Opponent or Partner: Do Negotiation Counterpart Labels Matter?

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Abstract

Many social situations are ambiguous. In negotiations, a crucial aspect of this ambiguity lies in their competitiveness: Is it better to compete or cooperate with a counterpart? To resolve this uncertainty, negotiators often drawn from seemingly diagnostic signals. In this research, we test the perceived diagnosticity of counterpart labels (*opponent* versus *partner*) in shaping competitive attitudes and behavioral intentions of negotiations. In four online experiments (total N = 1214), participants imagined themselves heading into various negotiation scenarios. Depending on condition, the counterpart they read about was labeled as either an *opponent* or *partner*. The studies varied in the negotiation context (e.g., tenant-landlord, antique sale) and in the source of the label manipulation (e.g., situation description, advice from a third-party). Overall, participants in the *opponent condition* reported a higher likelihood of behaving competitively, a stronger belief that the counterpart would behave competitively, and a stronger belief that competitive behavior would be effective. Mediation analyses showed that the relationship between label and behavioral intentions was better explained by the perceived effectiveness of competitive behavior than by expected counterpart behavior, suggesting that exposure to these labels impacts negotiators' framing of the entire situation, rather than just mimicry of anticipated counterpart behavior. This research adds external validity to the competitive framing literature, it contributes to our understanding of the ways in which labels impact framing, and it highlights the importance of label exposure in ambiguous situations that afford a range of competitive and cooperative approaches.

Do labels for negotiation counterparts matter? At the bargaining table, as in many other social situations, negotiators look for any available clue to determine if the best course of action is a more competitive or cooperative one. One such signal might be any label they encounter for their counterpart. Namely, if the other party is described as an *opponent*, as opposed to a *partner*, does a negotiator see the situation as more competitive and behave accordingly? Past evidence paints a mixed picture. On the one hand, scholars have found substantial effects of *situational labels* (e.g., Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004). Less work has examined *counterpart labels* (e.g., opponent versus partner), with one study finding effects emerging over repeated interactions in an economic game, but not in initial behavior (Burnham, McCabe, & Smith, 2000). No work, as far as we can tell, has examined the effects of counterpart labels in real-world negotiation contexts, even though negotiation educators and practitioners frequently use *opponent* and *partner* as labels when discussing real-world bargaining situations[1]. Here, we chart the impact of these terms, seeking to clarify whether the choice of counterpart label is trivial or consequential—and, if they do matter, how labels affect negotiator expectations.

How labels might matter

Alternative labels can evoke divergent expectations of an otherwise ambiguous episode (Cohen, 2003). Labeling a situation as a "Cutthroat Game" rather than a "Trust Game" leads to greater competition (Zhong, Loewenstein, & Murnighan, 2007), calling a game "The Wall Street Game," as opposed to "The Community Game," fosters competitive behavior (Liberman et al., 2004), and naming a 15-round trust game "Power Game," as opposed to "Trust Game,"

[1] In a recent informal poll of business school professors, recruited through the Academy of Management message board, 73% of negotiation instructors reported using at least one of these labels in class and 85% of them reported that their students used these labels. See Appendix 1 in the supplemental material.

decreases trust (Sun, Verbeke, Pozhaliev, Bagozzi, Babiloni, & Wang, 2019). In short, situation labels seem able to shape framing and, ultimately, behavior.

When it comes to counterpart labels, as opposed to situation labels, the evidence appears to be both limited and mixed. In one economic game, researchers manipulated whether the instructions featured *opponent* or *partner* as a counterpart label (Burnham et al., 2000). Contrary to predictions, participants in a single-round game did not show any effect of label. However, consistent with predictions, multiple rounds of the game les those in the *opponent* condition to be both less trusting and less trustworthy than those in the *partner* condition (Burnham et al., 2000). The researchers concluded that labels alone may not be enough to shape an actor's behavior; rather, labels may interact with the experience of initial counterpart behavior to shape trust. To the best of our knowledge, the impact of counterpart labels, as opposed to situation labels, has not otherwise been experimentally studied.

Several important questions remain unanswered. First, do counterpart labels alone have a meaningful impact in real-world negotiation contexts where people possess relevant experience and prior assumptions? Second, do counterpart labels have a meaningful impact when they are part of advice from a third party about a situation? And third, is any impact of counterpart labels primarily due to shaping expectations of counterpart behavior or due in part, or primarily, to a more general situational framing route? The answers to these questions have implications for scholarly accounts as well as for educators and practitioners. We expand on possible answers in the sections below and seek evidence for their validity in the current studies.

