

IT WAS YOUR FAULT! SELF-SERVING BIASES IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF CONFLICTS IN MARRIED COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Accounts of naturally occurring interpersonal conflicts were collected in interviews with 25 married couples from a community sample. The findings suggest that even in non-distressed close relationships accounts of conflict are distorted in a self-serving manner. Both partners tended to emphasize their own needs and hurt feelings, and to refer to aspects that excused or justified their own behaviour. Each partner also tended to blame the other for initiating the conflict, to describe the partner's behaviour as irrational and incomprehensible, and to refer to prior negative partner behaviour. Results are interpreted in terms of self-serving biases and favourable self-presentation. Effects of self-focused attention and actor observer biases are discussed.

KEY WORDS • accounts • autobiographical narratives • couples • marital conflict • self-serving biases

It is a common experience that a story told by two people can be quite different. One may hear an account of a quarrel from one person and

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completely agree that the other person involved was rather inconsiderate. After hearing the other person's side of the story, however, one may then empathize with that person and regard her behaviour as completely justified.

Research highlights fundamental differences in the attributions people make of their own and of others' behaviour (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Many studies have demonstrated that people tend to attribute their own behaviour to situational causes, but the behaviour of others to internal factors (e.g. Eisen, 1979; Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Maracek, 1973). Involvement in the situation, quality of the relationship of the people involved, and needs to protect self-esteem or establish a sense of control have been shown to affect attributional biases (e.g. Cadinu, Arcuri, & Kodilja, 1993; Chen, Yates, & McGinnies, 1988; Fletcher & Fincham, 1991; Gould & Sigall, 1977; Miller & Norman, 1975; Weber, Harvey, & Orbuch, 1992). Attributions tend to be self-serving or ego-defensive in that people tend to attribute success to their abilities and failure to situational factors, or tend to assume responsibility for success but share responsibility for failure (Carver, DeGregorio, & Gillis, 1980; Miller & Ross, 1975; Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1976).

More generally, it has been shown that people are motivated to perceive and present the self favourably by exaggerating their positive attributes and their control over events (Greenwald, 1980; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Esteem protection and esteem enhancement are powerful needs that shape the way people report events from their personal history (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Narratives about interpersonal transgressions and conflicts tend to be distorted in a self-serving manner such that transgressors describe their own behaviour as justified, but the target's behaviour as provocative (Baumeister, Stilwell, & Wotman, 1990). Transgressors also typically focus on their own inner states, but neglect the other person's thoughts and feelings (Schütz & Baumeister, *in press*).

Self-serving biases in close relationships

Non-distressed spouses in contrast to distressed spouses have been shown to extend self-serving biases to their partners and sometimes even make more benign attributions for their partners' behaviour than for their own (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Gould & Sigall, 1977). In fact, a positive bias in seeing one's partner may be self-enhancing in the end: being involved with a wonderful person is much more flattering than being involved with an inadequate person.

Whereas, in non-conflict situations, self-serving and partner-serving biases are compatible, they should be in opposition in moments of conflict between the partners. If the partners hold contradictory positions, being biased in favour of the partner implies admitting one's own wrongdoing. One may thus have to decide either to be biased in favour of oneself *or* to be biased in favour of one's partner (and now opponent). Even in non-disturbed close relationships people may, facing this choice, opt for egotistical biases. With respect to relationship conflicts, it may thus be expected that two partners will present quite diverging accounts of the

episode. More or less each person is expected to describe her/his own actions as justified and the partner's actions as inappropriate.

Autobiographical narratives and accounts

Research on narratives has focused on reports about entire lives (e.g. Kraus, 1996) or on stories about specific events (e.g. Baumeister et al., 1990). Stories about specific events have been termed micronarratives (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Accounts may be understood as narratives that provide explanations, privately or by being communicated to others (Fincham, 1992). Accounts are especially relevant after transgressions, failures, or other situations that threaten desired identities. In those cases, accounts may serve to reestablish self-esteem and restore public images (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Fincham, 1992; Schönbach, 1990; Schütz, 1998).

Recent research on autobiographical narratives has pointed out that motivational biases extend beyond causal attribution, and affect the details people include or exclude in their accounts of events (Baumeister et al., 1990; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stilwell, 1993). However, in those studies, only one participant reported his or her account of the event. Accounts from the respective partners were not available. It thus remained unclear if the participants chose to report different types of events when assigned to the role of victim than when, for example, assigned to the role of perpetrator. The present study addresses this issue by comparing the account of both protagonists involved in a conflict.

