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Egocentrism drives misunderstanding in conflict and negotiation[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the consequences of egocentrism in negotiations.
- In mock negotiations, we independently manipulated each party's issue priorities.
- After negotiating, parties judged the other party's interests.
- Perceptions were more related to own interests than other party's actual interests.
- Parties overestimated/underestimated the other parties' interests based on their own.

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ABSTRACT

A key barrier to conflict resolution is that parties exaggerate the degree to which the other side's interests oppose their own side's interests. Here we examine egocentrism as a fundamental source of such biased conflict perceptions. We propose that parties rely on their own interests and priorities when estimating those of the other side, and ignore the other side's true interests and priorities. Three experiments involving multi-issue negotiations provide strong evidence of such egocentric misperception. Participants judged their own important issues to be more important to their negotiation opponent, regardless of their opponent's actual interests (Experiment 1). Furthermore, accuracy increased when attention was experimentally focused on the opponent's interests rather than their own (Experiment 2), and perceptions of opponent's interests were more closely related to own interests than to the opponent's actual interests (Experiment 3). In the discussion, we highlight the broader implications of the egocentrism account for other areas of conflict.

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Introduction

Social life is replete with examples of conflict. In everything from quarrels between lovers, negotiations between competing business factions, political debates, to wars between rival ethnic, religious, and national groups, individuals and groups often have conflicting interests or must compete over scarce resources. Although conflict can inspire creativity and strengthen social bonds, it more often creates narrow-mindedness, anger and resentment, and escalates into exceedingly hostile exchanges (De Dreu, 2010). Why this is the case, however, remains poorly understood. Why does communication break down and negotiators impasse rather than reach mutually satisfying agreements? Why do parties in a conflict develop increasingly negative perceptions of each other, overlook opportunities to achieve agreement, and become pessimistic about their ability to resolve their disputes? Although the exact mechanisms underlying conflict escalation are not well understood, much is known about social psychological processes (e.g., egocentrism, perspective-taking errors) that may contribute to the misperceptions that promote and sustain conflict. In the present work, we examine egocentrism (i.e., excessive self-focused attention) as a fundamental source of these misperceptions.

One key barrier to constructive negotiation and effective dispute resolution stems from the fact that conflict parties have, develop, and hold on to inaccurate beliefs about what is and is not important to themselves and to those on the other side (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; Jervis, 1976; Ross & Ward, 1995; Thompson & Hrebec, 1996). Indeed, even when the conflict allows ample opportunity to reconcile, combine, and integrate parties' interests, individuals in negotiations suffer from a "fixed-pie belief," the assumption that gains by one side must come at the expense of losses by the other side (Bazerman & Neale, 1983). For example, in negotiations, people generally exaggerate incompatibility between the opposing parties' interests, especially when they are partisan to one of the parties and are psychologically "involved" in the proceedings (Thompson, 1995). Other work has uncovered a "false polarization effect": Partisans on opposite sides of contentious social

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debates tend to exaggerate the gap in their attitude positions (Keltner & Robinson, 1993). For example, Robinson, Keltner, Ward, and Ross (1995) had partisans on both sides of the abortion debate read a case of a young woman who became pregnant as a result of a casual affair and was considering abortion. Pro-choice partisans imagined pro-life partisans were far less sympathetic, and pro-life partisans imagined pro-choice partisans were far more sympathetic, than they actually were. If conflict parties see more conflict than truly exists, and hold on to their fixed-pie beliefs, they develop negative interpersonal attitudes (e.g., Chambers & Melnyk, 2006), engage in exceedingly hostile exchanges (e.g., Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), and conduct competitive negotiation ending in suboptimal rather than mutually beneficial agreements (e.g., De Dreu, Koole, & Steinel, 2000; De Dreu & Van Knippenberg, 2005; Keltner & Robinson, 1993; Pinkley, Griffith, & Northcraft, 1995; Thompson & Hastie, 1990; Thompson & Hrebec, 1996).

Egocentric "projection" as a source of conflict misperception

Both fixed-pie beliefs and false polarization have been attributed to the fact that individuals operate as naïve realists—the tendency to assume that oneself is a rational perceiver, that the world is as one sees it, and that other rational perceivers should see it in similar terms. When others appear to see the world differently, this is attributed to the other being less rational, less well-informed, or operating some hidden agenda. Put differently, any discrepancy between others' perceptions and one's own is taken as an indication that the other, rather than oneself, is biased and unreasonable (De Dreu, 2010; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Ross & Ward, 1995). For example, Kennedy and Pronin (2008) showed that people perceive those who disagree with them as biased, and this perception of bias in turn triggers conflict-escalating approaches towards those others. Finally, their research revealed that such conflict-escalating approaches prompt those others to see the actor as more biased and less worthy of cooperative gestures (see also Reeder, Pryor, Wohl, & Griswell, 2005). Naïve realism thus triggers conflict-escalation through a self-fulfilling and self-sustaining spiral of perceptual distortions and conflict-ridden behaviors.

