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Self-Serving Evaluations of Conflict Behavior and Escalation of the Dispute¹

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There is good evidence that people generally tend to evaluate behaviors, contributions, and outcomes in terms favorable to the self. The present series of studies expands this finding by showing that professional negotiators (Study 1), governmental decision makers (Study 2), and organizational consultants (Study 3) make self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior: They view their own conflict behaviors as more constructive and as less destructive than those of their opponents. In addition, results revealed that self-serving evaluation of conflict behavior is associated with increased frustration, with reduced problem solving, and with enhanced likelihood of future conflict. It is argued that these findings expand the conflict literature in that they provide better insight into the motivational-cognitive antecedents and consequences of conflict escalation.

During conflict interaction there may be an increase rather than decrease in the harshness of the conflict. That is, disputants may shift from mild to harsher tactics, and they may debate more rather than fewer issues (cf. Deutsch, 1973; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). Although the detrimental effects of unrestrained conflict escalation need no comment, we still know little about the individual's cognitions, motivations, and perceptions that are associated with conflict escalation. The current research continues work dealing with the link between individual cognition and social perception on the one hand, and dispute resolution and conflict escalation on the other (e.g., De Dreu, Carnevale, Emans, & Van de Vliert, 1994; Ross & Stilling, 1991; Thompson & Hastie, 1990). We attempt to further substantiate the empirical basis for the argument that, in the

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course of intensifying conflict, disputants come to see themselves as being good, reasonable, cooperative, and victimized, and their opponent as bad, unreasonable, hostile, and instigative (Deutsch, 1973; Ross & Stillinger, 1991; Rubin et al., 1994; Van de Vliert & Prein, 1989). More importantly, we examine the association between these differential judgments of one's own and the other's conflict behavior with the extent to which social conflict escalates.

Self-Serving Evaluations in Social Conflict

There is abundant evidence that people tend to interpret behaviors, events, and outcomes in ways that have favorable implications for the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988). For example, people take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure (Miller & Ross, 1975; Ross & Sicoly, 1979), and people are more likely to ascribe positive personality traits to themselves than to others, whereas negative traits are seen as more descriptive of others than of the self (Brown, 1990). In a similar vein, research inspired by social identity theory (Messick & Mackie, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) repeatedly showed that people bolster their in-group and derogate relevant out-groups. Thus, people reconstruct their past and present so that the self appears more favorable than it actually is (Conway & Ross, 1984; Greenwald, 1980), and they consequently evaluate themselves as fairer, more moral, and more honest than the average other (e.g., Kramer, Newton, & Pommerenke, 1993; Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985; Van Lange, 1991). These self-serving evaluations are generally attributed to people's need for personal control and for a positive self-image (for discussions, see Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Ross & Fletcher, 1985; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). In addition, self-serving evaluations may stem from the fact that people generally attend more to other people's negative rather than positive behaviors, since the former are more threatening and are believed to have higher diagnosticity (Fiske, 1980; Herr, 1986; Pratto & John, 1991; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989).

There is some evidence for self-serving evaluations being at work in settings of social conflict as well. In two studies, Thompson and Loewenstein (1992) examined judgments of fairness. Students negotiated, via written statements, settlement in a union-management dispute over wage rates. Each party received identical information in the form of a five-page case description, which contained a complex set of qualitative and quantitative information. Before negotiating, subjects were asked what they considered to be a fair wage from the vantage point of a neutral third party. Analyses revealed self-serving assessments of fair wage rates. In addition, Thompson and Loewenstein found some evidence that self-serving assessments of fairness produced longer negotiations. In a similar way, Kramer et al. (1993) recently showed that

undergraduate students negotiating with each other tended to attribute higher morality, honesty, and fairness to themselves than to their opponents. This corroborates the argument forwarded by Thomas and Pondy (1977) that due to differential availability of information about own and others' intentions, motivations and behaviors, disputants tend to attribute more problem-solving and compromising intentions to themselves than to their opponents, and more forcing intentions to their opponents than to themselves.

