

RECIPROCITY AND COGNITIVE BIAS IN REACTIONS TO INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

By

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In order to examine two social psychological variables determining conflict resolution (reciprocity of tactics and justice bias), we asked 207 university students to recall interpersonal conflict experiences and to rate them in terms of their own or others' goals and tactics, and the outcomes. We found reciprocity in some types of tactics but not in confrontational tactics. The matching of collaborative tactics was found to contribute to the favorability of the outcomes. This suggests that it was caused by concerns for both self-interests and for justice. Consistent with the research findings with Western participants, the present study clearly found the justice bias in interpersonal conflicts among the Japanese participants. Correlations of the bias and goals implies that it typically occurred in conflicts characterized by economical resource issues and antagonistic interactions.

Key words: interpersonal conflict, reciprocity, cognitive bias.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal conflicts are situations in which there is either an actual or potential opposition with others. Conflicts affect both personal outcomes and relationships either positively or negatively, depending on how they are resolved. It has been generally found that collaborative tactics are likely to produce constructive conflict resolution, and confrontational tactics frequently result in the escalation of conflict (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993; Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1991). As determinants of tactics for resolution, researchers have focused on participant variables such as gender or relationships; for example, females or people in close relationships prefer collaborative tactics for conflict resolution (e.g., Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986). There are little research on tactical decision processes, however. In the present study, we attempted to examine how two social psychological variables, reciprocity in tactics and cognitive bias, affect conflict resolution.

Reciprocity is widely known among researchers studying altruism or aggression (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995; Tedeschi, 1983); that is, people tend to respond to altruism with altruism, to aggression with aggression. Reciprocity is not rational in terms of short-term personal interest. Receiving help without giving anything in return is more beneficial than reciprocating, and your physical pain would not be relieved by beating the other

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who hit you. Nevertheless, people indicate a strong tendency to reciprocate, and therefore it must be driven by some social concern. A feasible explanation for it is that people have a strong concern for justice (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994); that is, since an unexpected altruism or unjustified harm disorganizes a social balance, people are motivated to recover the balance by reciprocating.

Research with Western participants have documented that reciprocity also occurs in social interactions between conflicting parties (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Participants tend to match their behavior with other's behavior; that is, they respond to the other party's collaboration with collaboration, and to confrontation with confrontation. Ohbuchi and his colleagues (Fukushima & Ohbuchi, 1995; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1995) argued that reactions to conflicts are motivated by multiple goals, such as resource, justice, or relationship. Based on the multiple goals theory, the response matching in conflict situations could be regarded as being motivated by several different goals. Since personal interests are threatened in conflict situations, resource and justice goals may exert different impacts on reactions to conflicts. Whether the response matching in conflict situations is rational or irrational may depend on the type of responses. Collaborative matching increases the likelihood of fulfilling both parties' interests, and thus, it may satisfy both justice and resource goals. Assuming that collaborative matching is viewed as a rational strategy for conflict resolution, we predicted that collaborative matching would be likely to occur in conflicting interactions. Regarding confrontational matching, however, we made a different prediction. It may not be perceived as a rational strategy, because it increases the risk to escalate the conflict. Although justice goals encourage confrontational matching, resource goals may inhibit it. From these considerations, we predicted that confrontational matching would be less likely to occur than collaborative matching. The first purpose of the present study was to examine these predictions regarding response matching in conflicts by analyzing conflicts which Japanese subjects experienced in everyday social interactions.

Another variable of the decision process involved in reactions to conflicts is cognitive bias. Among others, the justice bias has been documented in conflict research with Western participants (Thompson & Loewenstein, 1992; Messick & Sentis, 1993). It means that participants of conflicts tend to evaluate their own assertions as more reasonable or fair than the other party's assertion. It is a variation of self-enhancing bias, which is motivated by a desire to maintain self-esteem. It was assumed that this bias strengthens a belief that one's own assertion is justified, activating justice goals for conflict resolution. Based on the finding that justice goals encourage confrontational tactics (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1995), we predicted that, if the participants suffer the justice bias, they would likely to engage in confrontational tactics, and thus the conflict would escalate. The second purpose of the present study was to examine this prediction regarding justice bias.

However, Fukuno (1995), who had Japanese subjects negotiate with each other over a resource issue, found that they rated their own assertion as less reasonable and less fair than the other party's assertion. He doubted universality of the justice bias, because his finding was quite inconsistent with the previous findings with Western participants. Therefore, before we

can test the above predictions regarding the effects of the justice bias, we must examine whether this bias would be observed in conflicts among Japanese.

METHOD

Participants: The participants were 113 male and 94 female college students at a large public university in the northeast area of Japan. They participated as part of a requirement for introductory psychology courses. The mean age was 19.37, ranging from 18 through 27. However, 98% of the participants were between 18 and 22, and thus they were regarded as belonging to the same generation.

Procedures: We presented the participants with our definition of conflict as "overt or covert opposition or disagreement with others," and provided them with a set of examples of conflict, emphasizing that conflicts are sometimes only subjectively perceived and may not be expressed in overt behaviors. Each participant was asked to recall and briefly describe an experience of conflict, and then to rate the episode on scales which measured goals, tactics, and outcomes².

