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Diagnosing the difficulty of conflict resolution between individuals from the same and different social groups☆

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Abstract

We tested the hypothesis that intergroup conflicts are judged as more difficult to resolve than intragroup conflicts. We also assessed whether or not characteristics of the conflict (objective severity) and participants' beliefs about the relations between the two groups represented in the conflict would play a role in judgment. The results indicated that the intergroup conflict was judged as more difficult to resolve when the dispute had a lower likelihood of resolution. However, the intragroup conflict was judged as more difficult to resolve when the dispute had a higher likelihood of resolution. The pattern of results was restricted to participants who strongly endorsed the theory of group relations indicating that Whites and Blacks tend not to get along. We discussed the implications of the findings for intergroup relations and how people's naïve theory of group relations may be maintained.

Keywords: Conflict; Intergroup relations; Social judgment; Perception of conflict

Introduction

Some of the most intractable problems in current society and in the historical past have to do with conflict among different groups of people or representatives of those groups. The history of modern humans is a chronicle of events in which the common theme is the attempt of religious, cultural, and ethnic groups to dominate or counter-dominate competing groups. Even theories concerning the emergence of modern humans are based on the idea that our progenitors may have achieved their success in spreading across the globe in part by eliminating their contemporaries. Group conflict appears basic to the human condition.

Intergroup conflict is a problem to the extent that the conflict goes unresolved and gives rise to dysfunctional intergroup relations. The difficulty associated with conflict resolution depends on various factors. For example, conflicts that attract and involve additional people are more difficult to resolve than conflicts that involve fewer individuals (Kramer, 1991). Conflict may also be difficult to resolve because the conflict is conceptualized as a matter of principle or ideology rather than a set of concrete issues and suggestions for resolving the conflict (Greenhalgh, 1986; Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Another important factor that affects conflict resolution is the general tendency for the parties involved in a conflict to conceive of the situation as zero sum rather than positive sum (e.g., Follet, 1940; Thompson, 1990). In zero sum situations obtaining the resource in question is conceived as an all-or-none endeavor, in that what one party gets the other loses and vice versa. This is not the case with conflict situations that are perceived as positive sum (Greenhalgh, 1986).

An added problem involved in resolving group conflict is tied to the manner in which people perceive conflict between and within groups, the focus of the present research. At times conflict may appear more difficult to resolve when it involves members of different

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social groups. For example, perceivers may assume that people from different groups are less likely to cooperate with each other than are members of the same group (cf. Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Keenan & Carnevale, 1992). Perceivers may also assume that the tactics used in intergroup conflict will be of a contentious nature, whereas the tactics used in intragroup settings will be of a conciliatory and problem solving nature (cf. Rothbart & Hallmark, 1988). More recently the idea has been advanced that intergroup conflict may be perceived as particularly difficult to resolve because a conflict (or difference of opinion) between individuals from different groups will be attributed to a group or cultural difference (Miller & Prentice, 1999).

The current analysis

In line with the general idea that people bring their beliefs to bear on how they judge the difficulty of conflict resolution, we propose that people have a specific theory regarding the nature of conflict that involves individuals from different or the same social groups. People expect that conflicts that occur between individuals from different groups (*intergroup*) will be conceived as zero sum in nature, as having a lower likelihood of resolution, and that in many instances these conflicts will involve additional external parties (Himes, 1980; Schein, 1965; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Applied to group relations, at times it is such beliefs that may make intergroup relations so problematic, in that conflict escalates as more people get involved to try to defend group interests.

Conflicts occur between individuals from the same group as well (*intragroup*), but such conflicts are more likely to be judged as positive sum in nature and as having a higher likelihood of resolution (Himes, 1980). In addition, such disputes will usually involve fewer outside parties because the people involved in the conflict are likely to have overlapping social networks (real or symbolic) (e.g., Brewer & Kramer, 1986). At the group level, there are also pressures within the group for people to get along (Himes, 1980; Schein, 1965; Sherif et al., 1961), as exemplified in the tendency for a group to put forth more effort to achieve group cohesion when incentives for non-cooperation are high (Bonacich, 1972).