Although these prior studies provide compelling evidence for the existence of self-serving evaluations in social conflict, three questions remain unanswered. First, all prior research relied on naive conflict managers (i.e., undergraduate students), and it remains to be seen whether the findings expand to a more experienced sample. Second, prior research revealed evidence for self-serving evaluations of contribution and outcomes (i.e., fairness), and of intention and motivation, but not for self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior. Third, it is not clear in what ways self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior actually relate to conflict management and dispute resolution.

The current research attempts to answer the above questions by studying self-serving evaluations of constructive and destructive conflict behavior with experienced negotiators, organizational consultants, and governmental decision makers. Constructive behaviors are those behaviors that generally de-escalate the conflict and focus on maximizing joint outcomes. Destructive behaviors, in contrast, are those behaviors that tend to escalate the conflict and focus on maximizing own outcomes, and/or reducing the opponent's outcomes. On the basis of the aforementioned research, we predicted that disputants evaluate own conflict management as more constructive and as less destructive than that of their opponents.

In addition, the present study investigated the way self-serving evaluations of conflict behaviors relate to escalation of the conflict, with stalemate rather than settlement as the ultimate consequence. As mentioned at the outset, conflict escalation typically involves shifts from milder to harsher tactics, and shifts from few to many conflict issues (Rubin et al., 1994). Escalation may lead to reduced feelings of personal control, it may threaten one's self-image and self-esteem, and it may increase attention to one's own intentions, strategies, and future moves. Put otherwise, escalation of the conflict may promote processes that lead people to develop a positively biased view of themselves. In addition, conflict escalation is exemplified by an increase in destructive behaviors, and probably by an increase in the attention given to, the systematic processing of, and the internal attributions made for other's destructive behaviors. That is, conflict escalation may stimulate the development of a negatively biased view of the opponent. And finally, research by Bodenhausen (1988, 1990) suggests that as stress increases, people rely on more simple-minded

processing, such as the use of stereotypes. Thus, escalation of the conflict may increase stress and thereby bolster the tendency to rely on (negative) stereotypical views of the opponent. Together, these arguments suggest that conflict escalation may enhance self-serving evaluation of conflict behaviors.

In addition, a case can be made that self-serving evaluation of conflict behaviors fuels conflict escalation. Research by Snyder and Swann (1978) shows that people interact with others in ways that confirm their biased perceptions of those other people. In addition, self-serving evaluations may enhance the feeling that it should be the opponent who has to make the first cooperative move. Such a passive but noncooperative stance stimulates rather than inhibits escalation of the social conflict (Van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huismans, 1995).

To summarize, we designed the present research to provide a stronger empirical basis for the often noted self-serving evaluation of conflict behaviors, and to relate this self-serving evaluation to conflict escalation. We tested the prediction that disputants generate more constructive conflict behaviors when they themselves rather than their average opponents are the target of judgment (Hypothesis 1a, Study 1); that they believe themselves to use constructive tactics more often and destructive tactics less often than do their average opponents (Hypothesis 1b, Study 2); and that they view themselves as more constructive than their opponents (Hypothesis 1c, Study 3). Second, we predicted that self-serving evaluations of conflict behaviors is positively associated with conflict escalation (Hypothesis 2, Study 3).

To ensure high external validity and applied value, we tested our hypotheses with professional negotiators (Study 1), with governmental decision makers (Study 2), and with organizational consultants (Study 3). To reduce mono-method and mono-operation biases (Cook & Campbell, 1979), we employed both between-subjects (Studies 1 and 2) and within-subjects designs (Study 3); and we looked at free generation of constructive and destructive behaviors (Study 1), at frequency ratings of using constructive and destructive tactics (Study 2), and at rated constructiveness/destructiveness (Study 3).

Study 1

The method employed was based on Messick et al. (1985). We asked professional negotiators to write down behaviors and tactics used by themselves or their average opponents in disputes. As mentioned, we predicted that people would generate more constructive behaviors and tactics when they themselves rather than their average opponent are the target of judgment (Hypothesis 1a). To reduce the possibility that subjects would guess our hypotheses and behave accordingly, we employed a between-subjects design: Half of the

negotiators were asked to list tactics they themselves often use, whereas the other half were asked to write down tactics their average opponent often uses.