The impact of label use in real-world situations

Artificial games offer advantages for scholarship because their novelty allows for internal validity: Participants' behavior in them can be heavily impacted by the way they are described,

by their payoff structure, and by careful experimental manipulations. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that simply changing the name of a game impacts behavior. Unlike economic games, real-world social interactions can be swayed by past experiences, with context-dependent sets of expectations. When people face even somewhat familiar situations, they arrive equipped with mental models that shape expectations of social interactions and ensuing behavior (Halevy, Chou, & Murnighan, 2012), impacting competitive behavior in the context of conflict (Halevy, Kreps, & De Dreu, 2019). It is possible, then, that a simple label manipulation in a familiar real-world context might not have a meaningful impact on perceptions. As such, in the absence of counterpart behavior, negotiation counterpart labels may be innocuous (Burnham et al., 2000).

That said, we believe counterpart label effects could emerge in everyday negotiation contexts. Many such situations entail some degree of ambiguity, with even seasoned negotiators uncertain about how much to cooperate (e.g., Belkin & Rothman, 2017; Kramer & Lewicki, 2010; Sinaceur, Adam, Van Kleef, & Galinsky, 2013). In such ambiguous situations, people may infer what they can from available cues. Through cognitive processes of framing (see Dewulf et al., 2009), characterizing a counterpart as competitive or cooperative might disambiguate the negotiation. Cohen (2003) proposes that merely referring to a negotiation counterpart as an *adversary* or *partner* could tip the interpretation as either competitive or cooperative, accordingly. Possibly, then, counterpart labels may not be entirely innocuous; encountering *partner* and *opponent* labels may shape expectations about everyday negotiation situations.

The impact of label use in third-party advice

Labels might have an outsized impact when they are presented as part of an ostensibly neutral, even omnipotent, description of a situation. Behavioral research on label and framing effects in an experimental situation typically revolves around manipulations of instructions or

rules. Participants, coming into an experiment with little or no knowledge of the activity will likely take a description at face value. In real life, though, relevant information about a situation may come from an idiosyncratic source, such as an advice-giver. However, when a third-party lends advice for a negotiation, the labels they use might be seen as subjective, reflecting the advisor's own perspective. Accordingly, an advice recipient might discount the diagnosticity of those labels, giving them limited influence in the interpretation of the situation.

Despite this, we believe third-party advice givers' use of counterpart labels can matter. In economic games, advice given from former players to current players can create an intergenerational culture of behavior (Schotter & Sopher, 2007). In negotiations, actors are attentive to third-party experts (Steinel, Abele, & De Dreu, 2007). But to the best of our knowledge, there is no prior evidence about the impact of label use in advice. We propose that the counterpart labels used by a negotiation advice-giver can shape an advice-recipient's expectations about the nature of the negotiation.

Potential mechanisms

By what mechanism might exposure to counterpart labels impact behavior? One possibility is that counterpart labels shape peoples' expectations of how competitive a negotiation counterpart will be (Cohen, 2003), and their competitive behavior is a result of mirroring that expectation. Mimicking a negotiation counterpart can yield better outcomes (Maddux, Mullen, & Galinsky, 2008; Swaab, Maddux, & Sinaceur, 2011), so it stands to reason that a negotiator might behave competitively if they think their counterpart will do the same.

Another possibility is that counterpart labels have a broader effect, framing the entire negotiation as either competitive or cooperative. There is some evidence to suggest that situational attributes of negotiations are related to beliefs about counterparts' cooperativeness

(Morris, Larrick, & Su, 1999). In addition, social categorization of a negotiation counterpart influences fixed-pie perceptions of a negotiation (Demoulin & Teixeira, 2010). These inferences matter for what negotiators believe will yield a better outcome. Beliefs of what will (and will not) work inform behavior (Ames, 2008; Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007). If negotiators' beliefs about the effectiveness of various behaviors have a strong effect on how they act, this could represent a different path for labels to have an effect. We see both paths as plausible and worth evaluation and comparison.

The current research

In four studies, we test the impact of encountering *opponent* and *partner* labels for a counterpart on negotiators' expectations and intended behavior. Specifically, we evaluate if: encountering an *opponent* (versus *partner*) label leads individuals to: 1) have more competitive behavioral intentions (H1); 2) predict more competitive counterpart behavior (H2); and 3) expect competitive behavior to be more effective (H3). We believe these effects will emerge both when labels are presented as part of a seemingly neutral description of the negotiation situation itself (Studies 1A and 1B) as well as when they are solely embedded in advice offered by a third-party (Studies 2A and 2B).

Additionally, we examine potential mechanisms in Study 2B. Specifically, we test whether anticipated effectiveness of competitive behaviors (which we see as a situational framing process) and/or expectations of counterpart behavior (which we see as a mimicry process) explain the relationship between exposure to partner/opponent labels and intentions of competitive behavior. If both mechanisms meaningfully mediate this relationship, we aim to gauge which one has greater explanatory power, adjusting for one another in the same model, as well as examine alternative mediation models. In all studies, we report how we determined our

sample size, all data exclusions, and all manipulations (as recommended by Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2012). To see all measures that were collected, see Appendix 4 in the supplemental material.