The proposed naive theory appears to be reflected in various findings from the intergroup relations literature. For example, people are apt to better remember groupings of individuals when the relationships within groups are positive but the relationships between groups are negative (De Soto, Henley, & London, 1968). Other research has shown that in resolving conflict, people are confident that threats and contentious tactics will be more effective when the conflict involves people from different groups than from the same group (Lindskold, McElwain, & Wayner, 1977; Rothbart & Hallmark, 1988). Researchers have also found that people expect members of the same group to hold similar values and beliefs compared to people from different groups (cf. Allport, 1954; Rokeach & Mezei, 1966), and that their own beliefs are more similar to an ingroup member's beliefs than an outgroup member's beliefs (Allen & Wilder, 1979; Doise, Deschamps, & Meyer, 1978). Finally, much research has shown that people are more likely to be attracted to and to favor ingroup than outgroup members (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1979). Together, these varied findings suggest that people hold the belief that conflicts that occur between social groups or individuals from those groups have a lower likelihood of resolution (and are thus more severe) than conflicts that occur between individuals from the same social group.

The existence of this naïve theory of group relations does not mean that conflicts that occur between individuals from the same social group will necessarily be judged as easy to resolve. A second factor that has to be considered is the degree to which the conflict itself is amenable to resolution. Conflicts may differ in their likelihood of resolution depending on a host of factors that have nothing to do with whether the individuals involved are from the same or different groups. Therefore, we would like to argue that people's judgments of the difficulty of conflict resolution will depend on their naïve theory of group relations, as described above, and the likelihood that the conflict itself can be resolved.

The perception that a conflict has potential for resolution should be more likely if perceivers attend to the details of the conflict and are sensitive to the parties' positions that may signal points of agreement. Not attending carefully to the conflict information should reduce an appreciation for how the parties in the conflict might proceed in trying to resolve the situation they are in. At the level of the perceiver, lending attention to a conflict situation and elaborating on the information should depend on whether or not the conflict fits their naïve theory of group relations, given that in general information that violates people's expectations triggers greater elaboration of the information as perceivers endeavor to understand it (Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983; Hastie, 1984; Kulik, 1983; but see Stangor & McMillan, 1992).

Applied to the present context, certain conflicts by not fitting people's naïve theory of group relations (severe intragroup conflicts and less severe intergroup conflicts) should trigger greater elaboration and attempts to understand why they occurred. Conflicts that fit people's expectations (less severe intragroup conflicts and severe intergroup conflicts), in contrast, should trigger less of an attempt to understand why they occurred. The result is that conflicts that are elaborated to a greater extent may lead perceivers to judge them as

easier to resolve than conflicts that trigger less cognitive processing, as greater elaboration may lead to a better understanding of the conflict information and the parties' positions, thus suggesting ways in which the conflict can be resolved. Thus, according to the present analysis, intragroup conflicts should be judged as easier to resolve than intergroup conflicts when the conflicts are more severe and have a lower likelihood of resolution. In contrast, intergroup conflicts should be judged as easier to resolve than intragroup conflicts when the conflicts are less severe and have a higher likelihood of resolution.

In addition, in this study we also examined a proposed moderator of how people judge the difficulty of conflict resolution between members of the same and different groups when the conflicts vary in their amenability to resolution. The current analysis rests on the assumption that people apply their naive theory of group relations to make sense of and determine the difficulty with which a conflict will be resolved. If it is indeed the case that perceivers' expectations play a central role in their conflict-related judgments, it was anticipated that the predicted pattern of results would only hold for people who strongly endorse the naïve theory.

Method

Design and participants

Fifty Black participants (36 women, 14 men, age range = 18–28) were recruited from the introductory psychology participant pool.[1] They took part in the study for course credit and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In one condition they read about a conflict with a higher likelihood of resolution that occurred between two Black women, and in another condition they read about the same conflict that occurred between a Black woman and a White woman. The two other conditions were similar, but the conflict was modified to make it appear to have a lower likelihood of resolution. Thus, the basic design of the study was a 2 (Group condition: intragroup vs. intergroup) × 2 (Conflict type: higher likelihood of resolution vs. lower likelihood of resolution) between-participants factorial. Participants were run in single-person sessions.

