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FlashReport

Tell me more: The effects of expressed interest on receptiveness during dialog

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigated the effect of expressed interest on individuals' openness to opposing viewpoints and perceptions of debate counterparts. Participants in Study 1 engaged in an online conversation with a purported debate counterpart who did or did not express interest in the participants' viewpoint by asking an elaboration question—that is, a question geared at soliciting additional information. Compared to control participants, participants who received a question rated their debate counterpart more favorably, were more willing to engage in future interaction with their counterpart, and acted in a more receptive manner. Study 2 tested the effects of instructions to prepare elaboration questions on listeners' responses to a speaker offering counter-attitudinal arguments. Preparing questions caused participants to be more open to the idea of having a conversation with the speaker, to make more positive attributions about typical proponents of the speaker's viewpoint, and to judge the conclusions of the speech as more valid. Theoretical and practical implications of this research are discussed.

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Introduction

Parties in conflict, from warring nations to angry spouses, often experience frustration during dialog, not only because of substantive differences in views, but also because they feel that the other party has not listened in a genuinely interested manner and that, consequently, they have not been “heard.” Even when opposing parties are reluctant to express agreement with each other, the sense that grievances were noted and taken seriously can be a meaningful outcome. Partisans might pave the way to more positive future interactions simply by signaling interest in each others' views. In this paper, we present two studies in which dialog participants make and receive expressions of interest—in particular, elaboration questions during the dialog—and we report the results of this intervention on dialog outcomes.

We propose that expressed interest may improve dialog outcomes by increasing opposing parties' understanding of their divergent positions and reducing negative stereotypes, resentment, and mistrust. This may in turn influence both the subjective (Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006; Curhan, Elfenbein, & Kilduff, 2009) and objective value of an encounter, improving prospects for future negotiations. The existing literature on psychological barriers to conflict resolution leaves little doubt that partisans do not receive and evaluate each other's overtures in an unbiased manner (Lord,

Lepper, & Ross, 1979; Ross & Ward, 1995, 1996; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), nor do they expect each other to do so (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). We propose that when people interact with a disagreeing yet seemingly *interested* other, they may come to view that person as more open-minded than is the norm in conflictual discussion, and become hopeful that their viewpoint will be evaluated more fairly.

Research on close relationships using the Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF; Coan & Gottman, 2007) has established “interest” as one of several positive indicators that predicts marital satisfaction and stability (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Gottman, 1993, 1994; Gottman & Levenson, 1999). While these studies examine interest as a stable characteristic of a couple's dialog style, we focus on laboratory-controlled situations in which a listener does or does not express interest in the speaker's views by way of offering written elaboration questions, and we explore the immediate consequences of such expressions for dialog outcomes.

Elaboration questions

In daily life, individuals who are interested in a communicated viewpoint often ask questions to solicit further information. We posit that the recipient of such questions may reasonably reach different conclusions regarding the asker's interest compared to someone confronted with a set of opposing arguments. Additionally, asking questions may lead the *asker* to re-evaluate his or her own level of interest in the speaker's viewpoint. Thus, we hypothesize that elaboration questions in the context of opposing

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argumentation might have psychological benefits for both the recipient and the asker of a question.

In past research, questions have been shown to have many uses (see Clark, 1996; Levinson, 1983), including gathering information, testing whether someone else shares one's knowledge, or moving conversation forward. In our study, we take up *elaboration questions*. Such questions follow information another person has offered with a request to "please elaborate." Examples include: "Could you tell me more about that?" and "Why do you think that?" An elaboration question is not asked in order to couch an argument in question form, nor to trap the other party into making a contradictory statement, but rather to gain greater understanding of the other's views. In the studies presented here, we operationalize expressing interest by including (or instructing participants to include) elaboration questions during dialog.

Considerable research in the domain of attitude change addresses the effect of questions on persuasion (e.g., Blankenship & Craig, 2007; Petty, Cacioppo, & Heesacker, 1981; Zillman, 1972). However, this literature deals primarily with rhetorical or tag questions, not elaboration questions geared at soliciting additional information. We expect that unlike rhetorical or tag questions, elaboration questions may have a more specific effect of signaling the asker's interest and changing the tone of the dialog. Moreover, if true, we predict that both receiving and asking elaboration questions will have a positive effect on dialog outcomes.

Specifically, we posit that a person who receives an expression of interest in the form of an elaboration question will make more charitable inferences about the asker and perceive the asker more favorably, which should influence his or her own responses and intentions regarding future interaction. Furthermore, the act of *generating* elaboration questions might increase the askers' openness to the opposing viewpoint. Asking an elaboration question might induce more objective processing compared to counterarguing or simply restating one's views. Additionally, the process of asking a seemingly open-minded question might lead the asker to adjust her assessment of her own interest through a self-perception process (Bem, 1967). In other words, behaving open-mindedly might make individuals perceive themselves as more open-minded. We revisit these and other potential mechanisms in the General Discussion.

