

**TACTICS, CONTEXTUAL-SITUATIONAL FACTORS  
AND BUSINESS NEGOTIATORS' CHOICES**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of the paper is to report on the findings of a quantitative investigation carried out in the western Transdanubian region in order to gain information on Hungarian business professionals' foreign language knowledge, organisational behaviour and negotiating habits. The present study focuses on the role of certain contextual-situational variables which influence business negotiators' choices in opting for or against the use of ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics. First, the literature on the role of ethic in negotiations, ethically questionable negotiating tactics and variables affecting their employment is reviewed. Then, the research methodology and sampling are described and the results are presented and discussed. The results are also compared to the findings of a previous qualitative investigation carried out by the authors. In the light of the data from the two pieces of research, the paper concludes that for practising Hungarian business negotiators their relationship with the negotiating partner and the importance of the negotiations' outcome are the most important variables while the gender of the opponent seems to affect their use of tactics the least.

**Keywords:** *ethic, business negotiations, contextual-situational variables, EANTs*

**Abstrakt**

Cieľom príspevku podať výskumnú správu o výsledkoch kvantitatívneho skúmania uskutočneného v západnom transdunajskom regióne s cieľom získať informácie o znalostiach maďarských odborníkov na podnikanie z cudzích jazykov, organizačného správania a rokovacích zvykoch. Predložená štúdia sa zameriava na úlohu určitých kontextovo-situačných premenných, ktoré ovplyvňujú rozhodovanie účastníkov obchodných rokovaní o tom, či majú alebo nemajú použiť eticky nejednoznačné rokovacie taktiky. Prvá časť príspevku obsahuje kritický prehľad literatúry o úlohe etiky v rokovaní, eticky sporných rokovacích taktikách a premenných ovplyvňujúcich ich používanie. Ďalej sa charakterizujú a analyzujú výskumné metódy, výber vzorky respondentov a výsledky. Výsledky sa tiež porovnávajú so zisteniami predchádzajúceho kvalitatívneho skúmania, ktoré autorky uskutočnili. Vo svetle údajov z dvoch výskumov sa v závere príspevku konštatuje, že v praxi sú pre maďarských účastníkov obchodných rokovaní najdôležitejšími premennými ich vzťah s partnerom rokovania a význam výsledku rokovania, zatiaľ čo pohlavie oponenta zrejme len minimálne ovplyvňuje rokovaciu taktiku, ktorá sa používa.

**Kľúčové slová:** *etika, obchodné rokovania, kontextovo-situačné premenné, eticky nejednoznačné rokovacie taktiky*

**Introduction**

Practising negotiators for a long time held the view that negotiation is an art rather than an inventory of skills, and thus research into what was believed an aptitude to negotiation, as well as its teaching, was put into the background (Alavoine 2011). It was only later that professionals claimed that several negotiating competencies can be developed through instruction. The fact that the past decades have seen the incorporation of negotiations not only into the curriculum of business courses but also into that of other specialist fields at tertiary

level education, and further, the publication of dozens of coursebooks on negotiations indicates that the skills-based view seems to conquer.

However, in Hungary there is a relative lack of research into negotiations. The main reasons are the limited human and financial sources tertiary institutions and research institutes have at their disposal on the one hand, and practising negotiators' reluctance to fill in questionnaires or take part in interviews on the other. The majority of professionals in politics and the business sector tend to consider most aspects of their work confidential information. Given these unfavourable conditions, the little research done in the past decade concentrated mainly on the intercultural and moral aspects of business negotiations (e. g. Konczosné Szombathelyi, 2004, Dévényi, 2006; Borgulya, 2009). More recently, hand-in hand with broader-focus research (e. g. Dévényi, 2013; Szőke, 2013; Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2015), there are examinations with a more specific focus, e. g. bicultural comparisons (Szőke, 2015), the role of ethics (Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2013) or contextual-situational variables (Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2014).