Derivation of predictions

The present study analyses accounts of conflicts in married couples. The accounts given by each spouse individually were compared for convergent and divergent presentation of the events. The literature on biases in accounts (Baumeister et al., 1990) suggests that differences may be found with respect to the description of beginning and end of the conflict, attribution of responsibility for the event, and elaboration of needs and feelings of the parties involved.

Beginning of the conflict. Interpersonal conflicts are often seen as reciprocal escalations (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harris, Gergen, & Lannamann, 1987). Therefore, it is difficult or impossible to determine who initiated a conflict or who is to be blamed for it (Howe, 1987). For self-serving reasons, each party may in fact blame the other party for being in the wrong and starting the conflict while portraying her/his own behaviour as a reaction to provocations. References to prior events in which the partner showed similar negative behaviour may also be used to emphasize and validate the claim of being a victim who is simply reacting to the other partner's provocations.

Attributions. Episodes of conflict typically include socially undesirable behaviours such as hurting someone or violating rules of moral appro-

priateness, and may thus provoke a need for self-justification (Baumeister & Newman, 1994). Justification of one's own behaviour typically includes depicting it as inevitable, legitimate, or appropriate in the given circumstances (Scott & Lyman, 1968). If behaviour cannot be justified, participants may use excuses to reduce their level of blameworthiness (Shaver, 1985; Schütz, 1991). The assignment of intent is critical to the interpretation of transgressions and the provocation of anger (Averill, 1982). Therefore, participants should also be motivated to emphasize that they had no intention to harm. Self-justificatory motives may also cause people to be critical of their partners (Thomas & Pondy, 1977) and even assign blame to exonerate themselves.

As no a priori roles were assigned to the participants, and conflicts typically involve mutual acts of transgression and aggression, it is expected that the participants will take aspects of both the 'perpetrator' and the 'victim' roles, but for self-serving reasons will de-emphasize their role as perpetrators — the morally more negative role — and emphasize their role as victims — the morally more positive role, which may, in addition, elicit empathy and support (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Perpetrators have been shown to typically depict their behaviour as comprehensible and justified whereas victims typically depict perpetrators' behaviour as arbitrary and incomprehensible (Baumeister et al., 1990). We predicted that the participants in the present study will include both patterns in their accounts, on the one hand, justifying their own behaviour (perpetrator role) but, on the other hand, accusing their respective partners of behaving inconsiderately without any good reason (victim role).

Needs and feelings. For self-serving reasons, empathy with the partner in conflict situations is expected to be reduced, whereas one's own perspective should be emphasized. Each partner is thus expected to emphasize his or her own needs, feelings and desires, while speaking little about what his or her partner wanted or felt. This pattern neglects the other's perspective. Thus, as a consequence each partner may feel dissatisfied and misunderstood by his or her spouse.

Conflict resolution. While initiating conflict is associated with negative moral images, being responsible for conflict resolution is much more positive and desirable, but equally difficult to attribute to one or another party (Howe, 1987). For self-serving reasons, each partner is expected to attribute efforts for conflict resolution and compromise to himself or herself more frequently than to his or her partner.

Prior research has also shown that perpetrators tend to depict conflict episodes as over whereas victims tend to accentuate lasting grievances or harm (Baumeister et al., 1990). Although the present study does not label one of the partners as victim and one as perpetrator, the beginning of conflict episodes is typically associated with one partner's activity (Halford, Gravestock, Lowe, & Scheldt, 1992). Even though this does not necessarily imply more blameworthiness, that person (target) may still feel more guilty

and responsible for the conflict, and may thus be more inclined to depict the episode as over. By contrast, the other partner, who was opposed to the first person's activity (critic), which in fact marked the beginning of the open conflict, may still want to change something about the partner's behaviour or the basic situation and therefore would rather emphasize that the problem is not solved yet.

Summary of predictions. Because of self-serving reasons, it is generally expected that each partner will describe the episode in a way that depicts his or her own behaviour as understandable and justified, but the partner's behaviour as irrational and inappropriate (see Baumeister et al., 1990).