Study 1 – receiving an expression of interest

Study 1 engaged participants in an online discussion with a purported (but actually scripted) debate counterpart holding an opposing opinion, who did or did not offer an expression of interest in the course of discussion. We predicted that a brief expression of interest would lead participants to form more positive impressions about their debate counterpart, and others sharing his or her views, and behave in a more receptive manner during the interaction.

Method

Participants were 56 undergraduates who opposed a proposal to institute comprehensive exams as a graduation requirement for seniors (see Petty & Caccioppo, 1986). Eight participants were eliminated for missing data or expressed suspicion. After arriving at the laboratory in groups of four, participants were informed that the study was part of a project with the fictitious "Office of Undergraduate Affairs" to solicit student feedback on proposed policy changes. We then escorted participants to private cubicles. There, they rated their agreement with four policy proposals, including the target comprehensive exam proposal. All participants were then contacted by the experimenter via an instant message and informed that they had been paired for online discussion with a stu-

dent strongly in favor of the comprehensive exam policy. Participants were told to formulate their arguments and begin the online chat.

The interaction was scripted to occur in three steps. First, participants sent an online message with their arguments against comprehensive exams to the fictitious student. Second, participants received a scripted response with a series of arguments supporting the exams and containing the experimental manipulation. In the experimental ("interest") condition, the arguments were followed by an elaboration question expressing interest in the participant's views: "But I was interested in what you're saying. Can you tell me more about how come you think that?" All other aspects of the interaction were held constant.

Participants then responded with a second set of thoughts and arguments, after which the experimenter interrupted the chat and informed participants that they were out of time and should complete a final questionnaire. This questionnaire contained several measures accompanied by 7-point Likert scales ranging from -3 (indicating strong disagreement) to +3 (indicating strong agreement). A "counterpart's open-mindedness" measure was created from participants' ratings of their debate counterpart's receptiveness and open-mindedness. An "own receptiveness to viewpoint" measure was created from the composite of three items asking whether participants felt receptive to the other student's views, were willing to receive more information supporting the other student's views, and were willing to have a future conversation with their debate counterpart on this issue. We also measured participants' perceptions of the warmth, open-mindedness, intelligence, reasonableness, objectivity, and morality of typical proponents of the comprehensive exam policy, and created a composite measure of these six items. A "post-manipulation views" measure was created from participants' ratings of the validity of their debate counterpart's arguments and degree of opposition to comprehensive exams post interaction.

Finally, two naïve judges rated the text written by participants in the third part of the scripted interaction on a 5-point scale measuring receptiveness. The inter-judge correlation was significant ($r = .59, p < .001$), so we averaged the two sets of ratings to create a receptiveness score for each participant's written response.

Results and discussion

Results are summarized in Table 1. Prior to the manipulation, control ($N = 23$) and interest ($N = 25$) condition participants expressed comparable opposition to comprehensive exams ($t < .3, ns$). As predicted, though, participants in the interest condition perceived the other student as more open-minded than did control participants ($t(46) = 4.06, p < .001$). They also rated themselves significantly higher on the "own receptiveness to viewpoint" index than did control participants ($t(46) = 2.05, p < .05$), suggesting that receiving an expression of interest made participants feel more receptive. Participants in the interest condition also rated typical proponents of comprehensive exams less negatively than did control participants ($t(46) = 2.05, p < .05$), whereas perceptions of typical *opponents* of exams were unaffected by the manipulation ($t < .3, ns$). Importantly, naïve judges rated the open-ended responses of participants in the interest condition as more receptive than the responses of participants in the control condition ($t(45) = 2.43, p < .05$), indicating that an expression of interest from the counterpart elicited more receptive responses. Finally, the manipulation did not affect participants' post-manipulation views of the policy ($t < 1.1, ns$) nor their perceptions of the counterpart's certainty regarding his or her views ($t < 1.0, ns$). Thus, the effects of expressed interest cannot be attributed to differences in participants' beliefs about the strength of their counterpart's opinions.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of participants' responses.

	Study 1				Study 2			
	Interest condition		Control condition		Questioners		Commenters	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pre-experiment view of counterpart's position	−1.91	1.04	−1.80	1.08	−0.24	1.51	−0.24	1.67
Rating of counterpart's receptiveness	1.48**	1.58	−0.33	1.49	–	–	–	–
Participant's self-rated receptiveness	1.09*	1.16	0.43	1.06	−0.44*	1.76	−1.38	1.41
Participant's receptiveness as rated by naïve judges (scale between 1 and 5)	2.68*	0.79	2.05	0.70	–	–	–	–
Perceptions of typical proponents of counterpart's position	−0.18*	0.92	−0.68	0.79	0.18*	0.85	−0.31	0.58
Perceptions of typical opponents of counterpart's position	−0.01	0.75	−0.09	1.20	0.17	0.77	0.35	0.55
Post-manipulation views of counterpart's position	−0.62	1.26	−0.98	1.46	−1.08*	1.13	−1.94	0.94

Unless specifically noted, means are on a 7-point scale, with +3 indicating strong agreement and −3 indicating strong disagreement.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

Study 2 – delivering an expression of interest

Study 2 was designed to test the hypothesis that instructions to ask an elaboration question while listening to a communication might make the *asker* feel more open-minded. As suggested earlier, individuals who observe themselves expressing interest might become more receptive and open-minded as a result of self-perception processes (Bem, 1967) or more objective processing required to prepare an elaboration question rather than defend one's view. To test this prediction, participants were asked to prepare either questions or comments while watching a video featuring a counter-attitudinal message.

