Eating with the Enemy:

On the Dubious Benefits of Breaking Bread with Holders of Opposing Views

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Abstract

We test the impact of a broadly utilized social ritual, namely sharing food with an ideological opponent, on two phenomena relevant to dispute resolution: receptiveness to the opponent’s views and attitude strength. Participants engaged in a debate about a contentious socio-political issue while eating a sandwich that they either made for themselves (Control condition) or one that was made for them by their opponent (Exchange condition). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the construct of receptiveness to the opponent’s view is empirically distinct from the strength of the attitude one holds. Greater disagreement led to lower receptiveness and stronger attitudes. Exchanging food attenuated the negative effect of disagreement on receptiveness. However, exchanging food also led participants to report stronger attitudes on the issue in question. The effects of food exchange on negotiation outcomes appear to be more complex and not as uniformly positive as suggested by popular belief.

(148 words)
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Two weeks after taking office, President Barack Obama invited Democratic and Republican members of Congress to watch the Super Bowl at the White House. During the game the President personally served warm oatmeal raisin cookies to his guests, an event immediately labeled by the press as an attempt to bridge boundaries and build goodwill (New York Times, 2/4/2009). But is there any truth to the popular belief that breaking bread opens minds? Days later, as legislators entered a bitter partisan battle over the President’s economic stimulus package, it seemed that the cookies had been for naught.

Generations of anthropologists and sociologists have documented the practice of food sharing in human societies (see Kaplan and Gurven, 2001). From meat distribution customs among Aché hunters in Paraguay (Kaplan, Hill, Hawkes, & Hurtado, 1984) to the “bread and salt” ceremony of Slavic cultures (Smith & Christian, 1984), food exchange represents a basic form of gift giving. Sociologist Marcel Mauss, who examined the potlatch feast ceremony of Native American cultures, argued that gift giving is a ritual employed to build relationships.

Although popular belief and cultural practice holds that exchanging food has positive consequences in conflict settings, this assumption has never been empirically tested. Meanwhile, numerous psychological studies have demonstrated the importance of other seemingly minor situational factors in promoting conflict resolution. For instance, positive expectations and acknowledgement of the other side’s position increase the likelihood of reaching agreement (Liberman, Anderson, & Ross, 2010; Ward, Disston, Brenner & Ross, 2008). Perspective taking and positive framing increase participants’ ability to reach integrative deals (Galinsky, Maddux,
Gilin & White, 2008; Neale & Bazerman, 1985), and considering opposing viewpoints and own
sources of bias can reduce psychological barriers to conflict resolution (Lord, Lepper, Preston,
1984; Liberman, Minson, Bryan & Ross, 2011). This literature demonstrates that negotiation
outcomes are influenced by multiple aspects of the situational context and are highly sensitive to
the psychological state of the parties involved. Furthermore, recent work has shown that
negotiators not only seek to maximize objective outcomes, but subjective and relational ones as
well (Curhan, Elfbein and Xu, 2006). In the present work we seek to contribute to this literature
by exploring the psychological mechanisms at play in a common social interaction, namely
exchanging food with an ideological opponent.

Receptiveness versus Attitude Strength

In our study we focus on two dependent measures: receptiveness to the opponent’s
viewpoint and attitude strength. We have argued elsewhere (Chen, Minson & Tormala, 2010)
that receptiveness to opposing views (operationalized here as willingness to engage in future
dialogue) is an important and often overlooked dependent variable in research on negotiations
and conflict resolution. Whereas deeply held socio-political beliefs are not likely to change easily
or dramatically, the willingness to engage in future dialogue with an ideological opponent may
mean the difference between slow, laborious progress versus a stalemate.

Attitude strength, by contrast, has been extensively investigated, in part because shifts in
attitude strength are taken as an indicator of persuasion success (Tormala & Petty, 2002). In the
present study, we explicitly sought to examine the relationship between the constructs of
receptiveness and attitude strength, theorizing that receptiveness and attitude strength may be
empirically distinguishable. Whereas at first blush it may appear that receptiveness and attitude
strength may simply be inversely related to each other, we theorized that the two constructs can
vary independently and that certain factors may increase partisans’ openness to each other’s views while simultaneously solidifying their convictions regarding their own positions.