The present study reports on the findings of a questionnaire survey conducted to triangulate the findings of the above qualitative examination carried out to learn about whether and to what extent contextual-situational factors influence business negotiators' choices in opting for or against the use of ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics. First the literature on the role of ethic in negotiations, marginally ethical negotiating tactics, and variables affecting their use will be reviewed. Then the research methodology will be described and the findings presented and discussed.

### **The role of ethics in negotiations**

The definitions of negotiations put emphasis either on the contradictory interest and aims of the negotiating parties or highlight the trust and honesty necessary for the successful outcome of the negotiation. In the heart of the argument there is either competition or cooperation. Almost half a century ago Carr (1968) put forward the view that negotiations are similar to poker. Ever since, many professionals and researchers who support the idea of competition have claimed that deception is a necessary component in negotiations. It is inevitable that conflicting interests have as big a role in negotiations as those which require cooperation. Since the publication of *Getting to Yes* by Fisher and Ury (1981), authors have compared the negotiated issues to a pie. During competition-centred distributive negotiations the parties see a fixed pie and, consequently, they try to obtain as big a segment as possible so that they win and the other party loses. During cooperation-based integrative negotiations, however, the parties try to extend the pie in order to have a win-win outcome.

The distributive and integrative aspects are present in each negotiation, thus the negotiating parties alternate between showing their overbearing or emphatic self (Alavoine, 2011). Speakers of English often call their negotiating counterpart their 'opponent', which puts the competitive self into the forefront. Although the opponent is called a 'negotiating partner' in the Hungarian language, Hungarian negotiators, being representatives of a masculine culture (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), usually see their counterparts as enemies rather than partners. The authors of the present paper reported on a study which found that Hungarian female business negotiators display very masculine characteristics (Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2015).

Tactics and tricks are usually associated with distributive negotiations. The question concerning their use is not whether they are legal but whether they are ethical. At the same time, it is difficult to tell what is ethical. Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher (e. g. Kant, 1996) claimed that the ethical norm is universal and independent of experience while representatives of utilitarianism (e. g. Bentham, 1823) believe that ethicality depends on the results of a decision, i. e. the amount of pleasure it brings.

### **Ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics and culture**

Recent years have seen the emergence of research into the use of marginally ethical negotiation tactics (Lewicki and Robinson, 1998) or EANTs – ethically ambiguous negotiation tactics (Volkema and Fleury, 2002). In their book, the editors Menkel-Meadow and Wheeler (2004) devote a chapter to each of the following five ethical problems which may arise before or during the negotiating process: (1) Truth telling; (2) Bargaining tactics; (3) Negotiating relationships; (4) Negotiations and agents; (5) Social influences and impacts.

In a seminal study, Lewicki and Robinson (1998) put forward the view that negotiating tactics are on a continuum of ethically appropriate to ethically inappropriate with a grey area in between the two groups. They claimed that these marginally unethical tactics are justifiable under some circumstances but unclear as to their ethical appropriateness. In a large-scale questionnaire survey they made more than 1,000 MBA students from two American universities rate on appropriateness and likelihood of use 18 marginally unethical tactics. On the basis of the results, they established the following five factors (groups of tactics): (F1) Misrepresentation of information; (F2) Traditional competitive bargaining; (F3) Bluffing; (F4) Manipulation of opponent's network; and (F5) Inappropriate information gathering.

The data they gained allowed them to draw conclusions on the different preferences of students according to demographical data, for example that female respondents, regarding F2 tactics as inappropriate, tended to be more cooperative and fair-minded. Also, they found significant differences in the preferences of respondents with different cultural backgrounds. Among others, they found that American MBAs were significantly more accepting of F2 tactics than Eastern European MBAs and Eastern Europeans were significantly less accepting of F3 tactics than their American and Asian counterparts.