Studies 1A and 1B

We first tested the impact of the *opponent* and *partner* labels in a negotiation description. Study 1A tested a negotiation scenario and validated measures of competitive behavior and expectations. After observing effect sizes, we conducted Study 1B, a preregistered replication (preregistration here: https://osf.io/usbw2/?view_only=12f640f23d3841a0a3e81b6a7969aa35).

Method

Participants

Two hundred and two participants, recruited through Connect by Cloud Research (an online survey platform), completed Study 1A. Two participants failed an attention check, leaving a final sample of 200 (99 women, 99 men, 2 other; 150 White, 24 Black, 11 Asian, 9 multiracial, 3 Hispanic/Latinx, 3 other; $40k-$60k median income). A sensitivity power analysis showed that this sample size allowed us to detect a minimal effect size of d = .41 with 90% power. Before Study 1B, a power analysis suggested that 282 participants were needed to detect an effect size of d = .35 with 90% power. Therefore, 305 participants, recruited through the same platform, completed Study 1B. Twenty-five failed an attention check, leaving a final sample of 280 (130 women, 146 men, 4 other; 214 White, 30 Black, 12 Asian, 12 Hispanic/Latinx; 9 multiracial; 3 other; $60k-$80k median income). A sensitivity power analysis confirmed the a-priory power analysis. For participant demographic information, see Appendix 5 in the supplemental material.

Materials

Participants were instructed to imagine that, after signing a lease for an apartment, they discovered mice coming through a hole caused by a leaky radiator in their bedroom. In this scenario, they were about to talk to a representative from the management company with the primary goal of terminating the lease as soon as possible without penalty. In the description, the representative was labeled (by random assignment) as either a *partner* or *opponent*. For example, the descriptions of the counterpart start with the sentence, "[y]ou're about the talk with your [partner/opponent]: a representative from the management company who has been assigned to talk with you about this issue." After reading the description, participants were asked to write 1-2 sentences of advice for someone "facing this kind of situation with such a negotiation [partner/opponent]." For the full negotiation description, see Appendix 2 in the supplemental material.

Measures

Behavioral intentions. Behavioral intentions were measured with a six-item scale designed to capture three components of competitive behavior in a negotiation: Deception (e.g., *I would try to mislead or deceive my negotiation [partner/opponent]*), demeanor (e.g., *I would act in a tough, aggressive way toward my negotiation [partner/opponent]*), and deal-term setting (e.g., *I would try to anchor the negotiation in my favor by putting forth an extreme proposal and refusing to budge*). Each of these components also included a reverse-scored item. For each item, participants indicated the likelihood that they would engage in such behavior (1 = *Extremely Unlikely* to 5 = *Extremely Likely*). In both studies, all six items showed fair consistency and were averaged to form a scale (α_{1A} = .78; α_{1B} = .70).

Counterpart behavior. The six behaviors from above were modified to measure expectations of counterpart behavior (e.g., "My negotiation [partner/opponent] would try to

mislead or deceive me," using the same five-point scale as above). The items showed consistency and were averaged (α_{1A} = .86; α_{1B} = .86).

Effectiveness of behavior. The six behaviors from above were modified to measure anticipated effectiveness of competitive behavior (e.g., "trying to mislead or deceive my negotiation [partner/opponent]"), with ratings on a scale ranging from 1 ("Extremely harmful") to 5 ("Extremely helpful"). The items showed consistency and were averaged (α_{1A} = .80; α_{1B} = .75).

Results

Intentions of competitive behavior

To test the impact of condition on intentions of competitive behavior, we conducted two-sample t-tests. In Study 1A, participants in the *opponent condition* were marginally more likely report competitive behavioral intentions (M = 2.44, SD = .81) than participants in the *partner condition* (M = 2.22, SD = .85), $t(197.66) = 1.85$, p = .066, d = 0.26. In the pre-registered Study 1B, participants in the *opponent condition* reported significantly more competitive behavioral intentions (M = 2.42, SD = .71) than participants in the *partner condition* (M = 2.17, SD = .72), $t(277.83) = 2.91$, p = .004, d = 0.35.

Expectations of counterpart behavior

As predicted, in Study 1A, participants believed that "opponents" were significantly more likely to behave competitively (M = 3.67, SD = .74) than "partners" (M = 3.43, SD = .89), $t(191.80) = 2.11$, p = .036, d = 0.30. Likewise, in Study 1B, "opponents" were seen as more competitive (M = 3.64, SD = .77) than "partners" (M = 3.25, SD = .79), $t(277.98) = 4.27$, p < .001, d = 0.51.