*Predictions*

There are multiple reasons to predict that sharing food should lead to greater receptiveness. For example, because of the intimacy inherent in exchanging food, individuals compelled to do so by circumstances might judge themselves to be closer to each other than they otherwise would due to a self-perception process (Bem, 1967). Alternatively, since communal eating is normally done among family or friends, people may simply associate *all* dining partners with closeness, congeniality and safety through classical conditioning (Pavlov, 1927). Lastly, individuals may experience an increase in receptiveness if exchanging food and sharing a meal with an opponent disconfirms negative expectations.

Predictions regarding the effect of sharing food on attitude strength are less clear. Based on many consistency theories (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), one might predict that if sharing a meal increases receptiveness, then a softening of attitudes should follow. Furthermore, if an interaction becomes less adversarial, social norms may prevent individuals from expressing strongly opposing views.

However, prior research on reactance has also demonstrated that to the extent that individuals perceive a situation as constraining their ability to behave in their preferred manner they may report a strengthening of their prior attitudes (Brehm, 1966; Carver, 1977). Given that sharing food with an adversary is often a compulsory ritual, not resulting from interpersonal closeness but meant to induce it, it may backfire by provoking reactance and leading individuals to hold fast to their prior views in the light of the obvious attempt to manipulate their sentiments.
The present research was designed to investigate the differences between receptiveness and attitude strength using a manipulation that we expected to have differential effects on these constructs. In so doing, we were also able to test whether sharing food with an opponent does in fact lead to benefits for conflict resolution and negotiation processes.

Method

Participants: Participants were members of a paid university research pool (98 male; 172 female).

Procedure: Participants arrived to the lab in groups of 10-14 and sat at individual terminals. To match participants with an ideological opponent, we administered a questionnaire soliciting views regarding nine current US political issues (Table 1). For each issue in question, participants stated their views using seven-point scales from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.” After collecting the paper questionnaires, participants prepared a peanut butter and jam sandwich from provided ingredients.

Participants in the Control condition were told that they would eat their sandwich while discussing one of the questionnaire topics with another participant. In contrast, participants in the Exchange condition were told that they would exchange sandwiches with their discussion counterpart and would eat the sandwich that their counterpart made for them. While the participants prepared sandwiches, the experimenter created discussion pairs and assigned discussion issues, in order to maximize the level of disagreement within each pair on the issue assigned.

After making sandwiches participants sat next to their counterpart and learned which issue they would discuss. The experimenter instructed them to take notes regarding their planned arguments. Participants then began the discussion and ate the sandwiches. Participants in the
Control condition ate the sandwiches they made for themselves, whereas participants in the Exchange condition ate the sandwich their counterpart made.

**Dependent measures:** After the ten-minute discussion period participants evaluated the sandwich that they or their partner had made for them by listing the sandwich ingredients (type of bread, type of peanut butter, type of jam), and then by rating the taste, texture, appearance and overall quality of the sandwich on a 0 - 100 scale.

Participants then answered items assessing their receptiveness to the opposing viewpoint. Specifically, they were asked how receptive and open-minded they felt toward their counterpart’s views. They also stated their willingness to read information supporting their counterpart’s view, watch a news program presenting arguments for that view, engage in future face-to-face dialogue with their discussion counterpart, and engage in discussion with a group of people holding the opposing view. These six items were averaged to create a receptiveness composite (Chronbach’s alpha = .81).

Additionally, we measured the participants’ attitude strength regarding the target issue by asking them how certain they were of their attitude, how sure they were that their attitude was correct, how clear they were regarding their attitude, how confident they were about their attitude, how knowledgeable they felt about this issue, and to what extent they felt they needed more information to make up their mind (reverse-coded). These items were averaged to create a scale of attitude strength (Chronbach’s alpha = .89).