Lewicki and Robinson (1998) noted that they found no data on significant cultural differences which would have allowed for comparison of their findings. Later they expanded their research and concluded that “the perception of negotiation tactics is sensitive to cultural differences” (Robinson, Lewicki and Donahue 2000, p. 658). They also called for further research into the interplay of national culture, business practices and what is considered ethical behaviour in negotiations

During the fifteen years which have passed since the publication of their original research, a growing number of authors have published articles with data that prove the difference in preferences of negotiators with different cultural backgrounds. For example, Triandis et al. (2001) studied the relationship of deception and culture and concluded that although the situation and the importance of the outcome affect the tactical choices of negotiators, the judgement on what is considered a lie and to what extent a tactic can be used differs from culture to culture. Rivers (2004) examined Australian negotiators' perceptions of ethically ambiguous tactics along four dimensions and also discussed potential cross-cultural variations on these dimensions.

Quite a few of these investigations set out to identify the cultural aspect which is responsible for the difference. Volkema (1999, 2004), for example, found correlations between intercultural differences in negotiators' preferences and the Hofstede dimensions of culture, namely individualism/collectivism, high/low power distance and masculinity/femininity, although admittedly the results bore some inconsistency. Zhang, Liu and Liu (2012) compared American and Chinese negotiators' aptitude to deceive and came to the conclusion that Chinese negotiators, coming from a collectivistic culture, tend to employ more informational deception than American negotiators but their individualistic American counterparts are more likely to commit more negative emotional deception.

### **EANTs and contextual/situational variables**

With the growing number of investigations into EANTs it became obvious that in order to provide an explanation of the differences it is not sufficient to pay attention only to the

characteristics of a given culture; situational variables, for example whether a collectivist negotiates with an in-group member or an out-group member, need to be considered.

Volkema and Fleury (2002) examined culture's influence on the acceptance (perceived ethicality) and likelihood of use of ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics. The American and Brazilian respondents had to consider the following factors: (1) unspecified context; (2) the opponent has a reputation as an unethical negotiator; (3) the country is known for skilled negotiators; (4) it is a very important negotiation; (5) there is a time deadline; (6) the opponent has a reputation as a very good negotiator; (7) there will be future cooperation with the opponent; (8) colleagues will learn about the details of the negotiation. The results showed a significant difference due to country in five of the eight conditions. Thus, Volkema and Fleury (2002) demonstrated that although culture does play an important role, situational factors also have an effect on the perceptions and use of ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics independent of culture.

Lewicki et al. (2003) established the following situational/contextual factors: (1) Past experiences of the negotiator; (2) Incentives; (3) Relationship with the other party; (4) The relative power between the negotiators; (5) Mode of communication; (6) Whether or not the negotiator is acting as an agent; (7) The group and the organisational norms, (8) The cultural norms. Not only is this list of variables completely different from that of Volkema and Fleury's (2002) but in this model cultural norms represent only a contextual variable.

Rivers and Lytle (2007) point out that culture is much more than a simple variable since it has a direct effect on the negotiator's consideration of the ethical decision. They base their claim on the fact that (1) culture includes cultural values as well as moral philosophy (e. g. Christianity and Confucianism) and (2) it affects other components, for example the organisational codes of ethics, organisational goals (e. g. rewards, deadline, the negotiator's role), the legal environment and the perception of the other party.

Alavoine (2011) emphasises the confrontation between values, visions of negotiation and practices. In his view, there are two main sources of influence on ethical choices: the 'world of representation' and the 'world of interpretations'. The first category comprises the individual's core values, which are in fact norms, principles and beliefs affected by (1) goals, expectations, personality, motivation (2) culture, subcultures, groups, family, gender and (3) education, experience, expertise, competencies. The second category relates to the individual's practices, for example whether they are distributive or integrative negotiators. Practices include deception, lies, bluff, threats, promises and concessions affected by (1) context, opportunities, actors/partners, power, trust (2) feelings, emotions, communication, attitudes, behaviours (3) stakes, interests (4) objectives and personal orientation.

