

The Complexity of Multiparty Negotiations: Wading into the Muck

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Abstract

Multiparty negotiations have received less attention than two-party or group negotiations in the literature. This article attributes this to their greater complexity and explores how this can be remedied. Several theoretical lenses for studying multiparty negotiations are proposed along with some of the challenges such research presents for negotiations' researchers.

Within organizational research on conflict and negotiations, it seems that studies of multiparty negotiation often get short shrift. While attention to multiparty negotiations was given a boost with the publication of Susskind and Crump's (2008) four-volume book series, "Multiparty Negotiations," within organizational scholarship, work on multiparty negotiations (e.g., Crump & McGlendon, 2003; Gray & Clyman, 2003; Kramer, 1991; Olekalns, Brett, & Weingart, 2003; Polzer, Mannix, & Neale, 1998) is still fairly scarce. Susskind and Crump's contribution is a compendium of articles from a wide variety of fields that covers the history of over 30 years of work on negotiations among multiple actors in international, public policy, group, and organizational settings. Yet only a handful of scholars who conduct social psychological research on negotiations do so in multiparty settings (e.g., Bottom, 2003; Kopelman, Weber, & Messick, 2002; McCusker & Carnevale, 1995; Murnighan, 1978; Polzer et al., 1998; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Adding in communication research and process research increases the list somewhat (Brummans et al., 2008; Olekalns et al., 2003; van Dijk, Aarts, & de Wit, 2009). Further, widening the net to include multiparty collaboration (a desirable outcome of multiparty negotiations) unearths a few more scholars (e.g., Gray, 1989; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994). Nonetheless, research on multiparty negotiations still remains siloed with little interaction among scholars who approach the topic from diverse perspectives (Crump & McGlendon, 2003; McCaffrey, Faerman, & Hart, 1995).

In 2003, Crump and Glendon suggested that developing an integrative understanding of multiparty negotiation “is hindered by a lack of theory that can adequately explain the multiplicity of interactions that typically characterize such negotiations.” In addition to identifying five overarching topic areas for multiparty research,¹ they proposed the integration of research from two topics, coalitions and third parties, and called for scholars to find other models to integrate this research. Eight years later, I reiterate that plea.

As commercial transactions and world problems have become more global in scope, the frequency, importance, and complexity of multiparty negotiations have increased. Examples range from negotiations over local, regional, and national environmental issues (Garavan & Gray, 2011; Lewicki, Gray & Elliott, 2003; Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000) to sports negotiations between players associations and national-level sports organizations, to the negotiation of transnational agreements such as the one to establish the World Trade Organization (Hampson & Hart, 1995) or those over global warming (Djelic & Quack, 2008; Kanie, 2003). With so many prospective sites for study, why have organization and negotiation scholars shied away from studying contexts that present fertile ground for answering critical questions about human decisions and behavior?

I believe the answer lies in the complexity of these negotiations. Their complexity is a two-edged sword for researchers. On the one hand, the complexity of tracking the behavior of multiple actors in multiple interactions that often span months, and even years, may be off-putting to researchers who aspire to parsimony and simplicity in their research designs. With so many players and so many uncontrolled variables, many would argue such settings are the anathema of good research. The counter argument, of course, is that the unpredictability and sheer messiness of these kinds of negotiations is precisely what controlled, parsimonious designs cannot capture and what we most need to study in order to understand and predict the dynamics of these often fragile or volatile situations. Research that accomplishes these ends is needed if we hope to develop predictable knowledge about these dynamics. Without such knowledge, we cannot hope to increase the capacity of society to move at least some of these disputes to effective resolution. So, if we want to understand the factors that influence negotiation outcomes in such settings, we need to roll up our sleeves and wade into the muck. And there is clearly plenty of muck to go around.

Multiparty Research is Needed at the Intersection of Four Theoretical Domains

Four intersecting theoretical domains seem particularly appropriate for studying multiparty negotiation: Perceptual, structural, political, and processual. I argue that opportunities for interesting work lie at the intersection of two or more of these foci (see Figure 1). I will briefly describe each and then address the potential for expanding our knowledge at these intersections.

¹Their analysis includes both multilateral and multiparty negotiations as well as bilateral negotiations with multiple actors.