Ohbuchi proposed a multiple goals theory of tactical behavior in conflict. He and his colleagues have found, in several studies, that it is typical for participants to seek to maximize a number of goals, particularly social goals, in conflict situations (Ohbuchi & Fukushima, 1996; Ohbuchi, Chiba, & Fukushima, in press; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1995). Based on this theory, we measured four social goals (relationship, power-hostility, justice, and identity) and two resource goals (personal and economic resources). Table 1 shows the definitions of these six goals. In the measurement of the participants' own goals, they were presented with the 16 items, which were previously used by Ohbuchi and Tedeschi (1995), and they were asked to indicate, by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very strongly* (6), how strongly they wanted the outcomes described by these items in their attempts at conflict resolution. Then, they were asked to evaluate their goals by answering the two questions, "How reasonable would the neutral third person evaluate the participant's goals to be?" and "How fair would the neutral third person evaluate the participant's goals to be?" They were asked to indicate their answers by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Definitely* (6). In the measurement of the other party's goals, the participants were asked to infer how strongly the other party wanted the outcomes described by these items and to indicate it by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very strongly* (6). Then, they were asked to evaluate the other party's goals by answering the two questions, "How reasonable would the neutral third person evaluate the other party's goals?" and "How fair would the neutral third person evaluate the other party's goals?" They were asked to indicate their answers by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Definitely* (6).

We presented the participants with the 11 items to measure four tactics (collaboration,

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2. The present data was obtained from a part of a large research project on interpersonal conflict. In addition to goals, tactics, and outcomes, the participants were further asked to rate perceived causes of conflicts, relationships with the other, and attributions of the other's behaviors involved in their conflict experiences.

confrontation, third party intervention, and avoidance), whose definitions are shown in Table 1. These items were also previously used by Ohbuchi & Tedeschi (1995). In the measurement of the participants' own tactic, they were asked to indicate, by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very strongly* (6), how strongly they engaged in the tactics. Then, they were asked to evaluate their tactics by answering the two questions, "How reasonable would the neutral third party evaluate the participant's tactics?" and "How fair would the neutral third party evaluate the participant's tactics?" They were asked to indicate their answers by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Definitely* (6). In the measurement of the other party's tactics, the participants were asked to infer how strongly the other party engaged in the tactics described by these items and to indicate it by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Very strongly* (6). Then, they were asked to evaluate the other party's tactics by answering the two questions, "How reasonable would the neutral third person evaluate the other party's tactics?" and "How fair would the neutral third person evaluate the other party's tactics?" They were asked to indicate their answers by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Definitely* (6).

Finally, the participants were asked to answer the two questions regarding outcomes, "To what extent were their goals attained?" and "Overall, how satisfied were they with the outcome?," by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Completely* (6).

Table 1. Definitions of goals and tactics.

Goals	Relationship: A desire to maintain a good relationship with the other party.
	Power - Hostility: A desire to dominate or punish the other party.
	Justice: A desire to restore fairness.
	Identity: A desire to protect self-esteem or social face.
	Personal Resource: A desire to protect privacy or freedom to do some thing.
	Economic Resource: A desire to protect something economically valued.
Tactics	
	Collaboration: An attempt to integrate both parties' interests or to calmly persuade the other party.
	Confrontation: An attempt to strongly assert one's interests or to agrees the other party.
	Third party intervention: An attempt to seek the third person's help for resolving the conflict.
	Avoidance: An attempt to avoid the conflict.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows correlations between the participants' and the other party's tactics. It indicates that the response matching occurred with collaboration, third party intervention, and

avoidance, but not with confrontation. When the other party attempted to resolve the conflict by confrontational tactics, the participants frequently responded to it with collaboration, instead of confrontation.

Table 2. Correlations between the participants' and the other party's tactics.

	Participants			
	Collaboration	Confrontation	Avoidance	Third party
Other party				
Collaboration	.34**	.42**	-.03	-.01
Confrontation	.33**	.11	.11	.10
Avoidance	.16*	.37**	.21**	.19**
Third party	.03	.13	.18**	.36**

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

In order to examine how the participants' and the other party's choice of tactics contributed to conflict resolution, a series of regression analyses were carried out, in which the participants' and the other party's tactics and their interactions were treated as independent variables and the two outcome variables (attainment and satisfaction) as dependent variables. The results of these analyses were quite similar (Table 3). As the table shows, the collaborative matching positively contributed to conflict resolution, the confrontational matching did not contribute, and the other party's confrontational tactics negatively contributed. These results suggest that response reciprocity in conflict was controlled by a concern for personal interests. In other words, the participants' decision to match tactics depended on the judgment whether or not it could lead to favorable conflict resolution, but not on a desire for restoring justice. Another related finding was that confrontational tactics were responded to by collaborative tactics. The participants may have taken such a strategy for circumventing escalation of conflict, though it hardly lead to positive outcomes. We can conclude that, when one party engaged in confrontational tactics, it was difficult for the participants to resolve the conflict in a constructive way, except by asking for third party intervention, as Table 3 suggests.

