

The expression of anger in negotiations can be an effective strategy, several studies have shown, because it is interpreted by others as a sign of toughness, thus encouraging them to make concessions. However, there's a hefty caveat to this conclusion because those studies were conducted entirely in a Western context. Now Hajo Adam and colleagues have attempted to correct this oversight by studying the effect of anger in negotiations conducted by American students hailing from a Western background and American students with an East Asian ancestry. Adam's finding is that expressions of anger backfire in negotiations involving people with an East Asian background. A follow-up study suggested this is because such behaviour is considered culturally inappropriate.

The first study with 63 participants of European ancestry and 67 of East Asian ancestry involved a hypothetical negotiation situation. The students read a transcript of a negotiation between a salesman and client and imagined they were the salesman. Half the students read a version in which the client was described at one point as speaking in an angry tone. The key measure was whether the students said they would agree to add a warranty into the deal or not. The effect of anger was opposite for the two cultural groups: the Western students were more likely to add the warranty (i.e. make a concession) if the client got angry whereas the East Asian students were less likely to add the warranty in this situation.

To increase the realism, a second study involved another 67 European-ancestry students and 88 East Asian-ancestry students taking part in computer-mediated negotiations in pairs, in which they played the role of mobile phone seller. The whole affair was actually fixed by the researchers and computer-controlled but the students were tricked into thinking they were playing with another student. Another twist to the set-up was that the students were occasionally given a 'sneak insight' into their negotiation partner's typed intentions, for example 'I think I'll offer X'. Replicating the first study, the key finding here was that when these insights contained an expression of anger (e.g. 'This is really getting on my nerves, I'm going to offer X') the Western-ancestry students were more likely to make a concession to their negotiation partner whereas the East-Asian ancestry students were less likely to do so.

The final study provided a rather crude test of one possible explanation for the results - that the effect of anger has to do with what's considered culturally appropriate. Dozens of European and East-Asian-ancestry students took part in a replication of the computer-mediated negotiation task, but this time half the students were told in advance that most people express anger in negotiations and that it was acceptable to do so in this study, whereas the other half were told that expressions of anger were rare and it was not acceptable to get angry in the current task. With these instructions in place, the effects of cultural background disappeared. Instead, regardless of students' cultural background, anger was beneficial following the 'anger is ok' instructions whereas it backfired following the 'anger is unacceptable' instructions.

'Although we believe the present results are an important step in understanding how culture and emotions interact in negotiations,' the researchers said, 'the increasingly global nature of society highlights the importance of continuing to investigate the interplay of culture and emotions in a broad array of social settings.'

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Adam H, Shirako A, & Maddux WW (2010). Cultural variance in the interpersonal effects of anger in negotiations. *Psychological science : a journal of the American Psychological Society / APS*, 21 (6), 882-9 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20483822>