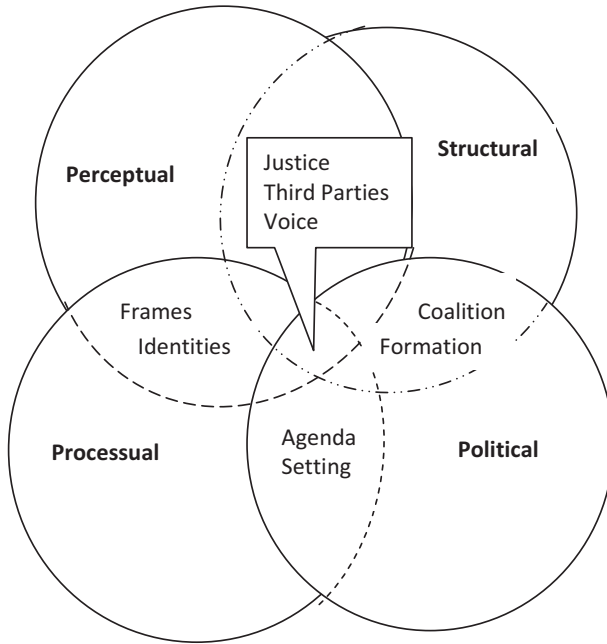


Figure 1. Intersecting domains for research on multiparty negotiations.

Perceptual and Processual Domains

There is a long tradition of studying negotiator perceptions within negotiation research. Cognitive biases have been one popular topic (Bazerman, 2006). Research on parties’ framing of disputes (Brummans et al., 2008; Lewicki et al., 2003) has taken a different tack in capturing disputant’s perceptions. Meanwhile, scholars of negotiation processes (Olekals et al., 2003) have linked negotiation tactics with phases of multiparty negotiations. However, little work has investigated how parties’ biases may interact with each other or shape their interaction and tactics over time or their subsequent negotiation outcomes (see Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994; Lewicki et al., 2003 for notable exceptions). This intersection of the perceptual and processual domains offers a fertile arena for future research. Researchers are only beginning to consider how negotiators’ frames may interact (DeWulf, 2006) and investigating how the degree of alignment of collaborative partners’ problem frames affects the outcome of their collaboration showing that discordant framing leads to worse outcomes particularly when it occurs among primary stakeholders (Nowell, 2010). And while we know much about the persistence of perceptions (Bazerman, 2006; Lewicki et al., 2003) and how they become entrenched and lead to escalation, further exploration of the processes and mechanisms that cause parties to adjust or change their perceptions (of each other and the issues) is warranted including identifying approaches that third parties can utilize to bridge discordant frames.

Processual and Political Domains

Many multiparty negotiations involve the interactions of nation-states and are often referred to as multilateral, rather than multiparty, negotiations (Crump & Zartman, 2003). Research in the political domain focuses on the role of power in shaping the table, the willingness of parties' to negotiate at all, and their ability to discursively define the issues considered and not considered (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). Largely, the domain of political scientists and the political dynamics of multiparty negotiations remain understudied by organizational scholars [see Gray and Hay (1986) and work by Hardy and colleagues as exceptions]. Research at the intersection of the processual and political domains might focus on agenda setting, i.e., how power is wielded to insert or prevent consideration of items in multiparty negotiations as well as how identification processes facilitate or inhibit coalition formation. Both top-down and bottom-up processes of coalition formation can forge a sense of shared identity that, in turn, can exert a positive influence on behavioral intentions and actual behavior in multiparty negotiations. For example, a key feature of collaboration is the construction of a collective identity (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Huxham & Vangen, 2005), and identification among low-power actors motivates them to form coalitions with other similarly disadvantaged actors (Simpson, 2004) at least when rewards are sufficient enough (van Beest, Wilke, & Van Dijk, 2004). Since collective identification is also closely allied with perceptions of justice (Lewicki et al., 2003), the stability of coalitions may change with disputants' perceptions about the procedural justice of the negotiating process as well as their perceptions of the substantive outcomes.

Political and Structural Domains

Organizational scholars have already made some contributions at the intersection of the political and structural domains by focusing on coalition formation (Bazerman, 1986; Mannix & White, 1992; Murnighan, 1978; Murnighan & Brass, 1991; Polzer et al., 1998). While early work on coalitions explained their formation in terms of the desire for reward maximization (Komorita & Chertkoff, 1973; Rapoport & Kahan, 1982), other scholars argued that factors such as social orientation (Simpson, 2004), organizational subcultures (Howard-Greenville, 2006), and power disparities (Mannix & White, 1992) influence how and why coalitions form. Additional critique of reward maximization explanations for coalition formation charges that they hold little predictive power for real world organizational (vs. laboratory) coalitions (van Beest et al., 2004; Komorita & Parks, 1995; Mannix & White, 1992). Consequently, field studies that investigate the contextual factors that foster or inhibit coalition formation are sorely needed.