1. Specifically, each partner is expected to blame the other for initiating the conflict, and to depict his or her own behaviour as a reaction to the partner's behaviour.
2. Both partners are expected to claim that they had no intent to harm, and to justify their own behaviour. Both partners are also expected to blame the partner for acting in an irrational manner.
3. Both partners are expected to emphasize their own needs and feelings, but to neglect the partner's feelings.
4. Efforts to resolve the conflict solution are expected to be more frequently attributed to the self than to the partner.

To test these predictions, each account had to be analysed on the basis of a standard scheme. Based on the reasoning of Halford et al. (1992), who argue that conflicts can generally be defined as situations in which one person opposes another person's actions, each conflict situation has been interpreted in this framework. Thus, the roles of critic (the one who initially criticized the behaviour of his or her partner) and target (the one whose behaviour was initially criticized) were assigned in each conflict. This distinction is conceptually related to the 'victim' and 'perpetrator' distinction (Baumeister et al., 1990), but uses less extreme and less value-laden labels. The distinction makes it possible to test whether certain biases are associated with one of these roles specifically, or whether the perceptions and distortions are similar on both sides.

Method

The present research is based on data that were collected in a larger project (Laux & Schütz, 1996; see also Schütz, in press b) and investigates hypotheses unrelated to that larger project. Two hundred and six married couples had been either randomly selected from citizens' registers in several communities in south-west Germany and asked by telephone whether they were willing to participate, or they had been attracted through advertisements in local papers. The selection criterion was that the couple should have at least one pre-school-age child. The couples had been married between 1 year and 26 years with a mean of 10 years. Participants' mean age was 35 years; their educational and occupational backgrounds were rather diverse. Sixty-three percent of the women were homemakers at the time of the study.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed about marital conflicts independently. Without knowing what event the other partner had talked about, in 25 of these couples both partners talked about the same incident. Apparently these were events that were highly salient to both partners. In some cases, the interviews dealt with recent or unresolved conflicts, and in other cases, the episode was chosen because it was one of the rare conflicts experienced by the couple. These 50 stories (two per couple) were analysed in the present study for differences in how the event was described.

Participants were interviewed in their homes. After they had described the basic incident, interviewers asked specific questions — How exactly did the conflict begin? What did you think about yourself? What did you think about your partner? How was the conflict resolved? Interviews lasted about 45 minutes per person.

The subsample ($n = 50$) was compared with the total sample with respect to family and marital satisfaction as well as situational criteria. No systematic differences emerged. The members of our subsample felt as satisfied with their families and their marriages as the rest of the sample. The situations reported by the subsample were not evaluated as more severe than those reported by the rest of the sample. Like the total sample, this subsample can be regarded as a normal community sample that is not particularly distressed. This is illustrated by the fact that the mean rating on the question 'How satisfied are you with your marriage?' was 1.76 ($SD = .75$) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very satisfied) to 6 (very unsatisfied).

Coding

All narratives were transcribed from tape recordings. One coder, who was different from the two who later did the analysis, read all the narratives and summarized the incidents around which the episodes revolved to assign the roles of target (the partner who did or said something or failed to do something to which the other partner objected) and critic (the partner who objected to this behaviour and criticized it). A second coder independently recoded all the stories to assign the roles of target and critic. These roles were not related to sex of participants: in 13 cases the woman was defined as critic, in 12 cases it was the man. Agreement between the coders (Cohen's kappa) was .92. Differences were settled by discussion.

The analysis was based on this distinction and compared the stories told from the critic's perspective (the person who initially objected to an activity of his/her partner) and the stories related from the target's perspective (the person who initially did something the partner objected to).

The episodes dealt with problems such as one partner spending a lot of time on a hobby, leaving belongings scattered in the living room, not keeping a promise, smoking in the house, punishing a child, refusing to accompany the partner on a trip, throwing out some of the spouse's belongings with the refuse, or working late hours. The topics can be regarded as typical of marital discord (Goldberg, 1987).

The stories were analysed with respect to 27 dimensions. The coding dimensions were derived on the basis of the theoretical hypotheses and supplemented on the basis of inspection of a sample of stories to check for

applicability of the dimensions (for this procedure see Mayring, 1990). The analysis addressed questions such as who was depicted as initiator of the conflict, how the behaviour of the two participants was attributed, what references to prior incidents were made, which emotions and motivations of the two participants were mentioned, and how the end of the conflict was depicted.