Effectiveness of competitive behavior

Confirming our prediction that label use would affect perceived effectiveness of competitive behavior, two-sample t-tests revealed significant effects. In Study 1A, participants in the *opponent condition* believed competitive behavior would be more effective (M = 2.57, SD = .81) than participants in the *partner condition* (M = 2.26, SD = .81), $t(198.00) = 2.76$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.39$. Likewise, in Study 1B, participants in the *opponent condition* believed competitive behavior would be more effective (M = 2.42, SD = .73) than participants in the *partner condition* (M = 2.14, SD = .77), $t(277.69) = 3.17$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.38$ (see Figure 1).

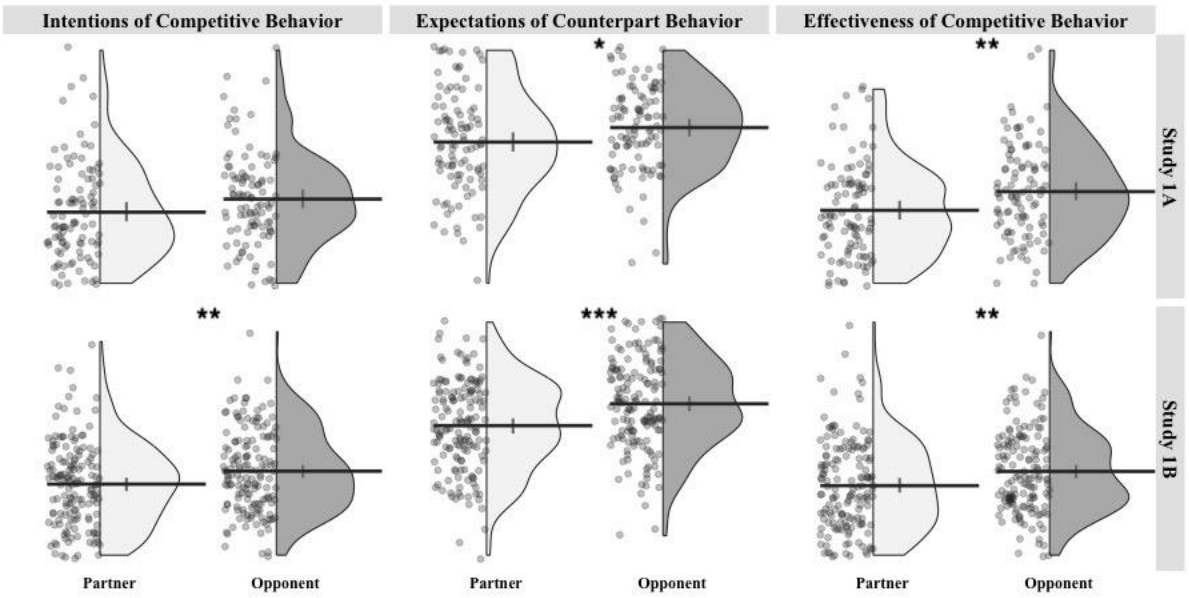

Figure 1. Effect of condition on attitudes and intentions of behavior. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Studies 2A and 2B

In Studies 1A and 1B, we found support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3: Labeling a negotiation counterpart impacts behavioral intentions (H1), predictions of counterpart behavior (H2), and beliefs about the effectiveness of competitive behavior (H3). In Studies 2A (see preregistration: https://osf.io/ywhea/?view_only=5a053d78354a47fa852d79d7f415be2c) and 2B (see preregistration: https://osf.io/kyztp/?view_only=1e9dbd981fff4b2d89563c308c40a8ff), we built on and went beyond these results in several ways. First, Studies 1A and 1B entailed only one

negotiation scenario, which may readily generalize. To better understand if these effects emerge across contexts, Studies 2A and 2B featured four additional negotiation scenarios. Second, the counterpart label manipulation appeared in the description of the scenario in Studies 1A and 1B. Studies 2A and 2B featured a more naturalistic source of labels: advice from a third party. In these studies, the negotiation situation was described first without labels, followed by advice from a friend in which counterpart labels were manipulated. Third, Studies 1A and 1B focused only on *opponent* and *partner* labels. To provide a comparison with a more neutral term, Studies 2A and 2B included a third label: *counterpart*. Fourth, with increased statistical power and external validity (five negotiation contexts), Study 2B allowed us to examine the mechanism by which exposure to counterpart labels impact intentions of competitive behavior (see Appendix 7 in the supplemental material for equivalent mediation analyses in all other studies).