Method

Participants were 49 undergraduates preselected for disagreeing with the target viewpoint (universal veganism), who were asked to watch a video of another student presenting his view on the topic. Control participants ("commenters," $N = 24$) were instructed to compare the speaker's view to their own. Experimental participants ("questioners," $N = 25$) were instructed to "come up with three open-ended questions for the speaker that will help you better understand why he feels as he does." We expected these instructions to lead questioners to approximate the behavior of a person interested in the speaker's opinion, while leading commenters to behave in the way that people normally do when exposed to counter-attitudinal information—that is, to reflect on differences, bolster their own opinions, or counterargue the opposing viewpoint (e.g., Osterhouse & Brock, 1970).

All participants viewed a 2-min speech by a member of a campus animal rights organization advocating universal veganism. After hearing the speech, questioners were asked to list their questions for the speaker, and commenters were asked to list their comments about the speech. Participants then rated their willingness to have a future conversation with the speaker and reported their impressions of "typical proponents" and "typical opponents" of universal veganism on the dimensions of warmth, open-mindedness, intelligence, reasonableness, objectivity, and morality, which were averaged into overall impression measures for each group. Finally, we created a composite "post-manipulation views" measure comprised of participants' ratings of the validity of the speaker's conclusions and post-manipulation agreement with the statement: "The raising and killing of animals for meat should be stopped." As in Study 1, participants recorded their answers using 7-point Likert scales.

Results and discussion

Prior to the manipulation, commenters and questioners expressed comparable opposition to universal veganism ($t < .1$, *ns*).

As predicted, participants who had been instructed to generate elaboration questions as they watched the speech rated the idea of having a conversation with the speaker about the issue as less unappealing than did participants who made comments, $t(47) = 2.05$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1). Questioners also rated typical proponents of universal veganism more favorably than did commenters ($t(47) = 2.33$, $p < .05$), whereas perceptions of typical opponents were unaffected ($t < 1.0$, *ns*). The manipulation did affect participants' views about the content of the speech, with questioners showing less unfavorable views on the composite measure than commenters ($t(47) = 2.88$, $p < .05$). It is noteworthy that these effects arose despite the fact that questioners were not given the opportunity to receive answers to their questions or even to pose them directly to the speaker. The mere act of *formulating* elaboration questions was sufficient to change their reactions.

General discussion

Two studies demonstrated the effects of expressions of interest on dialog outcomes. In Study 1, receiving elaboration questions caused individuals to view their debate counterpart more positively, behave more open-mindedly, and form more favorable inferences about other proponents of the counterpart's views. In Study 2, asking questions made participants more willing to engage in future conversation with their debate counterpart and again to see other proponents of the counterpart's viewpoint more positively. Unlike receiving elaboration questions in Study 1, generating them in Study 2 also induced more favorable attitudes toward the opposing viewpoint, suggesting that actively expressing interest may be more powerful than receiving an expression of interest. This possibility merits future research.

Although we did not test the specific mechanisms behind the observed effects, the literature suggests several contenders. As noted, the outcomes observed in Study 2 are consistent with both processing and self-perception accounts. It is possible that the speech was processed more objectively when participants prepared questions rather than comments. Alternatively, formulating questions might have induced questioners to make different inferences about their own open-mindedness (Bem, 1967). Generating elaboration questions might also have triggered perspective-taking (Clare, & Jeffery, 1972; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), which has been shown to have numerous benefits in negotiation settings. In Study 1, where *receiving* questions had positive effects, there might have been a different underlying process. For example, perhaps receiving expressions of interest relates to "acknowledgement," which has been shown to reduce reactive devaluation (Ward, Gerber, Brenner, & Ross, 2008).

Future research should address these and other underlying mechanisms to clarify whether they differ when receiving versus generating expressions of interest. The current interventions

should also be tested in contexts of more contentious debate to identify the potential impact of expressions of interest in the face of long-standing conflict (e.g., ethnic or geopolitical rifts), and the factors that give rise to such expressions in those contexts. Finally, it would be interesting to explore whether body language, affirmative statements, and other signals of interest might serve similar functions and lead to comparable outcomes as observed with elaboration questions here. For now, we hope the current studies will spark a broader line of research on the role of expressions of interest that will deepen our insight into conflict resolution, negotiation, and attitude change more generally.

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