To address hypothesis 1, each story was coded depending on whether it described the target's behaviour or the critic's behaviour as having sparked the conflict, and whether it described the target's or the critic's behaviour as inappropriate (wrong, inconsiderate, unfair, an overreaction). In addition, references to prior conflicts and prior behaviour on the part of the self or the spouse that had caused a problem were coded.

To address hypothesis 2, each story was coded according to whether benevolent intentions were attributed to the two parties involved, and whether their behaviour was depicted as justified or as irrational. Based on the literature on accounting and defensive self-presentation (Schönbach, 1990; Schütz, 1991; Scott & Lyman, 1968) we distinguished justifications in a more narrow sense from excuses. Justifications depict a behaviour in question as legitimate under given circumstances. Excuses involve claims of a lack of control, situational constraints, or emotional stress to reduce responsibility. On the basis of a preliminary reading of some stories depicting behaviour as irrational, we made a distinction between the narrator's describing the behaviour as inconsistent (across time or across situations), or explicitly stating that there were no good reasons for a specific behaviour.

To address hypothesis 3, stories were coded according to the needs and feelings of the two parties involved. Because the narratives revolved about a marital conflict, negative emotions emphasizing being hurt, sad, or suffering were especially prominent. Thus, negative emotions, on the one hand, and needs or desires, on the other hand, were coded with each story. In addition, we coded whether the narrator stated that he or she or his or her partner did not understand the other's needs.

To address hypothesis 4, stories were coded on the basis of whether efforts by each of the two parties with respect to conflict resolution were mentioned. Based on the reasoning by Baumeister et al. (1990), we expected that victims (in our case critics) would more frequently than perpetrators (in our case targets) mention that the conflict was not solved. This aspect constituted a final coding dimension.

Following the procedure used by Baumeister et al. (1990), one coder (who was different from the two coders who had assigned the roles of target and critic to the characters) read the verbatim transcript of every interview several times and coded each story 'yes' or 'no' on each of the 27 dimensions depending on whether the respective feature was present or absent in a particular story. Chi-square tests were performed to compare differences in how the two partners described the episode.

To check reliability of the coding, a fourth coder independently coded a subsample of 12 stories. The coding procedure was fairly simple and did

not require intensive training. Coders who were familiar with the procedure of content analysis from prior projects were simply given the list of coding dimensions and asked to read each story as often as necessary and code it as yes or no on each dimension. Average intercoder agreement was computed on the basis of Cohen's kappa and was .75.

Results

In accordance with hypothesis 1, critics typically claimed that the targets' behaviour had sparked the conflict $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 15.01, p < .001$ (see Table 1) and targets typically claimed that the critics' behaviour had sparked the conflict, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 14.06, p < .001$. Critics more frequently described the target's behaviour as wrong, inconsiderate, or unfair than targets described their own behaviour in such terms, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.78, p < .05$. Targets in turn, typically argued the the critics were wrong or overreacted, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 6.75, p < .01$. Forty percent of the critics' accounts referred to similar earlier negative or conflict-provoking behaviour on the part of the target, whereas only 12 percent referred to such behaviour on their own part, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.14, p < .05$. Only targets referred to such behaviour on part of the critic, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 8.10, p < .01$.

Good intentions were more frequently ascribed to the targets by themselves than by their partners, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.78, p < .05$. Likewise, critics ascribed good intentions especially to their own behaviour, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 9.09, p < .01$ (see Table 2). Justifications for the targets' behaviour were mentioned in 84 percent of the targets' accounts, but only in 20 percent of the critics' accounts, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 14.06, p < .001$. Justifications for the critics' behaviour were especially frequent in the critics' accounts, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 10.08, p < .01$.

Differences with respect to describing one's own behaviour, as opposed to the partner's behaviour, as situationally constrained approached significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 3.13, p < .10$ and $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 3.20, p < .10$, for targets' and critics' behaviour, respectively. The differences in excusing one's own behaviour versus excusing the partner's behaviour were significant with respect to the description of the critics' behaviour only, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 7.11, p < .01$.

