are intrinsically variable sum, in that gains for one side do not necessarily imply losses for the other. Individuals in these situations therefore have the capacity to create value through techniques such as log rolling, which involves the making of mutually beneficial trades across issues ([Fisher et al. 1991](#); [Lewicki et al. 2003](#)). The effects of a flinch on value creation might well be negative, as a flinch could be interpreted as a sign of intransigence. When negotiators face unyielding counterparts, they become focused on their own interests ([Johnson 1982](#)), make little effort to understand the needs of the other side ([Fisher et al. 1991](#)), and develop little shared trust ([Olekalns and Smith 1999](#)). All of these consequences could impede value creation, which requires a high degree of information sharing about interests. Further insight into the unique role of disgust may also come to light when exploring the role of the flinch on the creation of value. For instance, one may expect that a rejection centered in anger may have a different effect on value creation than a rejection centered in disgust. Exploring the effects

of flinching in integrative bargaining should therefore be a high priority for future research.

One limitation of both studies involved reliance on fictitious amounts of money as the currency of negotiation. In other words, no real monetary incentives existed for high performance on the negotiation task used. Other potent incentives to perform well, however, were present. For example, the negotiation simulation used in this research was a formal course exercise, and participants were informed in advance that their results would be disclosed and shared within the class. Future research should nonetheless attempt to examine the consequences of flinching in negotiations where the stakes are both monetary and large. Flinching is likely common practice in high-stakes financial negotiations. If so, this suggests the practical importance of understanding better the consequences of this tactic in the face of large financial incentives.

Although it is possible that the effects of a flinch are muted by monetary incentives, many psychologists have explored the question of whether financial incentives for good performance improves decision making. Two basic findings have emerged from this research. First, money does cause people to be slightly more attentive. Second, deviations from rationality tend to be somewhat more pronounced given financial incentives (Thaler 1987). Definitive conclusions regarding the effects of money on reactions to flinching await further research, but both findings suggest that large monetary stakes would be more likely to magnify than minimize the effects of flinching observed in this research.

Another potential limitation of the present research involves the lack of objective information that participants had about their counterpart's reservation price or alternatives to a negotiated agreement. Participants may have of necessity relied heavily on their counterpart's reaction to their opening offer to estimate the location of the ZOPA. When objective criteria are available (e.g., black book values for used cars), flinching might have less of an effect on objective and subjective outcomes in negotiations. Similarly, a negotiator making an opening offer based on objective criteria may be less susceptible to tactics such as the flinch. The conditions under which flinching facilitates value claiming in negotiation and when it does not are another potential avenue for future research.

In the present research, the flinch always came from negotiators who received the opening offer. As a result, we do not have any indication as to the efficacy of this tactic for people who also make the opening offer in negotiations. For instance, is it best to make the opening offer in negotiations and then to flinch in response to the first offer of the other side, thus potentially capitalizing on the advantages of both making the first offer and flinching? Similarly, is it better to accompany a flinch with an aggressive counter offer? Studies in which both sides in a negotiation flinch in response to the other's first offer could determine whether there is a first mover advantage in terms of flinching. The present research also does not address the relative aggressiveness of either the first offer or the counter offer in negotiations. Consequently, it is uncertain as to whether the flinch tactic is efficacious against aggressive first offers as well as generous first offers. Future studies that cross the flinch tactic with the aggressiveness of the first and counter offers in negotiation will provide insight into the boundary conditions related to counselling the use of the flinch tactic.

An effective negotiation tactic enables people to simultaneously achieve several objectives. Specifically, the tactic should facilitate the claiming of value while enhancing one's counterpart's sense that he or she has done well. Finally, the tactic should improve, or at the very least not diminish, the quality of the bargaining relationship. Flinching in distributive bargaining facilitated value claiming without negatively affecting the recipient's perceptions of how well he or she did. Whether flinching damages the bargaining relationship seems to depend on the characteristics of the specific flinch used. Based on these findings, flinching appears, from a practical perspective, to be a useful behavior to add to a negotiator's repertoire. Negotiators who are so inclined might therefore be advised to engage in the flinch tactic, but to do so with civility and in a contextually appropriate way so as to reduce the collateral damage that too forceful a use of this tactic can cause.

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