Method

Thirty-eight professional negotiators employed in both profit and nonprofit organizations received a short questionnaire by mail, of which 23 were sent back (60.5% response). All respondents were male, their average age was 39 ($Mdn = 40$, $SD = 7.34$), and they had worked in their current position for an average of 5.67 years. Over 70% saw themselves as a moderate to highly experienced negotiator, and they reported that they negotiated for their firm at least once a week. None of these biographical variables differed as a function of the between-subjects variable target of judgment. Hence, the response rate appears unaffected by our experimental manipulations.

Subjects were given 10 spaces to list tactics "often used in order to resolve the dispute." In the target of judgment is self condition, subjects were asked to list tactics they themselves frequently use. In the target of judgment is other condition, subjects were asked to list tactics their average opponent frequently uses. In both conditions, it was stressed that subjects were not obliged to list precisely 10 tactics.

Two judges blind to experimental conditions and hypotheses scored each tactic in terms of destructiveness/constructiveness, ranging from 1 (*very destructive*) to 6 (*very constructive*). In order to reduce the possibility that the judges' ratings were influenced by either halo or recency effects, we randomized the order in which the generated tactics were listed before presenting the tactics to our judges. Interrater reliabilities, as measured by Pearson correlations, ranged from .63 to .93. Hence, we averaged ratings over the two judges.

Results

Subjects did not generate significantly more tactics when self rather than opponent was the target of judgment ($M = 6.58$ vs. $M = 5.09$), $t(21) = 1.69$, $p > .10$. Hypothesis 1a was supported, in that tactics generated were judged as more constructive when the self rather than the average opponent was the target of judgment ($M = 4.26$ vs. $M = 3.25$), $t(21) = 3.25$, $p < .005$. To illustrate the kind of tactics subjects generated, Table 1 lists the first tactics subjects generated.

Study 2

The results of the first study were consistent with the hypothesis that

Table 1

First Tactics for Self or Opponent Generated by Professional Negotiators: Study 1

Subject #	Target is self	Subject #	Target is opponent
1	Collaborating	12	Listen carefully
2	Set date and time	13	Avoiding the issue
3	Giving correct arguments	14	Threatens to break off
4	Don't speak my true mind	15	Impose time pressure
5	Providing valid arguments	16	Giving irrelevant details
6	Listen	17	Salami tactic
7	Let other make first concession	18	Threatens
8	Being well prepared	19	Asking for commitment
9	Don't speak my true mind	20	Promise collaboration
10	Save opponent's face	21	Remains vague about profits
11	Showing you're an expert	22	Bluffing
		23	Threats to go to competitor

negotiators conceive of themselves as more constructive and less destructive than their average opponent.³ It should be noted, however, that the data may be alternatively explained by the fact that people tend to conceive of themselves as skilled negotiators and of others as unexperienced negotiators. When they then talk about themselves, they discuss tactics a skilled negotiator would use, while they cite tactics a less skilled negotiator would employ when they discuss others.⁴ Although our sample consisted of highly experienced negotiators and although they were instructed to think about their (highly skilled, professional)

³Interestingly, Ross and Sicoly (1979) found that spouses were prone to egocentric bias in recall of both positive (e.g., resolving a dispute) and negative (e.g., instigating an argument) events. Although inconsistent with current findings at first sight, it might be that in the Ross and Sicoly study subjects still recalled many more positive events than negative ones, or that subjects attached greater evaluative weight to positive rather than negative events. Unfortunately, Ross and Sicoly did not provide data bearing on these points. Also, there is some evidence that intimate couples make an exception to the general tendency to perceive of the self as better, fairer, and generally superior to others. That is, people tend to think of everyone else as worse than themselves, except for their intimate partner, who is perceived as even more constructive and considerate than oneself (e.g., Taylor & Koivumaki, 1976).

⁴We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this issue.

opponents (in the target is other condition), we cannot exclude this alternative entirely.

One way to circumvent this is by providing subjects with a fixed set of tactics that differ only in terms of constructiveness/destructiveness and ask them to rate how frequent they themselves, or their average opponents, employ these tactics. According to our original hypothesis, people should ascribe greater frequency to constructive tactics when they themselves are the target of judgment, but greater frequency to destructive tactics when their average opponent is the target of judgment. Thus, Study 2 was designed to investigate whether self-serving evaluations observed in Study 1 generalize to rated frequency of using constructive and destructive tactics (cf. Messick et al., 1985).