In targets' accounts, more frequently than in critics' accounts, the critics' behaviour was described as irrational, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 9.09, p < .01$, and lacking

TABLE 1
Beginning of the conflict: targets' versus critics' accounts

Dimension	Percentage of stories coded as yes	
	Target	Critic
Target's behaviour sparked conflict	16	96***
Critic's action sparked conflict	68	4***
Target's behaviour was inconsiderate, unfair	36	76*
Critic was wrong, overreacted	56	16**
Target's behaviour aggravated critic before	12	40*
Critic's behaviour aggravated target before	44	0**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2
Attributions for the conflict: targets' versus critics' accounts

Dimension	Percentage coded as yes	
	Target	Critic
Target had good intentions	56	12**
Critic had good intentions	12	52**
Circumstances justified the target's behaviour	84	20***
Circumstances justified the critic's behaviour	8	60**
Situation constrained the target	48	24+
Situation constrained critic's behaviour	12	32+
Stress excused target's behaviour	32	20
Stress excused critic's behaviour	12	48**
No good reason for the target's behaviour	4	44**
No good reason for the critic's behaviour	28	0*
Target behaved irrationally, inconsistently	4	20*
Critic behaved irrationally, inconsistently	32	8**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; + $p < .10$.

good reasons, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.14, p < .05$. Critics' accounts more frequently than targets' accounts described the targets' behaviour as irrational and inconsistent, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 5.14, p < .05$ and lacking good reason, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 6.75, p < .05$. These findings provide support for hypothesis 2. However, the differences were not significant on all dimensions.

Targets as well as critics more frequently mentioned that they were hurt than mentioning that their partner was hurt, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 7.69, p < .01$ and $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 10.08, p < .01$, respectively (see Table 3). Targets' needs were more frequently mentioned in their own accounts than in those of their partners, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 4.08, p < .05$. The equivalent difference concerning critic's needs was in the same direction but non-significant. Targets more frequently claimed that the partner did not understand them and that they did not understand the partner's feelings and thoughts, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 9.09, p < .01$. The same was true for critics, however, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 6.75, p < .01$. These findings provide some support for hypothesis 3. With respect to the end of the conflict, critics, more frequently than targets, emphasized that the conflict was not solved, $\chi^2(1, N = 50) = 6.13, p < .05$. Contrary to our expectations, there

TABLE 3
Needs and feelings: targets' versus critics' accounts

Dimension	Percentage coded as yes	
	Target	Critic
Target was hurt, sad, suffers	68	24**
Critic was hurt, sad, suffers	32	80**
Target's needs, desires mentioned	60	32*
Critic's needs, desires mentioned	40	68
Target did not understand partner's needs	0	64**
Critic did not understand partner's needs	44	0**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4
Conflict resolution: targets' versus critics' accounts

Dimension	Percentage coded as yes	
	Target	Critic
Target made efforts for resolution	40	8
Critic made efforts for resolution	12	24
Problem is not solved	12	40*

* $p < .05$.

was no significant difference with respect to which of the partners reportedly made the first move to end the conflict.

Discussion

Biases in accounts

The stories were told rather differently by the two partners. Typically each of them described the partner's behaviour as the basic problem. So, whereas one partner claimed that a specific action on the part of the spouse was the main problem, the other one typically regarded that criticism as inappropriate or intolerant, and perceived the very criticism as the cause of the conflict. Thus, each partner blamed the other for initiating a conflict, but described his or her own behaviour as appropriate and legitimate. For example, one man felt neglected by his wife because he thought she did not spend enough time with him when he was at home in the evening, but rather talked at length to relatives over the phone or was gone for over an hour when she put the children to bed. She, on the other hand, described her disappointment at his pursuing various leisure activities in addition to his job and frequently being absent in the evenings. As a consequence, she said, she had adapted her lifestyle to the situation of frequently being alone in the evenings; she had developed rituals of bed-time stories with the children, and often enjoyed long telephone conversations after that. She felt he was selfish and inconsiderate when he wanted her to keep him company instead of helping her to put the children to bed on the occasional evenings he spent at home.

Beginning of the conflict. With respect to the beginning of the conflict, critics typically described the target's behaviour as wrong, inconsiderate, or unfair. Targets in turn tended to describe their own behaviour as justified, but the critics' complaints as exaggerated or insensitive to their own needs, and indicated that the situation had been fine until the critic started complaining. Each partner frequently referred to similar earlier negative or conflict-provoking behaviour on the part of the spouse. This matches findings by Baumeister et al. (1990), who showed that perpetrators described their own behaviour as a reaction to a series of provocations by the so-called victim.