[1] In this study we also assessed participants' theories regarding the relations between Blacks and Whites, as will be described presently. Given pervasive politically correct motivations among White students, we assumed White students would provide relatively less reliable responses to the questions designed to assess their theories of group relations. Consequently, we decided to only study African-American participants.

Materials and procedure

Participants were taken into a cubicle that housed a computer on a table. The participants were seated, and after signing the consent form they were told the following by the experimenter: "We are interested in how people process information in different formats, computer text vs. regular paper text. All participants have been randomly assigned to either the computer or the paper text condition. Those assigned to the computer text format will view the materials on a computer screen and will then answer questions on the computer. Today, you have been randomly selected to be in the regular paper text condition. You will be presented the same materials as those who are in the computer text group but you will view yours on paper."

The participants were given personal descriptions of the two women to read (along with their pictures). The only difference between the conditions was that in the intragroup condition, participants viewed Lisa and Mary as two Black women. In the intergroup condition, one target was Black and the other was White. After reading the personal descriptions, the participants read through the conflict scenario.

The conflict between the two women involved a dispute over a scarce resource, specifically, access to a community center for an upcoming family celebration. One of the women had reserved the community center for her husband's upcoming birthday, whereas the other woman had reserved it for her parents' anniversary party. The conflict resulted from the fact that both women were allowed to reserve the center for the exact same time. The representatives at the community center office told the women that they had to resolve the issue themselves. The scenario went on to describe that both women learned of the scheduling mix-up at the same time, when they went to check on their reservation. Thus, they had some time (about an hour) to discuss their options. However, they could not come up with a solution, so they planned to discus the issue with their husbands and meet again.

All of the information including the description of the women and their plans and the nature of the basic conflict was the same in both conflict conditions. What differed were certain pieces of information regarding the parties' intentions and behaviors that were included in one condition to make the conflict appear more difficult to resolve. This information was based on findings from the conflict resolution literature (see Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). For example, for the conflict situation intended to have a higher likelihood of resolution, there was no information given on how much time the two women had before the actual celebrations took place, there was little information regarding the parties' emotional states, commitment to their positions, etc., and there was no indication that anyone else but the two women would be

involved in trying to resolve the dispute. In contrast, for the conflict situation intended to have a lower likelihood of resolution, the first meeting between the two women was described as taking place on the Wednesday before the scheduled celebrations that following Saturday (high time constraint). In addition, the two women's psychological and motivational states were described in more detail to convey their distress and frustration, and information was included about the possibility that the two women would bring their spouses and other family members along to their second meeting.

Pilot-test participants ($n = 31$) were recruited to validate the differences in the scenarios' perceived likelihood of resolution. After reading through one of the scenarios, which did not include target ethnicity information, the participants answered two questions on 7-point scales (0 = not at all difficult to 6 = extremely difficult). The questions were: "How difficult will it be for Lisa and Mary to find a resolution to their situation?" and "How difficult will it be for the two people to come to a negotiated agreement?" Responses to the two questions were averaged ($r(30) = .40$), with higher scores indicating greater perceived difficulty in resolving the conflict. Participants' responses were submitted to a between-participants analysis as a function of conflict scenario. The results validated the manipulation, $F(1, 29) = 5.21$, $p < .03$. The conflict situation with a lower likelihood of resolution was indeed regarded as more difficult to resolve ($M = 4.31$) than the more resolvable conflict situation ($M = 3.50$).

Measures

Endorsement of the naïve theory of group relations

We used two questionnaire items administered during mass pre-screening at the beginning of the semester as indicators of people's naïve theory of group relations. Participants in this study were not selected based on their responses to these questions given the small number of African-Americans in the participant pool. The questions dealt specifically with the nature of relations between Blacks and Whites. The two items read: "Blacks get along better with other Blacks than they do with Whites" and "Blacks get along better with Whites than they do with other Blacks." The questions were answered on 6-point scales (0 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The responses to the two questions were not available for nine participants.

