

Effect of a Structured Exchange Protocol on Dispute Termination: A Controlled Comparison

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Protocol and the chair's instructions are reproduced in Appendix A.

Abstract

Forty two-party disputes drawn from four communities were assigned to a structured protocol: definitions of every contested term agreed and recorded before the first exchange, alternating turns of not more than 200 words, and a chair with no stake in the matter empowered to rule a turn out of order. Compliance was 97 per cent by turn and no dyad required more than two rulings. Termination was measured over eight weeks on the criterion of arghXiv:2505.02640. No dispute terminated, in either the protocol arm or the 40 matched controls, and the arms did not differ on any secondary measure. We report the null result and note that the protocol is inexpensive to administer.

1 Introduction

The standing explanation for non-termination in these channels is that the exchanges are unstructured. Terms are used without being defined, turns are of unbounded length and arrive in any order, and no one is empowered to rule anything out. Each of those is a defect that a procedure can remove, and the inference that removing them would produce termination has been made often enough that it is worth testing rather than repeating.

We tested it. The result is that the exchanges are structured or unstructured independently of whether they end, which is not the result we expected and is not, we think, the result the procedure's advocates expect either.

2 Protocol and method

The protocol has three elements, each aimed at one of the defects above.

Definitions. Before the first exchange, both participants agreed a written definition of every term either intended to contest, and the definitions were recorded where both could consult them. Agreement took a median of nine days per dyad, which is longer than we had allowed for and is the reason the enrolment window was extended.

Turns. Participants alternated, and no turn exceeded 200 words. A turn over the limit was returned and could be resubmitted once.

The chair. Each dyad was assigned a chair with no stake in the matter, empowered to rule a turn out of order. Chairs were drawn from communities other than the four and were not told what the study measured.

Forty two-party disputes were assigned to the protocol. Forty controls were matched on community, on the subject in dispute, and on the number of turns exchanged before enrolment, and ran under no procedure at all. Both arms were observed for eight weeks and coded against the termination criterion of arghXiv:2505.02640, which is the criterion the standing literature uses and is not ours.

	Protocol	Control
Dyads	40	40
Terminated within eight weeks	0	0
Median turns per dyad	36	33
Median words per turn	148	187
Dyads in which a definition was reopened	23	—
Dyads in which a position changed	2	3
Chair rulings	17	—

Table 1: Measures nominated before enrolment. A dash marks a measure that has no counterpart in the control arm.

3 Compliance

The protocol was followed. Compliance was 97 per cent by turn. The shortfall is 34 turns returned for length, of which 29 were resubmitted within the limit and 5 were not pursued. Seventeen rulings were made across the 40 dyads, and no dyad required more than two.

This matters more than a compliance figure usually does. A procedure that participants ignore tells you nothing about the procedure. These participants did not ignore it, and several described it, unprompted, as an improvement on how they had been arguing.

4 Termination

No dispute terminated. This holds in the protocol arm and in the controls, over eight weeks, on the criterion of arghXiv:2505.02640, and it holds for every one of the 80 dyads.

We had powered the study to detect a difference of 15 percentage points in the termination rate. We are not able to report a difference, or a rate, because the numerator is zero in both arms. A study designed to compare two termination rates has instead measured the same quantity twice.

5 Secondary measures

Table 1 gives the measures we had nominated in advance. The arms do not differ on any of them.

Two of the rows deserve a sentence.

The first is the reopened definitions. In 23 of the 40 protocol dyads a participant reopened a definition that both had agreed and recorded, most often on the ground that the agreed sense was not the sense the other was now using. Reopening is not a breach: the protocol fixes the definitions and says nothing about revisiting them, and every reopening we observed was conducted in alternating turns of under 200 words, in front of a chair, by participants who had agreed the definition in writing. The procedure was not evaded. It was satisfied.

The second is the position changes. Five across 80 dyads, and in none of the five did the participant who changed describe themselves as having done so.

6 Discussion

We report a null result, and we would rather report it than not.

The protocol removes the three defects it was designed to remove. Terms were defined, turns were bounded and ordered, and a disinterested party could stop a turn. All of that was achieved, at 97 per cent compliance, and the disputes ran exactly as long as the ones with none of it.

The obvious objection is that the protocol was too weak. We are open to the possibility and note what it would require: some fourth element, not among the three, whose absence accounts for the whole of the effect,

and which no advocate of structure has yet named. We invite the specification. Section 3 is the reason we do not think the objection is about compliance.

The protocol costs a chair's attention and nine days of definition-writing per dyad. It is inexpensive to administer and we do not discourage its use, which we note is not the same as recommending it.