
Column

When “Sacred” Issues Are at Stake

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Claims of Sacredness

“Our land is sacred—it can’t be traded.”
“On principle, I won’t give that crook a dime!”
“You can’t place a dollar value on a human life.”

In these statements, the speakers are refusing to negotiate over issues that are “sacred” to them on ideological or moral grounds. Three different motivations may underlie sacredness claims. First, a negotiator may truly be constrained by ideology; his or her “sacred” issue is indeed not open for discussion and perhaps never will be. Second, a sacredness claim may be a tactic that a negotiator uses to try to claim value. Third, we argue that certain issues may be “pseudosacred” — sacred to the speaker under some, but not all, conditions. A negotiator may trade off a “pseudosacred” issue when necessary but treat the issue as sacred when he or she can afford to stand on principle. Claims of sacredness present a significant challenge to the negotiation process because they directly challenge much of the advice offered by scholars and teachers.

Traditional models of negotiation encourage individuals to identify their differing preferences in a negotiation and to make trade-offs on these

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differences with the goal of maximizing outcomes (Raiffa 1982; Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa 1999). This strategy is the basis of most contemporary advice on improving one's negotiation skills. Negotiators are advised to assess how much they value each issue at stake and to make trades that create value (Lax and Sebenius 2006; Malhotra and Bazerman 2007). Even in a negotiation as contentious as the talks that produced the Camp David accords in 1978, President Jimmy Carter was able to persuade the Israelis and the Palestinians to trade security for sovereignty, as Howard Raiffa (1982) has noted. Thus, the negotiation literature assumes that parties are both *able* and *willing* to make trade-offs on issues in ways that maximize their outcomes. Virtually all quantitative analyses of negotiation assume that negotiators will think through the value of differing issues.

Despite these widespread prescriptions, experience tells us that, indeed, not all issues in a given negotiation are up for sale. Some of these issues are linked to "sacred values" (Tetlock, Peterson, and Lerner 1996). As compared to values in general, which are simply subjective beliefs about the worth of entities, ideas, or behaviors, sacred values (similar to "protected values"; see Baron and Spranca 1997) are defined as "any value that a moral community implicitly or explicitly treats as possessing infinite or transcendental significance that precludes comparisons, trade-offs, or indeed any other mingling with founded or secular values" (Tetlock et al. 2000: 853). In other words, by definition, by virtue of their association with infinite utility, sacred values cannot be traded or compromised (Tetlock, Peterson, and Lerner 1996; Thompson and Gonzalez 1997).

Thus, the exchange behavior typical of negotiable issues becomes unacceptable for many negotiators when they believe that sacred values are at stake. Most people would consider their own health and safety and that of their children, for example, to be sacred values for which there is no monetary equivalent. Trade-offs involving such sacred values are taboo because they impose a market-pricing model in what many people would consider to be an inappropriate context (Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Tetlock et al. 2000). Thus, some researchers consider sacred values to be a barrier to optimizing outcomes in ideologically based negotiations (Wade-Benzoni et al. 2002).

How Sacredness Challenges Negotiators

The assumption that trade-offs are inevitable and desirable is core to behavioral negotiation frameworks. The potential existence of sacred issues, issues that are impervious to comparisons and trade-offs, thus poses a problem for negotiators. If a party refuses to negotiate on a specific issue, but a solution cannot be reached without negotiation of that issue, then an impasse is inevitable.

Philip Tetlock's (1999) analysis of sacred values may be particularly useful for examining their effect on negotiations. He noted that threats to

sacred values typically are accompanied by moral outrage, which itself has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Specifically, characteristics of such moral outrage include anger, contempt, and support for the punishment of violators of sacred values. For example, Tetlock and his colleagues (2000) found that, when compared to participants who considered routine trade-offs such as paying someone to clean his or her house, participants who were asked to consider trade-offs involving ostensibly sacred issues, such as the buying and selling of human body parts, expressed more anger, were more likely to make negative attributions about someone who would permit this type of trade-off, and were also more willing to sever contact with such individuals. In the context of negotiation, we expect that such reactions will directly affect a negotiator's outcomes as well as the negotiator's perceptions of his or her opponent.