In a Hungarian context, Tompos and Ablonczy-Mihályka (2014) conducted 72 semi-structured interviews in the western Transdanubian region to find out whether and to what extent the following seven factors influence business negotiators choices to opt for or against the employment of EANTs: (1) the opponent's gender; (2) the opponent's nationality; (3) first negotiation or (well-)known opponent; (4) the opponent is regarded almost as a friend; (5) the broad aim of the negotiation (one-off or long-term relationship); (6) the importance of the outcome of the negotiation; (7) the balance of power is in the respondent's favour. The results of the investigation are presented and discussed below in comparison with a subsequent piece of qualitative research.

### **Aims and methodology**

The investigation reported in this paper, among other objectives, aimed to gain data about practising Hungarian negotiators' negotiating habits and experiences. Thus, the data come from a questionnaire designed to map out foreign language knowledge and use, organisational behaviour and negotiating habits (for a more detailed description see Ablonczy-Mihályka and Tompos, 2014).

The respondents were selected by quota sampling. The quote was established on the basis of Hungarian Central Bureau of Statistics data on the ratio of economic sectors companies operating in the Western Transdanubian region represent. As well as the geographical cluster criterion, only practising businesspeople who work in an international environment and routinely conduct negotiations with representatives of foreign cultures were asked to fill in the questionnaire. As Hungary is a small country characterised with high levels of inward mobility, in the lack of previous research, it is assumed that the values of business professionals who work in other regions are not very different from the values of the respondents.

A total of 268 answers were received. The following analysis relies on the responses given by 250 subjects due to data cleaning necessitated by missing data. Thus, the answers of 126 male and 124 female subjects are considered, 62,8% of whom represent the younger generation (between 20 – 35), 28,8% the middle-aged generation (between 36 – 50) and only 6,8% the 51+ age category. 205 of the respondents hold a bachelor's or master's degree. Each respondent speaks at least one foreign language (English or German) at least at B2 level (CEFL), 180 speaks a second foreign language and 72 even a third one. SPSS 18.0 was used to process and analyse data.

The purpose of this study is to present and discuss the situational and contextual factors which practicing Hungarian business negotiators believe affect the use of ethically ambiguous negotiating tactics. The findings are compared to those of a prior qualitative examination (Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2014, discussed above). In fact, data were collected in order to triangulate its these results. Triangulation in this case is based on the findings discussed in prior specialist literature, as well as those gained by means of interviews and a questionnaire survey in a case research fashion (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Thus, the ultimate aim of the subsequent research was to validate the findings of the qualitative research or at least, to further shape them.

At the same time, the authors are aware that both methods employed have their advantages and drawbacks: the questionnaire, due to the sample size, is expected to bring more valid and reliable results while the interviews' findings are more contextualised and richer in detail. For example, during the interviews respondents were asked which EANTs the respective factors influence and how and further, they were encouraged to make comments. Although these were an option in the questionnaire as well, very few respondents answered the open-ended questions.

### Findings and discussion

The questionnaire contained the contextual/situational factors examined in the qualitative research. Respondents only had to state whether the given factors affect the use of EANTs or not. The results are summarised in Table 1. In brackets, the findings of the prior interview-based investigation are shown.

*Table 1. The effect of contextual/situational variables on the use of EANTs*

Variable	Yes (%)	
	questionnaire N=250	interviews N=72
the opponent's gender	38.4	28.9
the opponent's nationality	50.0	55.3
first negotiation or (well-)known opponent	69.6	68.4
the opponent is regarded almost as a friend	71.2	53.2
the broad aim of the negotiation (one-off/long-term relationship)	54.0	63.2

the importance of the outcome of the negotiation	60.8	69.4
the balance of power is in the respondent's favour	55.2	58.9

Source: own compilation based on SPSS outputs and Tompos, Ablonczy-Mihályka, 2014

The data in Table 1 show that the quantitative study has brought results very similar to those of the qualitative examination. The majority of respondents in both investigations claimed that the variables *first negotiation or (well-)known opponent* and *the importance of the outcome of the negotiation* affect their use of tactics. The interviews found that the first variable affects the use of all EANTs. Respondents agreed that in the case of a first negotiation one has to use the tactics very carefully and tentatively, whereas an established relationship with the opponent allows for the gathering of information directly from them or the use of more tactics which are known to be effective. With regard to the second variable, the interviewees claimed that they tend to use more EANTs if the negotiation is of less importance and, conversely, the more important its result, the less risk they are willing to take. The tactics most often used with negotiations of greater importance are related to the strategies which aim to lead the opponent to believe they must deal with the respondent's company.