Method

Participants

Three hundred and three participants, recruited through Connect by CloudResearch, completed Study 2A with no exclusions (169 women, 133 men, 1 other; 238 White, 27 Black, 10 Asian, 14 multiracial, 11 Hispanic/Latinx, 3 other; $60k-$80k median income). Since our a-priori hypotheses were focused on one contrast (*opponent* versus *partner*), we conducted a power analysis to detect the difference between those two groups, without adjustment for multiple comparisons. This indicated the need for a sample of 282 for those conditions to detect an effect size of d = .35, 90% power. In a higher-powered preregistered replication, Study 2B, we recruited 408 participants from the same platform, again, with no exclusions (221 women, 184 men, 3 other; 284 White, 52 Black, 23 Asian, 30 multiracial, 10 Hispanic/Latinx, 9 other; $60k-

$80k median income). This sample size provided 90% power to detect a medium effect size of *d* = .35.

Materials

Negotiation scenarios. In Study 2A, participants read about one of three randomly selected negotiation scenarios: (1) A dispute with a landlord; (2) home renovation with a contractor; or (3) auto repair with a car mechanic. In Study 2B, participants read about one of five randomly selected negotiation scenarios: (1) a dispute with a landlord; (2) home renovation with a contractor; (3) a used car trade-in; (4) a job negotiation; or (5) a sale of valuable antique items. See Appendix 4 in the supplemental material for scenario content. At the end of each description, participants were told that a friend of theirs, "a negotiating expert," gave them a piece of advice ahead of the negotiation.

Advice. To establish generalizability, the "negotiation expert" provided one of three (randomly selected) pieces of advice: (1) advice on anchoring deal terms in a favorable way; (2) advice on minding demeanor to make an intended impression in the negotiation; or (3) advice on planning information to share with—and seek from—their counterpart. In the advice, the label for the counterpart varied by condition. For example, each piece of advice noted that "[w]ith this [opponent/partner/counterpart], I suggest you think very carefully about…" one of the three components of negotiation advice. The advice content itself was not overtly competitive or cooperative. We did not predict any effect of advice (varying it to establish generalization), only an effect of counterpart label featured in the advice. See Appendix 3 in the supplemental material for advice content.

Measures

Behavioral intentions. Behavioral intentions were measured with the same six items from Studies 1A and 1B, with minor adjustments in Study 2B. To better fit the entire set of all five negotiation scenarios, the items were made shorter and more general. For example, one of the deceit-related items was adjusted from "I would try to mislead or deceive my negotiation [opponent/partner/counterpart] about my negotiation priorities and positions" in Study 2A to "I would try to mislead or misdirect my [opponent/partner/counterpart]" in Study 2B. The six items showed internal consistency and were averaged (α_{2A} = .67; α_{2B} = .62)[2].

Counterpart behavior. Predictions of counterpart behavior were measured with the same six items from Studies 1A and 1B. Again, in Study 2B, to fit all scenarios, the items were slightly abbreviated and adjusted to be made more general. The six items showed consistency and were averaged (α_{2A} = .84; α_{2B} = .78).

Effectiveness of behavior. Beliefs about the effectiveness of competitive behavior were measured with the same six items from Studies 1A and 1B. Again, Study 2B's items were slightly abbreviated and adjusted to be made more general. The items were showed consistency and were averaged (α_{2A} = .75; α_{2B} = .69).

Results

Intentions of competitive behavior

To test the effect of labeling on intentions of competitive behavior, we conducted a set of Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs). In Study 2A, a one-way ANOVA revealed an omnibus effect of condition on behavioral intentions, $F(2,300) = 5.06$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Tukey-HSD post-hoc between-group comparisons revealed that participants in the *partner condition* reported

[2] Despite Cronbach's Alpha values being relatively low, we treated this as a single construct for brevity. Analysis of each of the facets of the intentions of competitive behavior measure indicated that competitive deal-term making and deception drove this effect (see Appendix 7 in the supplemental material).

significantly lower competitive behavioral intentions (M = 1.94, SD = .61) than participants in the *opponent condition* (M = 2.22, SD = .60; d = .45, adjusted p = .007) and marginally significant lower competitive behavioral intentions than participants in the *counterpart condition* (M = 2.15, SD = .71; d = .32, adjusted p = .054). In Study 2B, again, a one-way ANOVA revealed an omnibus effect of condition on behavioral intentions, $F(2,405) = 7.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Tukey-HSD post-hoc between-group comparisons revealed that participants in the *partner condition* reported significantly less competitive intentions of behavior (M = 2.17, SD = .57) than participants in the *opponent condition* (M = 2.44, SD = .62, d = .45, adjusted p = .001). Unlike Study 2A, though, Study 2B participants in the *counterpart condition* reported significantly lower competitive behavioral intentions (M = 2.25, SD = .61) than participants in the *opponent condition* (d = .32, adjusted p = .022) but no different intentions than participants in the *partner condition* (d = .13, adjusted p = .543).