Intersection of All Four Domains

Several topics that can enhance our understanding of multiparty negotiations lie at the intersection of all four theoretical domains. For example, differences in perceptions of

justice and how it should be allocated are often important evidence of entrenched positions or stalemate in multiparty negotiations. Climate change negotiations offer a case in point as developed and developing countries dispute who should bear the costs of remediation. Concerns over voice have gained recent attention within organizations (Detert, Burris, & Harrison, 2010; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, & Edmondson, 2009), but also suggest compelling questions for multiparty contexts especially in the wake of recent protests by the citizens of totalitarian regimes in the Arab world, e.g., what conditions encourage speaking up and in what fora? Similarly, NGOs have pressed for a place at the table in transnational negotiations that have traditionally been restricted to nation-states. Finally, the roles that third parties can play in fostering collaboration in multiparty arenas warrant continued investigation. I place it at this intersection of theories as well because these roles can be expected to vary in scope and perceived effectiveness with respect to the institutional context in which they operate, the power asymmetries among the parties in the negotiation, and the cultural identities of the parties themselves.

Studying Complexity Itself

Studying complexity itself has also been proposed as essential to grasping the dynamics of multiparty negotiations. Crump (2003) has suggested that dispute complexity be treated as an independent variable that may influence leadership styles, decision making, coalition behavior, and communication processes in multiparty contexts. Others (Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2007) see utility in dynamical systems modeling to capture complexity, while others (Ansari, Gray, & Wijen, 2011; Peake, 2010) have suggested that complexity theory may hold the key to grasping the dynamic and changing nature of fields where actors are in conflict. Whether or not new theories of complexity are introduced or extant theories are utilized, research in multiparty contexts necessitates capturing reciprocal influences among parties and across time periods which also means allowing for and capturing how contextual shifts over time may also impact negotiation outcomes (e.g., by advantaging one party over another). Nonetheless, the sheer complexity of these negotiations also dissuades researchers from pursuing them.

Reluctance to Study Multiparty Negotiations

In addition to their complexity, a second reason scholars may have shied away from addressing multiparty conflict relates to the difficulty of gaining and maintaining access to these negotiation contexts and the actors involved in them. I recall a public policy mediator lamenting her decision to allow researchers to study an ongoing conflict in which she had served as a third party. The researchers had been insensitive to the potential repercussions of their inquiry on the ongoing negotiations. Clearly, researchers in such contexts walk a fine line between getting “accurate” data and possibly “tilting” the negotiations through their questioning of the parties. Understandably, parties and mediators may be loath to talk to researchers as negotiations unfold.

A third reason that may explain researchers' hesitation to investigate multiparty disputes is the potential to become implicated in the dispute or possibly forced to "take a stand" by one or more of the parties. While collecting data about an intractable conflict in Northern Minnesota between the National Park Service, environmentalists and members of the Wise Use Movement, on two separate occasions Ralph Hanke and were accused of sympathizing with the environmentalists because in the one case we drove a (rental) car with Twin Cities' license plates.² In another instance, we received a strong interrogation from one Northern Minnesota legislator about our research funding from the Hewlett Foundation—which, in addition to funding conflict studies like ours, also supported environmental issues. Consequently, our credibility with some disputants was unwittingly compromised because of inaccurate or minor details about our own presumed alliances. While mildly unpleasant but also insightful for us, some researchers might prefer to avoid such confrontations or circumstances in which they might feel pressured into taking sides in the conflict. Encountering a threat to the safe, arms-length vantage point of the researcher may be getting closer to conflict than some researchers are prepared to do.

A fourth reason that multiparty negotiations may escape researchers' scrutiny lies in an inattention to or lack of knowledge and finesse with actually handling conflicts. Even if conflict and negotiation scholars understand the importance of process (Wondolleck & Yaffee, 2000), many are not trained to intervene in conflicts. Consequently, important details pertinent to conflict intervention, e.g., understanding how one's credibility can be compromised, how to respond when one's neutrality is challenged, or recognizing when projection is occurring (Gray, 2003), or one is colluding (Gray & Schrujjer, 2010), may prevent researchers from fully grasping the dynamics they seek to explain. Additionally, researchers may be seduced into taking sides or disputants may impute researchers' allegiance to one side or another despite their attempts to remain unbiased. Researchers navigating in such murky waters may be dissuaded from continuing.

I have argued that, despite these obstacles, numerous theoretical lenses can productively guide future research on multiparty negotiations. Researchers can draw their theories from many different disciplinary traditions although, preferably, a theoretical synthesis should also be sought. I encourage organizational scholars to set aside parsimony (at least temporarily) and "wade into the muck" in order to excavate the many underexplored pathways to fuller explication of multiparty negotiation dynamics.

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²Voters in the Twin Cities heavily supported environmental causes while in Northern Minnesota (an area of resource extractive industries like mining and lumbering) environmentalism was seen as an anathema to economic well-being.

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