Attributions. Attributions for one's own and spouse's behaviour were likewise made in a self-serving manner. Critics claimed to have positive intentions, such as considering the needs of the children. They described their behaviour as justified in the light of prior events and circumstances, and excused emotional outbursts by arguing that they were under stress. They also tended to depict their partner's behaviour as unfair, inconsiderate or irrational, and inconsistent. However, targets, too, ascribed to themselves positive or legitimate intentions such as looking for self-fulfilment, and described their own behaviour as justified, but depicted the critic's behaviour as an overreaction that was irrational and lacking good reasons.

Clearly, justifications and excuses were predominantly applied to the self, whereas the partner was judged harshly or portrayed as irrational. These findings are consistent with the differences in how victims and perpetrators describe the perpetrator's actions (Baumeister et al., 1990). In the present study, for example, a woman (target) who worked at home drawing plans for an architect's office emphasized her desire to earn some extra money for the family with her work and explained how her boss sometimes had very urgent projects that needed to be done over the weekend. Her husband (critic), on the other hand, complained about her submissive and irrational attitude towards the boss, who, in the husband's opinion, exploited her. Her husband complained that family life and the marital relationship suffered from his wife unnecessarily working long hours.

Needs and feelings. As predicted, results indicated that each partner focused more on his or her own needs and feelings than on the partner's. Targets, as well as critics, more frequently mentioned that they were hurt, sad, or suffered from the situation than they mentioned that the partner experienced such emotions. Targets also more frequently mentioned their own needs and desires than those of their partners. Understandably, each partner perceived the situation from his or her point of view; consequently, both of them complained that their partners did not sufficiently appreciate them and their needs.

A cancelled holiday plan illustrates this aspect. The husband (target) described himself as an active sportsman who felt he needed to get some exercise on a regular basis in order to feel good, and complained that his wife did not understand his needs. According to him, she had given him the choice of either joining her on a vacation to the Alps and accepting her schedule of events, or not coming at all. However, her schedule, according to his description, would not give him the chance to get 'a little' exercise, but would force him to spend most of the time in bars and coffeehouses. She (critic), on the other hand, emphasized how egotistic his excessive sport activities were, and that not even on a family trip would he agree to cut back on his jogging and join in some basic family activities, but instead he would insist on making his jogging the first priority. Another couple quarrelled about their relationship with the husband's mother, who had

upset and hurt both partners in the past. While his (critic) story focused on his wish to make peace with his mother again, his wife's (target) focused on how hurt she still was by her mother-in-law's behaviour.

Conflict resolution. With respect to the end of the conflict, critics, more frequently than targets, emphasized that the conflict was not solved. Given the fact that they were the ones who were dissatisfied with the target's behaviour in the first place, this result is plausible. Targets are not only victims. They may be regarded as perpetrators who transgressed an agreement, or did something that was perceived as unpleasant by the critics. Whereas the critic may still hold a grudge, or want to change the basic situation, the target often wants to forget about the episode and treat it as finished (cf. Baumeister et al., 1990). Differences in mentioning one's own but not the partner's efforts in coming to a resolution did not reach the level of significance.

In summary, the results show manifold divergences in how intimate partners described an episode of conflict between them. As predicted, results indicate that both partners described themselves as morally right by holding the partner responsible for the incident and excusing or justifying their own behaviour. Each protagonist offered a different version of how the conflict had started: targets emphasized that their behaviour was legitimate, that the real problem was the critic's exaggerated criticism or oversensitivity; critics presented the target's behaviour, which they described as inconsiderate or inappropriate, as the basic problem and portrayed their own subsequent reaction as appropriate. Interestingly, each of the two protagonists tended to more frequently refer to incidents in the past when the partner had behaved in a conflict-provoking manner, than to incidents when he/she had provoked conflicts. In other words, the partner's behaviour is presented as typical and habitually problematic, but one's own behaviour is portrayed as atypical and provoked by the situation. This style of description is useful in blaming the partner and defending one's own self-image against possible negative implications.