The harsh negative emotions experienced by someone who believes that his or her protected values are being threatened are particularly likely to affect the negotiation process (Tetlock et al. 2000). Jonathan Baron and Mark Spranca (1997) found that people experience anger when asked to trade off issues tied to their sacred values, and other researchers have found that negotiators who experience such negative emotions as anger achieve fewer joint gains than negotiators who experience more positive emotions (Allred et al. 1997). In addition, high levels of emotional stress may impair a person's decision-making process and diminish the quality of their decisions (Janis and Mann 1977).

Furthermore, threats to sacred values are associated with inflexibility. Tetlock and his colleagues (2000) argue that people respond to such threats with rigidity and a refusal to think about more flexible and creative solutions. Leigh Thompson and Richard Gonzalez (1997) similarly assert that negotiators may become uncompromising in negotiation when their sacred values are at stake, and Baron and Spranca (1997) suggest that the presence of sacred values may increase hard-bargaining strategies. In sum, the onslaught of negative emotion and the rigidity provoked by threats to seemingly sacred values can clearly serve as significant obstacles to negotiation success.

Separating the Sacred from the Pseudosacred

We have no desire or right to censure negotiators for placing infinite value on a particular issue or to insist that they quantify such issues. Nonetheless, the arguments we have presented clearly highlight the danger of mislabeling an issue as sacred during a negotiation when it would actually be tradable if the right deal came along. Indeed, research suggests that seemingly sacred issues can be, in fact, negotiable when an impasse is a relatively unattractive option — thus indicating that those issues are “pseudosacred” rather than sacred (Tenbrunsel et al. 2007).

In an environmental context involving a negotiation between a logging company and a Native American tribe, researchers found that a focus on sacred issues led to more impasses, lower joint outcomes, and more negative perceptions of one's opponent. These effects, however, were only evident when the negotiators had strong alternatives to a negotiated agreement (Tenbrunsel et al. 2007). These results suggest that upholding the sanctity of one's values may depend on whether people can afford to do so. If such issues were truly sacred, then the impact of focusing on them should be consistent, independent of structural factors such as the attractiveness of one's alternative.

As further illustration, Northwestern University professor Douglas Medin has told the story of the Lacandon Mayans in Mexico, who believe that when a tree is cut down, a star falls from the sky. Despite this seemingly sacred valuation on trees, the Lacandon negotiated an agreement with the Mexican government for selective harvesting of its forest. When asked whether they could make such an agreement, the Lacandon's tribal leader replied that the agreement was the best alternative for keeping as many stars in the sky as possible.

Similarly, consider the Israeli claim that Jerusalem is entirely theirs and the Palestinian claim that Jerusalem must be their capital. Despite the ongoing strife in the region, many scholars believe that key pieces of a final resolution to the conflict are clear. Specifically, a workable resolution would include two different definitions of Jerusalem, each with some biblical precedent. By having Palestinians define the boundaries of Jerusalem as a larger area than the Israeli definition, it may be possible to allow the Palestinians to locate their capital in a place that the Palestinians define as part of Jerusalem but that is not part of the Israeli definition of Jerusalem.

These two stories suggest that flexibility is possible in negotiations involving seemingly sacred issues. To achieve such flexibility, negotiators must learn to separate *important* issues from truly *sacred* ones and be willing to make trade-offs on the important ones. When they do so, mutually satisfying agreements concerning seemingly sacred issues become more likely.

The research described earlier suggests that one method for separating sacred from important issues would be to think through one's alternative to a negotiated agreement and determine in advance whether one would be likely to accept an extremely attractive offer from the other side that may involve some level of compromise on the issue in question — thus saving “as many stars in the sky as possible.” Or, in contrast, would one be more likely to pursue the alternative regardless of the attractiveness of the offer if it involves any compromise on the sacred issue? In the former case, the issue would be more appropriately categorized as important; in the later, it may be truly sacred.

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