



ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS  
IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS  
BY JULIE CAMPBELL CARLSON

**ROCK CRUSHES  
SCISSORS. PAPER  
COVERS ROCK.  
SCISSORS CUT PAPER.**

Playing the rock-paper-scissors game to settle a conflict is almost universal. In fact, rock-paper-scissors (RPS) fans say that they can "get on a bus in just about every city in the world and play (rock-paper-scissors) for the last remaining seat without speaking a word." But a group of Baylor University business faculty contends one can learn how people face zero-sum conflict situations

when there are definite winners and losers by observing their strategies while playing RPS. They share their research and findings in "Scissors Cut Paper: Purposive and Contingent Strategies in a Conflict Situation," which was published in the *Journal of Conflict Management* (Vol. 23, No. 4, 2012). The paper was written by associate professors Christopher Meyer and Blaine McCormick; Charles Fifield, senior lecturer in Marketing; Rachel Woods and Aimee Clement.

"Rock-paper-scissors is a seemingly random way to resolve things. People believe it is fair, but actually the game may not be as random as people think," McCormick said. "In fact, there are many systems in our society that are set up to function fairly, and most are fair. But some are not as neutral as we think. For example, a jury selection should end up with a neutral jury. But there are lawyers who have learned strategies for selecting jury members that will benefit their clients."

Indeed like learning strategies to pick a favorable jury, there are strategies developed by the RPS Society and others to affect the outcome of the game. These experts have designed a series of throws, such as "the avalanche" (all rock) or the "toolbox" (all scissors), and have determined when to use each series.

But the researchers were more interested in RPS contestants' styles of strategy in a situation in which there is a definite winner and loser than in their particular RPS strategy. To research strategies in a zero-sum conflict situation, the group had students enter an RPS competition.

Participants were 211 upper-level and MBA students enrolled in negotiation classes. Each contestant was assigned to a bracket with the student who had the best two out of three throws progressing to the next round. The tournament was single elimination with only one winner, who collected a \$200 grand prize.

Fifield said the idea for the competition and the research sprang from a chance remark at a meeting between Meyer, McCormick and him.

"I was teaching negotiation and conflict resolution in the graduate school. I mentioned during a meeting with Chris and Blaine that I had read a story about the president of a Japanese corporation settling a dispute by playing RPS," he said. "Chris and Blaine thought this sounded like a good exercise for the students."

Before the group knew it, they had a research project under way.

**SO HOW DOES THIS RPS TOURNAMENT DEMONSTRATE STRATEGIES IN A ZERO-SUM CONFLICT SITUATION?** First, contestants must embrace the idea that RPS is not a random game of chance and that the outcome can be influenced by strategies.

The researchers also determined the contestants' strategy style through a series of questionnaires before the tournament.

These instruments measured each participant's typical behavior in conflict situations. Sample statements included "I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from," and "I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my abilities to others," to "I intend to employ a strategy to perform the task," and "I intend to try to distract my opponent during the task."

**PARTICIPANTS GENERALLY FELL INTO TWO SPECIFIC STRATEGY MINDSETS—**

purposive and contingent. Purposive strategists set a strategy and stick with it, regardless of the moves of the other party.

It is a proactive strategy and is often utilized by people with a "proving goal" orientation or a desire to demonstrate their superiority over others on a specific task. They also had a high degree of self-efficacy or the belief in their own ability to succeed. Contingent strategies are reactive in nature. Those employing this style try to disrupt the strategy of their opponents by blocking or frustrating that party. Contingent strategists are more likely to have a learning goal orientation, in which individuals learn from the data and adapt. They also have a collaborative conflict resolution style.

The researchers hypothesized the purposive strategists would be more successful during the RPS competition, a belief that was born out.

"We had a pretty even split between purposive and contingent strategies, and that was good for the experiment," Meyer said. "The student who won had a different strategy for each round, and these strategies would get more complex each time. One time he actually wore a sign that said 'I'm going to play rock,' and he did. But he decided ahead of time what he would do, and it paid off for him."

Meyer said that in a competitive situation, having a clear vision of "who you are" is better. He points to Apple versus Samsung as an example of purposive and contingent strategies in the business world.

"Apple takes a very purposive strategy, and they don't really care what the rest of the marketplace does," he said. "Samsung employs more of the contingent strategy and reacts to Apple's products. In fact, Samsung even has a commercial that slams Apple's iPhone 5."

Meyer acknowledged that it can be unnerving to stay on a path when the marketplace changes. Those employing a purposive strategy have to be aware of changes. The authors also contend that using an integrative resolution in which both parties gain is most desirable.

"What we try to teach in negotiation classes is the best result is a win-win situation," Fifield said. "The world of business is a lot about winning, but you don't want to win at everyone's expense. You don't want to beat up on everyone time after time because it will backfire. The challenge is to know when to stop competing and start cooperating."

Meyer agreed. "Zero-sum conflicts are unfortunate because those in dispute would frequently get more with an integrative solution," he said. "When I worked in sales, I sold a lot to the head of Oldsmobile. He had concern for my outcome and how to benefit me because he wanted to keep me coming back. He understood the value of the integrative solution."

[bbr.baylor.edu/rock-paper-scissors](http://bbr.baylor.edu/rock-paper-scissors)