Participants also evaluated how receptive, open-minded, informative, and certain of their viewpoint the counterpart was. They also rated the validity of the counterpart’s arguments. Finally, we asked participants to evaluate the supporters and opponents of their own viewpoint
on how intelligent, reasonable, warm, open-minded, objective and moral they considered them to be. At the end of the experiment participants again reported their attitudes on the issues.

Our procedure for matching participants with discussion counterparts resulted in variation in the level of disagreement between any two discussants. Because views on any particular issue were reported using a seven-point scale, discussants could disagree by a maximum of six scale points. Exploratory data analysis revealed that the level of disagreement was significantly related to participants’ attitude strength and receptiveness. Thus, in the reported analyses, we control for level of disagreement. Because our participants interacted with a dyad partner we used hierarchical linear modeling in Stata to control for non-independence of observations.

Results

Factor analysis: To test our prediction that receptiveness to an opposing viewpoint is empirically different from attitude strength, we conducted a Principle Components Factor Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation on the twelve items we included to measure attitude strength and receptiveness. In line with our predictions, two factors emerged, jointly accounting for 62.5% of the overall variance. The six items addressing attitude strength loaded primarily on the first factor (loadings > .62), which explained 38.1% of variance. The six items measuring receptiveness loaded primarily on the second factor (loadings > .68), which explained 25.0% of variance (Table 2).

Effect of manipulation and disagreement on receptiveness: When we regressed our measure of receptiveness on condition (effects coded: -1 = Control; +1 = Exchange), mean-centered level of disagreement, and the interaction of disagreement and condition we observed that greater disagreement regarding the issue under discussion made participants less receptive to their counterpart’s viewpoint ($B = -0.17, z = -2.09, p < .04$). The main effect of the manipulation
was not significant ($B = .02, z = 0.25, ns$) due to the presence of a significant cross-over interaction effect ($B = .17, z = 2.16, p < 0.04$). A closer examination of the data revealed that greater disagreement led to a significant decrease in receptiveness in the Control condition ($B = - .34, z = -3.16, p < 0.003$), but no such linear trend was present in the Exchange condition ($B = 0.01, z = 0.05, ns$). In other words, food exchange attenuated the negative effect of disagreement on receptiveness.

Effect of manipulation and disagreement on attitude strength: When we repeated the above analysis for our composite measure of attitude strength, we observed two significant main effects and no significant interaction effect. Again, participants’ disagreement level with their partners correlated with stronger attitudes on the issue in question ($B = .36, z = 5.87, p < 0.001$). Contrary to popular wisdom, however, the food exchange manipulation led participants to report stronger attitudes on the issue discussed ($B = .11, z = 2.22, p < 0.03$). Across levels of disagreement participants who exchanged food with their discussion counterpart reported stronger and more polarized attitudes about the issue on which they disagreed.

Interestingly, participants’ ratings of the sandwiches they made for themselves did not differ from their ratings of the sandwiches made by their debate counterparts (all $t$-s $< 1.4, ns$). However, greater receptiveness was positively associated with the rating participants gave to the sandwich they ate, and this relationship proved to be significant in both Control ($B = .009, z = 1.99, p < 0.05$) and Exchange ($B = .02, z = 3.0, p < 0.005$) conditions. No relationship was observed between sandwich ratings and attitude strength in either condition. Finally, the manipulation had no significant effect on participants’ ratings of their debate counterpart or ratings of other individuals who agreed or disagreed with their viewpoint.
General Discussion

“Breaking bread” is a ritual that across continents and centuries has come to be associated with peace-making. In the present study we investigated the psychological consequences of this complex social interaction and demonstrate that the outcomes of exchanging food with an opponent are complex and not uniformly positive.

Sharing food attenuated the negative effect of disagreement on receptiveness to opposing views. Especially in cases of extreme partisanship, this result suggests that food exchange can lead ideological opponents toward future dialogue. Contrary to lay beliefs, however, exchanging food increased the strength of participants’ attitudes. This second finding should give pause to negotiators and mediators alike, especially when eventual agreement is a priority — stronger attitudes are likely to be even more difficult to change in future interactions (Tormala & Petty, 2002).