We first performed a within-participants' analysis to determine if in general participants showed greater endorsement for the first than the second statement, and this was the case, $F(1, 40) = 39.44$, $p < .0001$. In general the participants agreed to a greater extent that Blacks get along better with other Blacks ($M = 3.10$) than with Whites ($M = 1.66$). Participants' endorsement of the naïve theory did not covary with the two between-participant conditions (Group Condition × Likelihood of Resolution) (all F's < 1.00). In the analyses to be reported, we created a difference score in which participants' responses to the second item were subtracted from their responses to the first item, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the theory.

Difficulty of resolving conflict index

After the participants finished reading the materials, they were provided the primary dependent measure that assessed their perceptions of how difficult the conflict would be to resolve. The measure was comprised of 8 questions (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$). Some of the items included: "How likely is it that Lisa and Mary will resolve this situation?" (0 = very unlikely to 6 = very likely, reverse-scored); "How difficult will it be for the two women to come to a negotiated agreement?" (0 = not at all difficult to 6 = very difficult); and "What degree of severity best describes this type of conflict?" (0 = very mild to 6 = very severe). A secondary dependent measure assessed participants' perceptions of the category divide between the two individuals in the conflict. A question similar to that created by Miller and Prentice (1999) was used for this purpose. The question asked: "To what extent do you think these two people's difference of opinion reflects a difference in their underlying values, beliefs, and attitudes?" (0 = not at all to 6 = completely).

Cognitive processing evoked by the conflicts

We gave participants the opportunity to provide continuations to the scenarios as an indicator of the amount of cognitive processing they devoted to the different conflict situations. After giving their judgments, the participants provided on a sheet of paper a conclusion to the scenario when the women met the second time. Two raters, blind to experimental conditions, coded participants' conclusions for the number of new pieces of information they introduced in their ending to the story (range = 1–7, inter-rater reliability = .84), which corresponded to the number of complete sentences the participants wrote. The raters also coded the continuations for the novelty of the proposed resolution to the conflict (0 = not at all novel, 1 = moderately novel, 2 = very novel). The inter-rater reliability for the latter measure was .73. After completing the study and the suspicion probes, the participants were debriefed, thanked, and given course credit for their participation.

Results

Participants' responses to the primary and secondary dependent measures were submitted separately to regression analyses. We conducted regression analyses given the continuous nature of the naïve theory en-

dorsement variable. In the analyses naïve theory endorsement was standardized and the between-participant factors were contrast coded, (Group condition: intergroup vs. intragroup) and (Conflict type: higher likelihood of resolution vs. lower likelihood of resolution). After this we created all possible interaction terms among the variables (all two-way and three-way), and then we included them along with the main effects in a regression analysis predicting each of the dependent variables. Table 1 displays the means for the two main dependent measures as a function of the experimental conditions and the dichotomized naïve theory endorsement variable.

Difficulty of resolving conflict

The overall analysis yielded two reliable interactions, including the interaction of Group condition × Conflict type, $F(1,33) = 14.21$, $p < .001$, $B = .46$. Consistent with expectations, this interaction indicates that for the lower likelihood of resolution conflict, participants judged the intragroup conflict ($M = 3.06$) as easier to resolve than the intergroup conflict ($M = 3.58$), consistent with the cultural divide hypothesis (Miller & Prentice, 1999). In contrast, for the higher likelihood of resolution conflict, the participants actually judged the intergroup conflict ($M = 2.91$) as easier to resolve than the intragroup conflict ($M = 3.62$). Thus, both intergroup and intragroup conflicts can be judged as difficult to resolve depending on the nature of the conflict situation. Given the novel nature of the prediction for the conflict situation that had a higher likelihood of resolution, the results reported here have been replicated with a different sample and targets. In two separate studies using either Blacks or Hispanics and Whites as both participants and targets, we also found that a conflict situation that had a higher likelihood of resolution was judged as easier to resolve when the conflict was intergroup compared to intragroup in nature.