Work on naïve realism traces disagreement and conflict escalation to distorted views of the opposing party, and focuses on how disagreement and escalating conflict further fuel such distorted views. Here we suggest that such conflict misperceptions emerge at least in part because of an egocentric tendency to assume that what is (un)important to oneself must be (un)important to those on the other side, that is, to ignore the other side's actual interests and priorities and instead to estimate them based on one's own. In operational terms, we thus conjecture that in conflicts with multiple issues of different importance to both sides, people's judgments of the other side's interests and priorities will be weakly related to the other side's *actual* interests and priorities and more strongly related to *their own*. This main prediction was tested in the three experiments reported here.

Showing that people think egocentrically in social conflict situations—focusing primarily on their own side's interests and priorities even though they *should* be considering those of both sides—would make a novel contribution to the literature on conflict misperceptions, and would complement existing work on the naïve realism account. Second, such evidence would be consistent with classic and contemporary research on the egocentric nature of social judgments, in particular, the false consensus effect (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), above- and below-average effects (Chambers, Windschitl, & Suls, 2003; Kruger, 1999), the spotlight effect and illusion of transparency (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999) and overclaiming effects (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Third, it would fit with initial work showing that political partisans (e.g., Republicans vs. Democrats) exaggerate differences between their own and the opposing party's attitudes, especially on issues that are important to their own side (Chambers, Baron, & Inman, 2006; Chambers & Melnyk, 2006). Of course, because these partisans probably had socially-shared stereotypes about both political groups (e.g., that Democrats are generally more pacifistic than Republicans and therefore probably oppose a strong national defense), the biased conflict perceptions revealed in these studies may reflect the content of these stereotypes rather than the outcome of egocentrically-biased reasoning processes. To prevent these and related inferential problems, we tested the egocentrism account in an experimental paradigm free of those confounds.

Finally, evidence for egocentrism as a source of conflict misperceptions would fit with earlier work on fixed-pie beliefs (e.g., Thompson & Hastie, 1990). Fixed-pie beliefs are commonly understood as a manifestation of naïve realism, such that negotiators assume that what matters to them matters to others and because others are opponents rather than allies, preferences and priorities must be diametrically opposed (De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003; Ross & Ward, 1995). The egocentrism account, however, offers a different explanation of fixed-pie beliefs: People think primarily about the issues that are more (vs. less) important to their own side—that they have the strongest vested interest in defending, protecting, or promoting—and give little thought to how important those issues are to the other party. Because the other party is on the opposite side in the conflict (and therefore expected not to share one's interests), they are assumed to have opposing interests, *particularly* on issues deemed highly important to one's own side. This implies that (1) when an issue is of high importance to perceivers but relatively low importance to the other side, perceivers will tend to overestimate its importance to the other side, and (2) when an issue is of low importance to perceivers but high importance to the other side, perceivers may actually *underestimate* its importance to the other side. These tendencies fuel if not create the perception that own and other's interests and priorities are diametrically opposed and that there is more conflict than actually exists. As such, egocentric misperception would provide a novel explanatory basis for the well-established fixed-pie beliefs that hamper constructive negotiation.

The present research: hypotheses and overview

Distorted views of the other side's interests and priorities may stem from the fact that one sees the other as irrational, biased, and operating on a hidden agenda (per naïve realism), and from the fact that one "imposes" onto the other one's own interests and priorities (per egocentrism). Naïve realism and egocentrism both create misperceptions of conflict and may give rise to overestimation of conflict, but for different reasons. Furthermore, whereas naïve realism would have difficulty explaining when and why parties *under*estimate the amount of conflict, egocentrism would straightforwardly predict *over*estimation of conflict on issues important to oneself, and *under*estimation of conflict on issues unimportant to oneself.

Here we provide the first experimental tests of the egocentrism account. We adapted a dyadic negotiation task that is commonly used in the conflict literature to study negotiation (e.g., De Dreu, Koole, et al., 2000; De Dreu, Weingart, et al., 2000; Pruitt & Lewis, 1975; for a review and discussion see De Dreu & Carnevale, 2003). In this task, participants represent one of two roles (union or management) in the negotiation of a new labor contract, for which there are multiple issues under dispute (number of paid vacation days, rate of annual salary raises, etc.). Prior to negotiating, participants in each role receive a "payoff schedule" listing the various alternatives for each issue (e.g., annual raises could range between 3% and 15% of base salary) and the number of points they earn for each alternative.

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