The data do not elucidate the issue of where the observed differences stem from. From our findings it cannot be determined if the differences found are caused by processes during encoding, recall, selection, or even intentional distortion during the interview. The interview situation may have prompted tendencies of impression management. However, the design of this study does not allow us to compare private and public descriptions, so we do not know whether narrators perceive themselves as they present themselves: we do not know whether the descriptions reported represent the participants' private realities. It is certainly possible that each partner's description of the event, even though contradicting the other partner's description, has some aspect of subjective truth in it, for each partner may perceive the incident quite differently. For example, differences in punctuating the beginning and end of disagreements (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974) cause each partner to regard the other as the originator of the conflict. In fact, from reading the stories closely, it

becomes clear that, in several cases, participants were unaware of the fact that the partner perceived and described the event in a different way.

However, the differences in description and attribution of events cannot be explained as mere effects of self-focused attention, for participants did not simply talk more about themselves than about their partners. Instead, they tended to focus on their partner's role when negative aspects of the event were concerned, but focused on their own role when positive aspects were concerned.

Actor-observer effects do not explain the results adequately either. Some results do match the actor-observer bias: participants focused on circumstances when they interpreted their own behaviour. However, very few trait attributions were made overall. This may indicate the participants' readiness to focus on a specific episode without undue generalization. Instead of actor-observer effects, targets' and critics' accounts mainly diverged on a 'good versus bad' dimension. This provides evidence of self-serving biases: both partners were inclined to focus on their own positive intentions and on factors that excused or justified their own behaviour, as well as on the wrongness of the partner's behaviour and its incomprehensibility. Thus, the accounts appear to be shaped by an overriding motive to affirm self-integrity and present favourable impressions (Steele, 1988) by exculpating the self and blaming the other.

The results expand the findings of Tillman and Carver (1980), who found a positivity bias among actors and observers. In that study, both actors and observers made favourable attributions for success and failure. They had neither common nor conflicting interests. The present study, however, investigated conflict situations, and indicates that under these circumstances self-serving distortions do occur: only one's own behaviour is interpreted benignly, as the other party's behaviour is interpreted in an unfavourable manner. The results match the findings obtained in other areas of conflict where strong self-serving biases and depreciation of opponents were observed, too, among rival political parties (Rosenberg & Wolfsfeld, 1977), in management conflicts (Thomas & Pondy, 1977), and in situations that involved competition between subjects (Snyder et al., 1976).

The findings also extend the results of Baumeister et al. (1990) on victim and perpetrator accounts of conflicts in showing that self-serving distortions in interpersonal conflict are not caused by sampling effects resulting from studying only victims or perpetrators, but can be replicated when accounts of the two parties involved in a conflict are analysed (see also Stilwell & Baumeister, 1997).

Finally, the findings extend the research on biases among non-distressed couples and suggest that positive biases that favour and protect one's partner (Fincham et al., 1987) may be eliminated when there is a conflict between the partners that forces partners to choose between self-serving and partner-serving attributions.

The distortions regarding the event, as well as one's own and the partner's role observed in the present study of a normal community sample, can be regarded as serious because, on the basis of such biased

views, escalation of conflict seems likely. As Bradbury and Fincham (1992) have shown, attributions about partner behaviour are related to behaviour towards the partner, so misinterpreting the partner's intentions and not seeing why the partner regards his or her behaviour as justified is likely to result in verbal arguments and escalating conflicts (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Following this line of argument, self-serving distortions may be regarded as self-defeating in the long run (Baumeister & Schütz, 1997).

It should be noted, however, that distortions could have been worse than those observed in the present study. Even though partners were depicted as not empathizing enough, as irrational, overreacting, or inconsiderate, they were never described as intentionally malevolent, and hardly ever were negative trait attributions or overall negative descriptions made. In many cases, the partners even emphasized that they did agree on a common goal, but disagreed on how to get there. It is easy to imagine that distressed couples may present even more controversial accounts (see Fincham et al., 1987; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, & Stovik, 1991), may include more extreme biases, such as making negative trait attributions when judging the partner's behaviour, or may react with greater negative reciprocity (Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996).

Questions to be addressed in future research include the moderating role of personality variables. Traits such as self-esteem may moderate the observed self-serving biases. It may, for example, be expected that participants with high self-esteem, who have been shown to be more defensive and more self-enhancing (Schütz, 1997; Schütz & DePaulo, 1996; Schütz & Tice, 1997), exhibit stronger biases.

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