Expectations of counterpart behavior

In Study 2A, an omnibus effect emerged, $F(2,300) = 8.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Post-hoc Tukey-HSD between-group comparisons, adjusted for multiple comparisons, showed that participants believed "partners" would behave less competitively (M = 2.67, SD = .82) than "opponents" (M = 3.12, SD = .78; d = .57, adjusted $p < .001$) and marginally less than "counterparts" (M = 2.93, SD = .80; d = .32, adjusted p = .059). In Study 2B, an omnibus effect of condition on predictions of counterparty behavior emerged as well, $F(2,404) = 6.16$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Tukey-HSD post-hoc comparisons showed that "opponents" (M = 3.22, SD = .73) and "counterparts" (M = 3.17, SD = .71) were seen as more competitive than "partners" (M = 2.92, SD = .78; $d_{\text{opponent-partner}} = .39$, adjusted $p_{\text{opponent-partner}} = .003$; $d_{\text{counterpart-partner}} = .33$, adjusted $p_{\text{counterpart-partner}} = .018$), but not more competitive than one another (d = .06, adjusted p = .866).

Effectiveness of competitive behavior

We next examined the effect of condition on the anticipated effectiveness of competitive behavior. In Study 2A, we did not observe a significant difference between conditions, $F(2,300) = 2.30$, $p = .102$, $\eta^2 = .02$. In a higher-powered replication, Study 2B, a one-way ANOVA revealed an omnibus effect of condition on expected behavioral effectiveness, $F(2,405) = 5.01$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Tukey-HSD post-hoc comparisons showed that participants believed competitive behavior was more effective when negotiating with an opponent ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .67$), as opposed to a partner ($M = 2.19$, $SD = .61$; $d = .38$, adjusted $p = .005$). Expected effectiveness of competitive behavior was not significantly different going into a negotiation with a counterpart ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .65$), when compared to an opponent (adjusted $p = .113$) or partner (adjusted $p = .516$; see Figure 2).

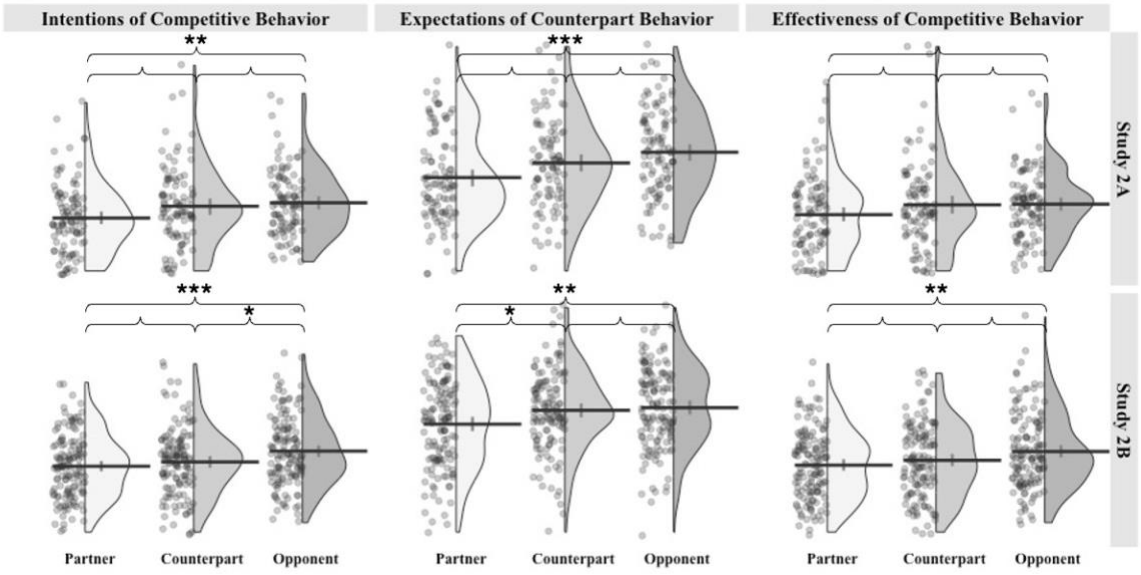

Figure 2. Effect of condition on attitudes and intentions of behavior. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. *adjusted $p < .05$, **adjusted $p < .01$, ***adjusted $p < .001$; p value indicators are adjusted for multiple comparisons with Tukey-HSD corrections.