In addition, Study 2 was designed to obtain some initial insight in the processes underlying Hypothesis 2 that self-serving evaluations relate to higher levels of conflict escalation. Therefore, we assessed the level of intensity of conflict our subjects were generally facing, and we predicted that the tendency to overestimate own (as compared to other's) constructiveness, and to underestimate own (as compared to other's) destructiveness would be stronger under high rather than moderate levels of conflict intensity.

Method

Subjects. One hundred fifteen governmental decision makers received a questionnaire pertaining to the ways they handled social conflicts with their colleagues. Seventy-seven questionnaires were returned (67% response). The respondents had a mean age of 43.6, and they had worked for an average of 4.91 years in their current position.

Design and materials. We employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Target of Judgment, Self vs. Average Opponent $\times$ Level of Escalated Conflict, Moderate vs. High $\times$ Valence of Tactic, Constructive vs. Destructive) factorial design. Target of judgment was manipulated between subjects, conflict intensity was construed through a median split (see below), and valence of tactic was varied within subjects.

The questionnaire we sent consisted of two parts. Part I assessed the frequency of using constructive and destructive tactics (22 and 20 items, respectively). Examples of constructive tactics are "invests in a good relationship with the other party," "attempts to understand other's point of view," "uses correct and valid arguments," and "seeks for alternatives that satisfy both parties." Examples of destructive tactics are "cheats and provides incorrect information," "withdraws previously made concessions," "attempts to exploit the other party whenever possible," "negotiates with a hidden agenda," and "is not interested in other's point of view." The constructive and destructive tactics

were presented in random but fixed order. In the target of judgment is self condition, respondents rated each tactic on the question, "How often do you use this tactic"; answers ranged from 1 (*seldom*) to 7 (*very often*). In the target of judgment is other condition, respondents rated each tactic on the question: "How often does your average colleague use this tactic." (Throughout, we ensured that subjects thought of those colleagues that they often met, so that "colleague" here comes very close to the concept of average opponent in the previous study.)

Part II assessed the average level of conflict intensity. As such, Study 2 deals with conflict escalation as a rather static variable (in Study 3, we will consider conflict escalation as a dynamic process variable as well). Specifically, we asked subjects how the atmosphere generally was during meetings with their colleagues, ranging from 1 (*very bad*) to 7 (*very good*), reverse scored; how often conflicts and disputes emerged, ranging from 1 (*very seldom*) to 7 (*very often*); and how competitive or cooperative the encounters with their colleagues generally were, ranging from 1 (*very competitive*) to 7 (*very cooperative*), reverse scored. The internal consistency of this conflict intensity index was good (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). The mean was 5.31 ($SD = 1.13$), and the median was 5.50. Conflict intensity (moderate vs. high) was construed through a median split.

Results

The frequency ratings of the 22 constructive and the 20 destructive tactics had good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$ and $.87$, respectively). The averaged frequency ratings were submitted to a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ (Target of Judgment $\times$ Conflict Intensity $\times$ Valence of Tactic) ANOVA with the last variable within subjects.⁵ This revealed a main effect for valence, showing that constructive tactics received higher frequency ratings than did destructive tactics ($M = 5.24$ vs. $M = 2.20$), $F(1, 73) = 913.12$, $p < .001$, as well as a main effect for target of judgment, $F(1, 73) = 4.01$, $p < .05$, showing that ratings for self were, on average, higher than those for other.

Both effects were qualified by the predicted Valence of Tactic $\times$ Target of Judgment interaction (Hypothesis 1b), $F(1, 73) = 21.35$, $p < .001$. Constructive tactics received higher frequency ratings when self rather than the average colleague was the target of judgment ($M = 5.56$ vs. $M = 4.91$, $p < .05$), whereas destructive tactics received lower frequency-ratings when oneself rather than the average colleague was the target of judgment ($M = 2.05$ vs. 2.34 , $p < .05$).