If reactance is to blame, mediators should strive to create situations where food-sharing rituals are separated from the negotiation process such that partisans do not feel that they are being “softened up.” On the other hand, a situation in which individuals express openness to each other despite holding opposing views may indicate success when issue agreement is not a priority — respectful co-existence between parties who have “agreed to disagree.”

Our study was designed specifically to address the effect of exchanging food. To this end we required participants in both conditions to make and eat a similar type and quantity of food. The positive association between receptiveness and sandwich ratings suggests a generally favorable mood within receptive dyads. Follow-up studies should examine whether a direct relationship exists between mood and receptiveness. Future work should also separately address the results of giving food, receiving food, or a combination thereof. Other potentially adversarial
meals such as state dinners, business lunches, and brunch with the in-laws possess additional complex situational features that may affect the outcomes of interest.

It is worth highlighting that in our study participants discussed strongly held views on contentious socio-political issues, not assigned views in a fictional scenario or issues only relevant to college life. Furthermore participants engaged in a face-to-face interaction with each other rather than receiving scripted arguments or interacting with a confederate. The fact that exchanging food (versus eating one’s own food) had an effect on this complex social interaction involving strongly-held political attitudes merits attention.

The present study also contributes to a theoretical understanding of the variety of psychological outcomes of hostile dialogue. Whereas prior work has focused on partisans’ ability to reach agreement or attitude change, we provide empirical evidence for the construct of receptiveness as being distinguishable from attitude strength. Factor analysis confirmed the presence of the two factors we posed on conceptual grounds. Furthermore, our manipulation had differential effects on receptiveness and attitude strength, lending additional validity to the claim that these constructs are distinct. Given the high stakes and the complexity of the psychological processes involved, the common social ritual of food exchange may prove to be a fertile domain for continued research.
References


Table 1: Discussion issues and number of participants per condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue Wording</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Exchange</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This country needs stricter gun control laws.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage between two men, or two women, should be legalized in this country.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should have the right to prohibit the news media from</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reporting on information that could be a threat to national security.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical research on stem cells taken from human embryos should receive</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>federal funding.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downloading copyrighted music from the Internet without paying for it is</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unethical.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The death penalty should be abolished.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In cases where the pregnant woman’s health is at risk, late-term abortions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should be allowed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal experimentation for the purposes of medical advancement is</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morally justifiable.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officers should have the right to question people about their</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigration status if there is reason to suspect they are illegal immigrants.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Varimax-rotated factor loadings from a factor analysis of the questionnaire measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How willing or unwilling would you be to receive more information supporting the other participant's viewpoint on this issue?</td>
<td>.786</td>
<td>-.231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How willing or unwilling would you be to have a conversation with a group of people who hold the same viewpoint as the other participant?</td>
<td>.784</td>
<td>.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How willing or unwilling would you be to watch an informational news program (such as a special on CNN or BBC) on the other participant's viewpoint on this issue?</td>
<td>.736</td>
<td>-.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How willing or unwilling would you be to have another face-to-face conversation with the other participant about this and related topics?</td>
<td>.729</td>
<td>.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How receptive or unreceptive do you feel toward the other participant's viewpoint on this issue?</td>
<td>.679</td>
<td>-.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How open-minded or closed-minded do you feel toward the other participant's viewpoint on this issue?</td>
<td>.696</td>
<td>-.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how much confidence do you have in your opinion about this issue?</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent is your attitude about this issue clear in your mind?</td>
<td>-.066</td>
<td>.897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How certain are you of your attitude about this issue?</td>
<td>-.096</td>
<td>.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How sure are you that your attitude about this issue is right?</td>
<td>-.150</td>
<td>.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How knowledgeable would you consider yourself to be about this issue?</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent do you feel like you need more information about this issue before making up your mind about it? (reverse-coded)</td>
<td>-.231</td>
<td>.616</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One dyad was eliminated from analysis because the dyad members agreed on the target issue.