Of greater relevance to the present analysis, the two-way interaction was qualified by the three-way interaction of Group Condition × Conflict × Type × Naïve Theory, $F(1,33) = 4.14$, $p < .05$, $B = .27$. As suggested by the means in Table 1 (median split performed on theory endorsement variable), the two-way interaction of Group condition × Conflict type was reliable for high endorsers, $F(1,17) = 20.46$, $p < .0001$, $B = .65$, but not for the low endorsers, $F(1,16) < 1.00$.

Cognitive processing evoked by the conflicts

In a second set of regressions we also examined participants' continuations to the conflict scenarios. It was expected that participants' degree of cognitive processing devoted to the conflict situations would be greater when the conflict situations contrasted with expectations, that is, when a conflict with a lower likelihood of resolution took place in an intragroup compared to an intergroup context but a conflict with a higher likelihood of resolution took place in an intergroup compared to an intragroup setting.

Participants' cognitive processing scores were derived from the number of pieces of information they provided in their continuations to the conflict (i.e., average of two raters' scores) and the novelty score assigned to their recommended solution (i.e., average of two raters' scores). The two separate averages were standardized and then averaged to create an index ($r(49) = .29$, $p < .04$). One participant failed to write a continuation to the conflict scenario.

The overall analysis yielded a reliable two-way interaction of Group condition × Conflict type, $F = (1,32) = 12.20$, $p < .002$, $B = -.46$, consistent with the overall predictions. However, the effect was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction of Group Condition × Conflict Type × Naïve Theory, $F(1,32) = 6.57$, $p < .02$, $B = -.36$. As suggested by the means in Table 1, the two-way interaction of Group Condition × Conflict

Table 1
Perceived difficulty of conflict resolution (DRC) and cognitive effort (COG) as a function of naïve theory endorsement, group condition, and the conflict's likelihood of resolution

	Low endorsers		High endorsers	
	Group condition			
	Intragroup	Intergroup	Intragroup	Intergroup
DRC				
Likelihood of resolution				
Low	3.12 (.45)	3.39 (.43)	2.91 (1.20)	3.85 (.67)
High	3.50 (.53)	3.15 (.74)	3.55 (.46)	2.52 (.32)
COG				
Likelihood of resolution				
Low	.37 (.73)	−.17 (.52)	1.30 (.53)	−.50 (.99)
High	−.79 (.26)	−.17 (.82)	−.22 (.40)	.23 (.74)

Higher scores indicate greater perceived difficulty and cognitive effort.

Type was reliable for the high endorsers, $F(1,15) = 12.05$, $p < .003$, $B = -.63$, but not for the low endorsers, $F(1,17) = 1.88$, $p < .19$.

Perception of the category divide

We also analyzed participants' responses to category divide question using the regression approach described above. The analysis did not produce any reliable effects, in particular the three-way interaction previously obtained for the other dependent variables in this study. Further, there was no reliable correlation between the difficulty of resolution measure and the category divide measure. This was the case even when just examining the responses of the participants exposed to the intergroup conflict that had a lower likelihood of resolution.

Discussion

The results have shown that a conflict that had a lower likelihood of resolution was judged as more difficult to resolve when it occurred between members of different groups than members of the same group, consistent with the cultural divide hypothesis (Miller & Prentice, 1999). However, a conflict that had a higher likelihood of resolution was judged as easier to resolve when it occurred between members of different groups than members of the same group. The latter findings contrast with those obtained by Miller and Prentice (1999). Although concerns related to cultural differences and differences in ideology may be made salient and influence judgments in intergroup compared to intragroup settings, other factors may also play a role as a function of how the conflict information fits people's expectations for intergroup relations. The present findings follow from the current analysis proposing that judged difficulty of conflict resolution depends in part on the degree to which the conflict information fits people's expectations and is elaborated. Severe intragroup conflicts but less severe intergroup conflicts trigger greater elaboration of the information and presumably a better understanding of those conflicts and positions. A better understanding of the details of the conflict may suggest points of agreement between the parties, which in the end, may make such conflicts appear easier to resolve than conflicts that receive less attention and elaboration.