⁵Regression analyses employing conflict intensity as a continuous rather than dichotomous variable yielded similar results and identical conclusions.

Table 2

Mean Frequency of Using Constructive and Destructive Tactics as a Function of Target of Judgment and Conflict Intensity: Study 2

Target of judgment	Conflict intensity			
	Moderate		High	
	Self	Other	Self	Other
Destructive tactics	1.89 ^a	1.86 ^a	2.21 ^a	2.82 ^b
Constructive tactics	5.70 ^c	5.20 ^d	5.42 ^{de}	4.63 ^c

Note. Means with different superscripts differ at $p < .05$.

A significant Target of Judgment $\times$ Valence $\times$ Conflict Intensity interaction, $F(1, 73) = 5.07$, $p < .025$, finally showed that this pattern was especially strong under high rather than moderate conflict intensity (see Table 2 for the cell means). This three-way interaction is consistent with the idea that conflict escalation is associated with stronger self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior.

Together, Study 2 supports Hypothesis 1b that governmental decision makers rate more frequently the usage of constructive tactics and less frequently the usage of destructive tactics, when self rather than the average opponent is the target of judgment. This corroborates the findings of Study 1. Second, we obtained some indication that self-serving evaluations are stronger under high levels of escalated conflict, that is, that the tendency to ascribe greater frequency of using destructive behaviors to the average opponent than to oneself was stronger under high rather than moderate levels of escalated conflict.

Study 3

The first two studies indicate that experienced conflict managers evaluate themselves as relatively constructive conflict managers (cf. Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b), and that this self-serving evaluation may be related to conflict escalation (cf. Hypothesis 2). Study 3 was designed to further test Hypothesis 2 that conflict escalation is associated with self-serving evaluation of conflict behavior. To this end, we engaged 29 dyads in an experimentally induced conflict interaction and had external judges rate the amount of conflict

escalation. We tested Hypothesis 1c that organizational consultants would rate themselves as more constructive than their opponent, as well as Hypothesis 2 that level of conflict escalation during the interaction correlates with this predicted self-serving evaluation. As in our second study, we looked at the end state (i.e., conflict intensity at the end of the conflict interaction). In addition, we looked at conflict escalation as an ongoing process.

Method

Subjects. The 29 dyads participating consisted of two colleagues from the same organization. They volunteered to participate in the study which was conducted during a conference on conflict management they were attending. Fourteen dyads consisted of two males, 10 dyads of one male and one female, and 5 dyads consisted of two females. Since no systematic gender differences were observed, this variable is not considered any further. Dyads came from different organizations, such as professional bureaucracies and small- and medium-sized consultancy firms. The participants' average age was 39, and participants had worked an average of seven years in their current position as organizational consultant. Over 90% had an academic education. Dyads were more or less acquainted prior to the study; in most instances, dyad members had to deal with each other regularly, and they thus had both a professional past and future.

Procedure. The procedures and methods used in this second study closely resembled those used in some of our prior research (e.g., Van de Vliert et al., 1995): Subjects were provided with background information in which a conflict issue is delineated and then freely interacted with each other to discuss the issue. This interaction was videotaped and rated afterwards by external judges on various relevant dimensions.

Instructions. The study was conducted in five separate rooms. In each room, one experimenter handled five or six dyads, one at a time. When a specific dyad entered the room, it was provided with written instructions stating that the purpose of the exercise was to study their interactions during conflict situations that might occur during their daily work activities, and then to provide feedback on their behaviors. Subsequently, subjects were given written information about the conflict situation in which they were supposedly involved. The subject assuming the role of Party A read the instructions in the room, whereas the subject assuming the role of Party B read the instructions outside the room, and returned just when the actual conflict interaction was about to start.

Subjects were given 8 min to read this background information and to make notes for themselves. They were told that they could use these notes during the subsequent interaction, but that they had to return the written instructions

before interacting. Finally, we asked subjects to abstain from role playing and to become involved in the situation as much as possible. To motivate them, we emphasized that doing so would make the feedback to be provided afterward more useful to all participants.