However, the variable *the opponent is regarded almost as a friend* was considered decisive by almost three quarters of the questionnaire respondents, while only a little more than half of the interviewees thought so. In general, the interviewees stated that close rapport influences the employment of all EANTs since it makes it easier to reach their aims with fewer tactics. Nine interviewees expressed the opinion that it is not a good idea to make friends with business partners. In a converse manner, the variable *the broad aim of the negotiation (one-off or long-term relationship)* was seen as important by a much higher ratio of the interviews than the questionnaire respondents. The interviewees said if they want to establish a long-term relationship they tend to take less risk, thus use EANTs very carefully. They claimed they do not use tactics related to bluffing (e. g. making the opponent believe they must deal with them) or to the manipulation of the opponent's network (e. g. contacting the opponent's superior).

About only half of the respondents from both pieces of research thought *the opponent's nationality* and *the balance of power is in the respondent's favour* affect their use of ethically questionable tactics. The interviewees who stated that their opponent's nationality does influence their use of EANTs gave several examples. Most of them told that it is worth concentrating on the facts if the opponents are from Germany or Austria. Similarly, fewer bluffing-related tactics should be used with Japanese counterparts, whereas they believe entertaining and gifts might be useful with Russian negotiating partners. Some interviewees pointed out that instead of tactics, more direct information-gathering channels can be used with Eastern Europeans. As for the second variable, the answers received were more diverse. Some interviewees said when their position is more powerful than that of the opponent, due to their advantage, they use fewer EANTs, while others claimed that they use more of them. Quite a few of them said that since the negotiating position tends to change during the negotiation, they use more shocking tactics related to traditional competitive bargaining and bluffing whenever they feel their position strengthen or weaken. Several interviewees pointed out that the advantage of being more powerful should not be abused and the opponents should be treated as equal partners even if the balance of power is not in their favour.

The variable *the opponent's gender* received the lowest approval rate in both investigations. It was exclusively male interviewees who said promising favourable things, entertaining and further, doing personal favours to female opponents positively influences the outcome of the negotiation. Further comments made included "women are easier to persuade" and "it's better to try to influence women's emotions rather than their logic". One respondent said women often tend to use their femininity and unethical tactics, for example "seducing" the



male negotiating partner. As pointed out above, the Hungarian culture is usually considered strongly masculine (e. g. Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005), while other pieces of research show higher levels of femininity (e. g. Szőke, 2014). This duality is believed to be reflected by the above results.

### Conclusion

The present study introduced the findings of two investigations into contextual-situational variables affecting the choices made by business negotiators for or against the use of ethically questionable negotiating tactics. The findings of the examinations confirmed the view that these factors need to be considered when studying practising negotiators' attitudes towards the tactics as well as examining the likelihood of their use.

Both investigations found that the variables *first negotiation or (well-)known opponent* and *the importance of the outcome of the negotiation* seem to affect Hungarian business negotiators' use of tactics to the highest degree, whereas the variable *the opponent's gender* does not appear to exert a significant influence on it. The factors *the opponent's nationality* and *the balance of power is in the respondent's favour* are taken into consideration only by every second business negotiator. However, the findings of the questionnaire survey have failed to confirm those of the interviews with regard to two variables, namely *the opponent is regarded almost as a friend* and *the broad aim of the negotiation (one-off or long-term relationship)*, thus further research is needed. The non-random samples and the geographical impoundment also necessitate further research.

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