The mechanism by which labels impact behavior

To examine the mechanism by which labels may impact behavior, we excluded the *counterpart condition* and conducted a series of mediation analyses. The main analysis consisted of condition as a predictor (*partner = 0; opponent* = 1), expectations of counterpart behavior and effectiveness of competitive behavior as the mediators, and behavioral intentions as the outcome. In this model, behavioral effectiveness far better explained the relationship between condition and behavioral intentions (β_a = .24, p = .002; β_b = .66, p < .001), as compared to counterpart behavior (β_a = .29, p = .001; β_b = .13, p < .001), accounting for one another. Together, they fully explain the relationship between condition and behavior intentions (direct effect = .27, p < .001; indirect effect = .07, p = .109; see Figure 3). When inserted into separate models, these mediators showed a similar pattern. The relationship between conditions and behavioral intentions was almost fully explained by believed behavioral effectiveness (direct effect = .27, p < .001; indirect effect = .10, p = .039; β_a = .24, p = .002; β_b = .71, p < .001), but only partially explained by counterpart behavior (direct effect = .27, p < .001; indirect effect = .17, p = .019; β_a = .29, p = .001; β_b = .35, p < .001).

We examined two additional alternative models, both of which showed significant mediation. One tested whether behavioral intentions accounted for the relationship between condition and effectiveness of behavior (direct effect = .24, p = .002; indirect effect = .02, p = .711; β_a = .27, p < .001; β_b = .83, p < .001). The second model tested whether behavior intentions accounted for the relationship between condition and predicted counterpart behavior (direct effect = .29, p < .001; indirect effect = .14, p = .092; β_a = .27, p < .001; β_b = .56, p < .001).

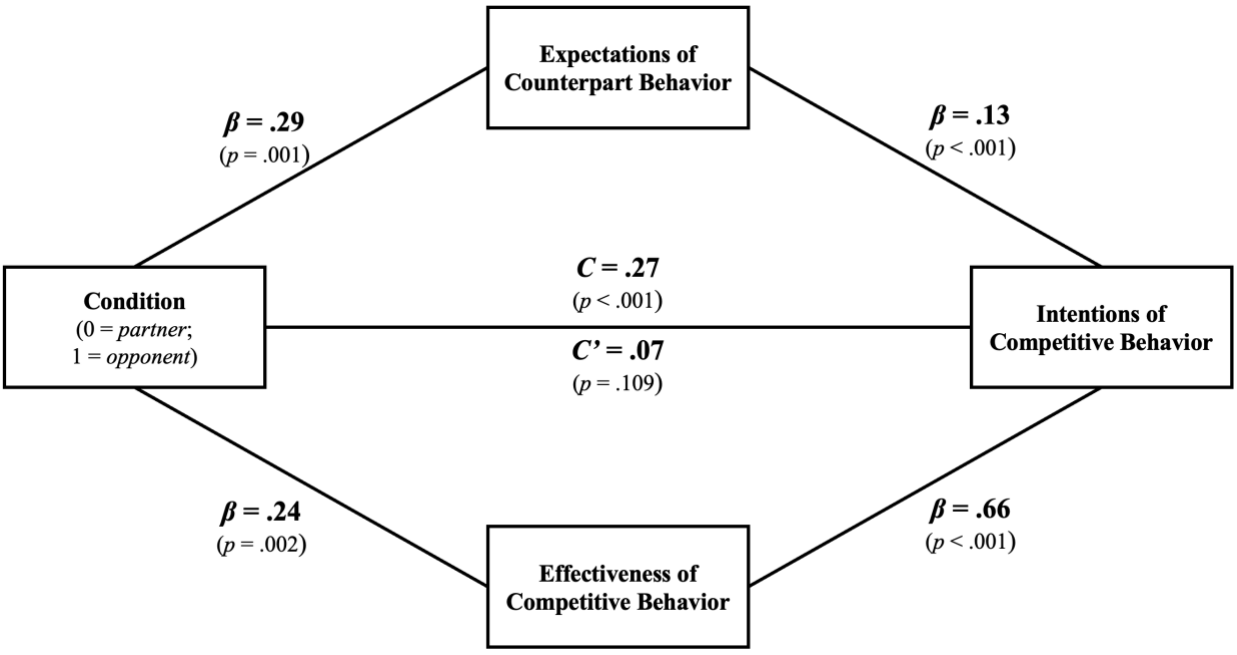

Figure 3. Mediation analysis examining the mechanism by which exposure to counterpart labels impacts intentions of competitive behavior in Study 2B