Conflict situation. Both dyad members were informed that the dispute concerned the work of a committee selecting job candidates for a vacant position. Both dyad members served on this committee, and both had strong interests in the kind of candidate that would be hired. However, both had different interests and quite different expectations about the qualifications of the new candidate: Party A attached great importance to the social skills of the applicant, whereas Party B valued the applicant's administrative experience.

Subjects assuming the role of Party A further read that, due to illness, they had been on leave for the last 3 weeks and that they returned just today. They learned that Party B continued the procedures and selected two candidates, neither of the two pleasing them very much. They were told that they felt frustrated and annoyed since Party B proceeded without letting them know. Finally, we informed them that there would be a meeting to discuss the issues and that they would be given 12 min to do so.

Subjects assuming the role of Party B read a quite different situation. They were informed that, due to illness, Party A did not show up the last 3 weeks, so that they had to do all the work by themselves: They carefully scrutinized all candidates and selected the two most outstanding candidates. They read that Party A showed up just today and appeared rather dissatisfied by the decisions made. They were told that they felt frustrated and annoyed since Party A left them with all the work. Finally, we informed them that there would be a meeting to discuss the situation and that they would be given 12 min to do so.

Conflict interaction. After 8 min of reading time, one party entered the room where the other party was already present, and started to discuss the conflict issue. The experimenter remained in the room and videotaped the conflict interaction. After 12 min, the experimenter interrupted the conflict interaction and distributed a short questionnaire.

Assessing self-serving evaluations. The dyad members were asked to rate their own as well as their opponent's behaviors. Specifically, subjects were asked to indicate to what extent their own (or their opponent's) behavior was (a) hostile or friendly (1 [*very hostile*] to 9 [*very friendly*]), (b) competitive or collaborative (1 [*very competitive*] to 9 [*very collaborative*]), (c) frustrating or stimulating (1 [*very frustrating*] to 9 [*very stimulating*]), and (d) evil-minded or good-hearted (1 [*very evil-minded*] to 9 [*very good-hearted*]). When the target of judgment was self, the internal consistency of this destructiveness/constructiveness scale was .78; when the target of judgment was other, the

internal consistency was .89. The order in which the questions pertaining to self or other appeared was counterbalanced, but had no effects. Also, the specific role subjects assumed (Party A or B) had no effects. Therefore, these variables are not discussed any further.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, subjects were given general feedback on their performance during the conflict interaction and were permitted to leave.

Level of conflict escalation: End states. As in Study 2, we assessed the level of escalated conflict by asking four judges, blind to hypotheses, to rate each videotape for (a) "How large is the chance for renewed conflict between these parties?" (1 [*very large*] to 7 [*very small*]); (b) "At the end, there was a stalemate," that is, a situation in which none of the parties can win (1 [*certainly agree*] to 7 [*certainly disagree*]); and (c) "At the end, there was an integrative solution," that is, an agreement that satisfied both parties optimally (1 [*certainly agree*] to 7 [*certainly disagree*], reverse scored). Because interjudge reliabilities per escalated conflict item were high (Cronbach's α s ranged between .76 and .85), we averaged ratings per item over the four judges.

Level of conflict escalation: Process. As pointed out before, the end-state measures take a rather static perspective on conflict escalation and thus facilitate comparison with Study 2. To cross-validate the above data, as well as to obtain a more process-oriented index of conflict escalation, we asked a second group of six judges to rate each videotape for the following items: (a) to what extent did parties obstruct each other; (b) to what extent did frustration increase; (c) to what extent did the atmosphere worsen; (d) to what extent did parties work out an ideal solution; (e) to what extent did parties come closer; (f) to what extent did parties search for a common way out; and (g) to what extent were ideas explored (1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*very much*]; items 4 through 7 were reverse scored). Since interjudge reliabilities per escalation item were high (Cronbach's α s ranged between .69 and .86), we averaged ratings per item over the six judges.

Unit of analysis. Since data within one dyad are not independent, all data are analyzed at the dyadic level. This means that for all analyses reported below, we used data averaged over the two members of each dyad. For five of the dyads, only the questionnaire data were available due to failure of the video equipment.

