The role empathy and perspective-taking in the resolution of social conflicts

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The current research explored whether two related yet distinct social competencies – perspective-taking (the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another’s viewpoint) and empathy (the ability to emotionally connect with another) – have differential effects in strategic, mixed-motive interactions. In particular, we investigated whether perspective taking and empathy are differentially valuable traits in strategic interactions depending on the cognitive versus affective nature of the underlying conflict task.

In a first set of studies, using both individual difference measures and experimental manipulations, we found that perspective-taking increased individuals’ ability to discover hidden agreements, achieve peace, and both create and claim resources at the bargaining table. However, empathy did not prove nearly as advantageous and at times proved detrimental to deal discovery, peaceful settlements, or individual profit. In addition, only perspective taking was associated with greater accuracy in predicting a partner’s negotiation-related traits.

In a follow-up study, we explored whether there might be distinct benefits to empathy, with these benefits emerging only when an affective understanding of and connecting with others is critical. The study involved a competitive social coalition game in groups of three strangers in which participants had to choose to enter into a social coalition with a team member who also simultaneously chose them (rather than the third person). The task required participants to assess their social connections with the other participants. Empathy predicted both winning the game and accuracy about the other players’ game choices. Perspective taking, in contrast, was not associated with either winning or accuracy in this task.

Overall, perspective-taking seemed to represent a beneficial competency in situations requiring cognitive and objective vantage points, whereas empathy was relatively more beneficial in contexts that rely on correct identification of social connection.