General Discussion

Encountering the label of *opponent* or *partner* for a negotiation counterpart can matter. In a set of four experimental studies, we found that being exposed to an "opponent," as opposed to a "partner," negotiation counterpart label led to more competitive behavioral intentions (H1), more competitive predictions of counterpart behavior (H2), and stronger beliefs that competitive behavior would be effective (H3). Additionally, the relationship between exposure to counterpart label and intentions of behavior was better explained by a belief that competitive behavior would be effective than by competitive predictions of counterpart behavior. These relationships were consistent in a negotiation scenario of tenant-landlord dispute (Studies 1A-1B), as well as job negotiations, antique sales, home renovations, and used car trade-in negotiations (Studies 2A-2B). These effects emerged across a range of competitive behaviors, including making extreme offers, engaging in deception, and acting aggressively. We found these effects when the label

manipulation appeared in a seemingly neutral description of the situation (Studies 1A-1B), as well as when it appeared in potentially idiosyncratic advice (varying in focus from proposing the right deal terms to cultivating the right impression to sharing and seeking the right information) given by a third-party expert (Studies 2A-2B). Overall, being exposed to the negotiation counterpart label of *opponent*, as opposed to *partner*, led to more competitive attitudes and behavioral intentions in upcoming negotiations.

These findings offer answers to the three open questions we highlighted in our introduction. First, they extend competitive label effects from economic games to familiar real-world scenarios. Even though people may infer a great deal about the competitiveness of a situation from their past experience (Halevy et al., 2012; Halevy et al., 2019), it seems that they are still influenced by counterpart labels. Second, these findings extend counterpart label effects from ostensibly neutral descriptions and instructions to third-party advice. Rather than being discounted or dismissed as idiosyncratic, *opponent* and *partner* labels used by a third-party advice giver shifted competitive attitudes and behavioral intentions. This brings the existing literature even closer to the lived experience of negotiators. Third, these findings highlight a potential mechanism by which opponent and partner labels impact intentions of behavior. It seems that the effect of labels on intentions of behavior cannot simply be attributed to anticipatory mimicry. Instead, these labels likely frame the entire situation as either competitive or cooperative, informing what people will think is an effective strategy, and ultimately affecting behavior. That said, additional mediation models suggested that we cannot rule out alternative causal explanations by which behavioral intentions explain perceived effectiveness of competitive behavior. Further studies, where perceived effectiveness is experimentally manipulated, may clarify its causal role.

Our findings hold some potentially important lessons for negotiation instructors and advice-givers. At the very least, educators and advisors should be mindful of their word choices. While using *opponent* versus *partner* in a lecture or guidance might feel like an innocent or trivial choice, our results suggest it is not innocuous or inconsequential. One approach might be to systematically embrace more neutral terms, such as *counterpart* or *other party*. Another might be to address the topic head on with an audience, talking about alternative frames and labels for the counterpart and situation, and examining what the consequences of embracing them might be, from self-fulfilling prophecies to tragic misreading.

This research highlights important avenues for future exploration. First, despite self-reported negotiation strategies generally matching behavior (Vetschera & Kainz, 2013), the self-reports in the current studies were hypothetical. In a live negotiation, other factors may outweigh a label for a negotiation counterpart. The literature could benefit from future research examining the roles of *partner* and *opponent* labels in face-to-face negotiations.

Second, our findings paint a mixed picture about the direction of the label effect from baseline. In some cases, the *partner* label seemingly made people more cooperative, whereas in other cases the *opponent* label seemingly made people more competitive, compared to the seemingly neutral *counterpart* label. We suspect this could be because the *counterpart* label's effect is heavily dependent on context. Future work might build on this idea, exploring if *opponent* and *partner* labels do more "work" when situations are ambiguous or when those labels cut against typical assumptions about the situation.

Third, future work could examine what leads people to use different counterpart labels in the first place. In congruence with their mental models of conflict (Halevy et al., 2012), people's worldview about human nature may shape whether they see negotiation counterparts as

opponents, rather than partners. Specifically, those who believe the world is a competitive jungle (Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007), where everyone is driven by self-interest (Miller, 1999), may more readily use the term *opponent*, rather than *partner*, to describe a negotiation counterpart.

Negotiation counterpart labels matter. They matter not just in decontextualized economic games and not just in seemingly omnipotent descriptions of situations. *Opponent* and *partner* labels may seem like innocent word choices, but our findings (across a range of contexts and competitive behaviors and including labels embedded in advice) show that exposure to these labels may channel people's thinking and behavior down different paths of cooperation and competition.

Open Practices

Materials, analysis scripts, data sets, and supplementary analyses can be found at:

https://osf.io/mdazh/?view_only=bfb294eb6466427baa8e0ef1a1103bfe

Study 1B preregistration:

https://osf.io/usbw2/?view_only=12f640f23d3841a0a3e81b6a7969aa35

Study 2A preregistration:

https://osf.io/ywhea/?view_only=5a053d78354a47fa852d79d7f415be2c

Study 2B preregistration:

https://osf.io/kyztp/?view_only=1e9dbd981fff4b2d89563c308c40a8ff

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