Results

Hypothesis 1c was tested by submitting the ratings for own destructiveness/constructiveness and for other's destructiveness/constructiveness, to a within-dyads *t* test. As expected, self was rated as more constructive than other

($M = 6.08$ vs. $M = 5.25$), $t(27) = 4.25$, $p < .001$. In addition, ratings for self exceeded the scale's midpoint (i.e., 4; $p < .05$), whereas ratings for other did not. This indicates that self is rated as "constructive" and other is rated as "neither destructive nor constructive." Note that since both dyad members rated themselves as more constructive than their opponent, the observed pattern can best be accounted for by the assumption that disputants engaged in some sort of self-serving biasing of conflict behavior.⁶

To test Hypothesis 2, we first subtracted the ratings for other's destructiveness/constructiveness from those for self. We then correlated this difference score with the escalation items. As can be seen in Table 3, these correlations were high and in the expected direction: The stronger evaluations were self-serving, the higher the level of conflict escalation. These data support Hypothesis 2.

General Discussion

The current series of studies was designed to study self-serving evaluation of conflict management in relation to conflict escalation. Consistent with prior research and theory (Kramer et al., 1993; Thomas & Pondy, 1977; Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992), we found that professional negotiators generate more constructive behaviors when oneself rather than the average opponent is the target of judgment (Hypothesis 1a, Study 1); that governmental decision makers ascribe greater frequency to using constructive, and lower frequency to using destructive tactics when they rather than their average opponent are the target of judgment (Hypothesis 1b, Study 2); and that organizational consultants rated their own conflict management as more constructive and less destructive than that of their opponents (Hypothesis 1c, Study 3). Thus, in three studies, with rather different methodologies and with rather different subject populations, we were able to demonstrate that experienced conflict managers are subject to self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior. This first conclusion joins research which found negotiators to make self-serving judgments about contributions and deserved outcomes (Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992). Taken together, it appears as if disputants think of themselves as fair while they actually are self-favoring, and that they evaluate their own behaviors toward obtaining those self-favoring distributions of outcomes as more constructive and less destructive than they ought to do.

In addition to this, our second study revealed a stronger association between level of escalated conflict and frequency ratings of destructive

⁶We did not find substantial differences in the way members within one dyad perceived one another. Thus, there was good within-dyad agreement that self was more constructive than other.

Table 3

Correlations Between Self-Serving Evaluations and Level of Conflict Escalation

	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>	Evaluation (self/other)
Process measure (6 judges)			
(1) Did parties frustrate each other	3.92	(1.08)	+0.68**
(2) Did irritation increase	3.20	(1.12)	+0.60**
(3) Did the ambience worsen	3.17	(1.00)	+0.56*
(4) Did viewpoints come closer	3.92	(1.10)	-0.63**
(5) Did parties work out a solution	3.44	(1.23)	-0.44
(6) Did parties seek consensus	3.30	(1.04)	-0.46
(7) Did parties explore new ideas	3.63	(1.12)	-0.39
End-state measure (4 judges)			
(a) Stalemate	6.33	(1.05)	+0.65**
(b) Future conflict	4.05	(1.56)	+0.71**
(c) Integrative solution	3.09	(1.57)	-0.64**

Note. Items 4 through 7 are not mirrored. Process indexes (Questions 1 through 7) and end-state indexes (Questions a through c) were obtained with different groups of judges.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

behaviors when the opponent rather than oneself was the target of judgment. Moreover, Study 3 demonstrated that self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior were positively associated with the escalation of social conflict. Specifically, self-serving evaluations of conflict behaviors were found to be associated with increased frustration and irritation, with reduced problem solving, and with enhanced likelihood of future conflict.

Our studies were not designed to uncover the processes that may account for the observed association between self-serving evaluations and conflict escalation. As mentioned at the outset, various processes may account for this association, including the need for a positive self-image, and differential processing of other's negative and positive behaviors. For example, as conflict intensifies, disputants may develop a less positive self-image which can be restored to some extent by augmenting one's own constructive behaviors, noble intentions, and desirable motivations, while downplaying one's destructive

behaviors, intentions, and motivations. In addition, intensifying conflict goes hand in hand with more destructive behaviors, and especially other's destructiveness constitutes an important input for self-serving evaluations. Finally, the correlational nature of our data allows the interesting possibility that self-serving evaluations fuel conflict escalation. That is, evaluating oneself as more constructive than the opponent may cause one to refrain from making a unilaterally cooperative move, which in the end may promote rather than impede escalation of the dispute.