The judgment patterns obtained in the present research have implications for the manner in which observers respond to group conflict. If we take perceived difficulty of resolution as an indicator of the effort and resources people will put into resolving conflict, the present findings suggest that conflicts that are amenable to resolution may attract few resources when such conflicts occur between different social groups or members of those groups. Thus, the lack of interest by more objective third parties may allow conflicts, which at the outset may be resolvable, to escalate and become more dysfunctional.

The present findings and the above implications are based on the proposal that people possess a naïve theory of group relations. In the present research we have provided little discussion of how people acquire this naïve theory of group relations. Although there are probably various socialization experiences (possibly in conjunction with people's natural inclinations) that can lead to the creation of such beliefs, it is of interest to consider one example that may serve to highlight the conditions that aid in creating and reinforcing such a set of beliefs.

The observation has been made that representatives from groups in conflict many times act in accordance with their constituents' expectations. These expectations appear to reflect the proposed naïve theory of group relations, that intergroup conflict in general will be nasty and difficult to resolve. Thus, you find, for example, that when labor union representatives meet with representatives from corporate management, both groups many times delay the announcement of a resolution to their disagreement even if they resolve the disagreement in a short period of time or in a relatively easy manner. This seems to be the case because their constituents expect them to be embroiled in a long negotiation battle (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). In the end, such behavior on the part of the representatives may help to reinforce people's beliefs about the nature of group relations, that conflicts between groups are difficult to resolve.

Limitations of the present research

The present research has opened a window to some of the factors that influence how people perceive conflict between and within groups. But there are limitations to the present findings that we believe provide various avenues for future research. One factor we did not examine is the basis for the conflict. In the present research participants learned about a situation that involved a dispute over a resource. Although resources serve as an important basis for intergroup relations, many times group-related conflict revolves around a group's ideology and values (Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998; Ybarra & Stephan, 1994). Researchers have suggested that these types of conflicts are particularly difficult to resolve (e.g., Greenhalgh, 1986), so it would be of interest to examine how people perceive conflicts of this nature along with other types of conflicts.

The above distinction potentially has other implications for the current analysis. In the present research we specified the conflict people were to consider before rendering their judgments. However, when the conflict situation is not specified perceivers may bring different

content to mind. For example, it may be that in general intergroup conflicts trigger more thoughts of a dispute over resources, power, and way of life (Jones, 1997), whereas within-group conflicts trigger more thoughts of personality clashes and struggles for power within the group. It would be of interest to examine what people bring to mind for different conflicts when there is no mention of the nature of the dispute. These responses could in turn be categorized and tested for their influence in helping to make conflicts more or less difficult to resolve.

The present findings are based on the manner in which perceivers judge conflict when it involves individuals from the same or different social groups but not whole groups themselves. What makes this an interesting case is that it is probably more difficult to think of people within the same group as comprising a group of their own compared to thinking about people from distinct social categories. Thus, if it is not clear to perceivers that a conflict involves individuals, perceivers may readily assume that a conflict within the same group involves individual members, whereas a conflict between groups involves the groups themselves. Given that people expect interactions between groups to be more competitive than interactions between individuals (Komorita & Lapworth, 1982; Lindskold et al., 1977; Pemberton, Insko, & Schopler, 1996), perceiving whole groups in conflict may potentially make intergroup conflicts appear more difficult to resolve than intragroup conflicts, even when the conflict situation is moderate in nature.

In conclusion, one factor that may contribute to the difficulty of resolving intergroup conflicts is the manner in which people perceive conflict that occurs within- or between-group boundaries. We have argued that people have a naive theory that suggests that conflicts that are likely to be resolved are more likely to occur between individuals from the same social group than individuals from different social groups. This naive theory has implications for the perceived difficulty of conflict resolution and potentially the conflicts people single out for dispute resolution assistance. In the end, these different processes may converge to help perpetuate people's original beliefs regarding the nature of intergroup relations.

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