In order to examine the predictions regarding the justice bias, we measured the evaluation of goals and tactics of the participants and of the other party, using the two scales (reasonableness and fairness). Since these scales highly correlated with each other ($r = .62 \sim .78$), the average scores were analyzed with ANOVA treating participants/other party, goals/tactics, and gender as independent variables. As Figure 1 indicates, the participants rated that the neutral third person would evaluate their own goals and tactics as being more justified than those of the other party ($F(1, 202) = 46.89, p < .001$). A significant interaction effect ($F(1, 202) = 10.61, p < .01$) indicated that this biased evaluation was more remarkable for goals than for tactics. These results clearly show the existence of a justice

Table 3. Regression of outcomes by the participants' and other party's tactics: Significant β s.

Independent variables	Dependent variables: Outcomes	
	Attainment	Satisfaction
Participants' collaboration	.31**	.30**
× Other party's collaboration		
Other party's confrontation	-.13*	-.26**
Participants' third party intervention		.30*
× Other party's confrontation		
Participants' third party intervention		-.19*
R^2	.10**	.14**

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

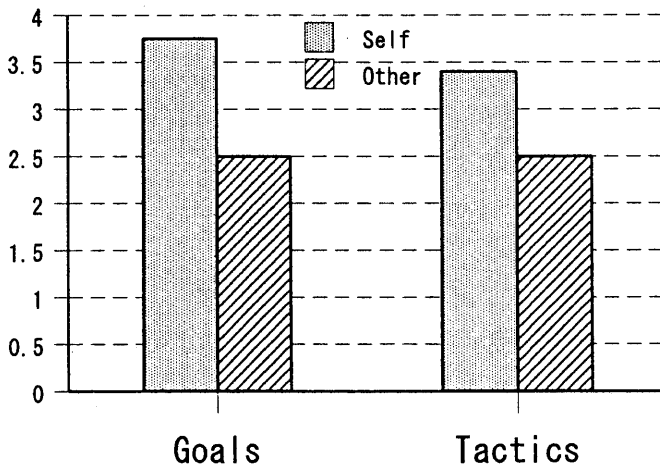


Fig. 1. Evaluation of the participants' goals and tactics and that of the other's goals and tactics.

bias; that is, as Western participants did, Japanese participants believed that their goals were more justifiable and their tactics were socially more appropriate than those of the other party. The present study was apparently inconsistent with Fukuno's study (1995), in which the counter-justice bias was found. What was the reason for the difference, regardless that Japanese students participated in both studies? In Fukuno's study, each student was asked to negotiate with a stranger over the decision of time schedules. The author assumed that the negotiators should have opposing resource concerns, but they might not have perceived that

their personal interests were severely threatened because the conflict was hypothetical, not real. They did not have a strong commitment to the negotiation, and, in addition, they might have felt that collaboration was required in such a situation. For these reasons, we suppose that the justice bias was suppressed in his experiment. As the present results indicate, however, the bias was definitely observed among Japanese when personal interests were actually threatened. Therefore, the justice bias in conflict seems to be universal.

Finally, we computed the amount of justice bias by the following formula: the evaluation of the participants — the evaluation of the other party. Table 4 represents correlations of these scores and the participants' goals. The justice bias negatively correlated with relationship goals, but positively correlated with power-hostility, justice, and economic resource goals. These results suggest that the justice bias was facilitated when the conflict involved resource issues or antagonistic factors. In other words, if these factors are not included in the conflict, this bias is not likely to occur. The reason for why it was not observed in Fukuno's (1995) study may be that the negotiation situation did not strongly activate resource or hostile concerns of the participants.

Table 4. Correlations between the amount of justice bias and the participants' goals.

	Justice bias	
	Goals	Tactics
Goals		
Relationship	-.27**	-.24**
Power - Hostility	.17*	.20**
Justice	.27**	.26**
Identity	.10	.11
Personal resource	.06	.02
Economic resource	.21**	.21**

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

We predicted that the justice bias would lead the participants to choose confrontational tactics, but there were no significant correlations between it and the participants' use of tactics. Although we observed in the present study that this bias was related to activation of certain goals, which have been regarded by previous studies as the determinants of tactics (Ohbuchi & Fukushima, 1996; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1995), we failed to prove its direct effects on the tactical choice.

CONCLUSION

We found reciprocity in some types of tactics but not in confrontational tactics. The matching of collaborative tactics was found to contribute to favorability of the outcomes, which suggests that it was caused by concerns for both self-interests and for justice. Consistently with the research findings with Western subjects, the present study clearly demonstrated the justice bias in interpersonal conflicts among the Japanese, suggesting its universality. Correlations of the bias and goals implies that it typically occurred in conflicts characterized by economical resource issues and antagonistic interactions. Although its effects on tactics were not directly confirmed, the observed correlations of the bias and several goals may be regarded as an indirect evidence for the effects.

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