Although further research regarding these matters is clearly needed, the link between self-serving evaluation and conflict escalation is most likely bidirectional, rather than unidirectional. Self-serving evaluations prevent oneself from being the first to cooperate, and with both parties thinking this way, escalation rather than resolution becomes the more likely process. The opponent's relative large amount of destructive behaviors subsequently contributes to the feeling that oneself is more constructive and less destructive than the other. Seen this way, our data make a contribution to conflict theory, which mostly looked at behavioral correlates of conflict escalation (Deutsch, 1973). Consistent with the current framework, however, Rubin et al. (1994) argued that conflict escalation triggers changes at both the disputant's perceptual and cognitive level. That is, other's destructive behaviors (perhaps in response to one's own) evoke hostile attitudes and a search for confirmation of negative attributions about the other party. This, in turn, stimulates destructive behaviors, and so forth. The data of our second and third study are consistent with such a bidirectional escalative process, in which behavior, perceptions, and attitudes jointly determine constructive and destructive conflict management.

The above revealed several strengths and weaknesses of this research. We cannot be conclusive about the exact processes that accounts for our observations. Future research thus needs to address whether it is the need for restoring a positive self-image, the differential weighing of other's destructive as compared to constructive behaviors, or some combination that account for the link between conflict escalation and self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior. One way to think about this is may be to assess whether self-serving evaluations primarily involve the augmentation of one's own constructive and derogation of one's own destructive behaviors (as an explanation in terms of self-image would suggest), or involve primarily the derogation of the other's constructive and augmentation of the other's destructive behaviors (as an explanation in terms of differential weighing would suggest). In addition to these questions, research is needed to establish our speculation that self-serving evaluations not only follow, but also fuel escalation of the dispute. Proving this to be the case would add to the general statement that conflict

escalation is indeed a consequence of the disputants' biased cognitions and motivations.

Among the more positive news is that with a variety of methods and subject samples we were able to demonstrate self-serving evaluations of conflict behavior. This corroborates prior speculation and research. The fact that we used professional conflict managers enabled us to demonstrate that not only young, impressionable students are subject to erroneous judgment and biased evaluation. And third, we successfully connected self-serving evaluations with actual (escalating) conflict behavior. As argued above, conflict escalation most likely stimulates self-serving evaluations, which may reduce mutual cooperation, increase frustration, and enhance the likelihood of stalemate rather than settlement.

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Patient Distress Undermines the Credibility of Illness Complaints¹

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Two studies examined the effects of telling lay perceivers about patients' nonmedical problems. In Study 1, college students rated a male peer's report of a sore throat as less credible and more psychologically caused when these co-occurred with nonmedical problems (midterm exams or insomnia), even when diagnostic results for strep throat were positive. In Study 2, perceivers received no diagnostic information, and gender of the stimulus patient was varied systematically. The patient was rated as less credible if insomnia was mentioned in a conversation, regardless of the patient's gender. Nonmedical problems also affected which health advice perceivers gave to the patient. These findings are compared with those of previous research on credibility judgment processes, and implications are traced for lay perceivers' mental models of illness.

How do laypersons decide that a peer's illness complaint is to be taken seriously? Social psychologists have paid surprisingly little attention to this question, even though lay conferral is usually the first step people take in seeking help for nonemergency medical problems (Sanders, 1982). In contrast to disease—a biological condition—*illness* is socially constructed and validated (DiMatteo & Friedman, 1982; Parsons, 1951). People talk to one another about their aches, pain, and other physical symptoms, and such exchanges are crucial to defining the individual as having a valid claim to the illness role (Friedson, 1960; Telles & Pollock, 1981; Verbrugge, 1985b). Thus, it is pragmatically important to ask what makes a patient's symptom reports credible to those to whom the patient turns most frequently for information and, ultimately, validation: nonprofessional peers.

Neither health professionals nor laypersons accept illness claims at face value. Professionals often express doubts about the veridicality of patients'

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