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How groups contest depends on group power and the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat

Elanor Kamans,¹ Sabine Otten,¹ Ernestine H. Gordijn,¹ and Russell Spears²

Abstract

The aim of the current study was to show that the type of conflict behavior (constructive vs. unconstructive) groups use in conflicts depends on their power position as well as the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat. In an alleged online debate, we created a conflict between two opinion based groups. We then measured participant's action tendencies and their actual behavior. Overall, the results show that especially when the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat is low, power plays a role: those low in power become more constructive, while those high in power show no constructive behavior at all. Next to that, powerless groups tend to behave more unconstructively when it is likely that power determines victory and defeat. The implications for intergroup relations are discussed.

Keywords

conflict behavior, intergroup conflict, likelihood of power determined conflict outcome, power

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Peaceful demonstrations, military attacks, riots, internet petitions, and terrorism are all examples of groups expressing their grievances. These examples show that within conflict, groups can adopt different strategies to contest outgroups. Not much is known about *how* groups contest outgroups (but see Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990). The way in which groups do this, however, can have enormous consequences; constructive conflict behavior might result in win-win situations

and de-escalation, whereas, unconstructive conflict behavior is likely to cause escalation.

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In the extreme, it can make the difference between peace negotiations and warfare.

Conflicts between groups are often rooted in differences in perceived interests. Therefore, group goals are often perceived as negatively related. As such, intergroup conflict tends to be characterized by a win-lose attitude grounded in the notion that one group's gain implies the other group's loss. In such zero-sum situations (Schelling, 1960; De Dreu, 2010) – also called negative or competitive goal interdependence (Deutsch, 1973)—conflicts readily escalate with the groups becoming increasingly competitive and hostile towards each other, and less and less likely to engage in constructive exchange. In this paper we focus on possible moderators of this robust phenomenon. More precisely we focus on (a) the power relationship between groups and (b) the likelihood that power determines victory or defeat on (c) the tendency to display unconstructive versus more constructive conflict behavior towards the outgroup.

Although conflict behavior can take several forms (e.g., avoidance, accommodating, compromising, fighting, problem solving; Van de Vliert, 1997), we focus on behavior that clearly addresses the conflict issue, as in fighting and problem solving. We operationalize *constructive conflict behavior* as behavior that addresses the conflict issue without the negativity associated with fighting. *Unconstructive conflict behavior* is operationalized as behavior that is clearly negative and potentially harmful for the intergroup relation (e.g., abusive language). Without implying that there are no other factors contributing to the differences between constructive and unconstructive forms of conflict behavior (e.g., concern for the other party; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993) or dimensions on which constructiveness can be judged (e.g., content related outcomes; Giebels & Euwema, 2006), we focus on the effects that these different types of action are likely to have on the relationship. We assume that the relationship is more likely to get damaged and conflicts are more likely to escalate when people engage in what we call unconstructive forms of conflict behavior.

In this paper, we thus focus on competitive intergroup relations and we investigate if group power and the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes affect if groups differ in the extent to which they use more constructive and unconstructive types of action. Group power is likely to influence what outcomes people may anticipate. Group power determines the ability to control or influence (Jones, 1972; Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Raven & French, 1958), and as such, how efficacious and advantaged groups are as a conflict party.

In many conflict situations, due to their ability to control or influence, the powerful anticipate victory, while the powerless group, which cannot control or influence, will likely anticipate defeat. As a consequence, conflicts are simply less important or self-relevant for powerful group members, leading them, for example, to experience lower levels of intergroup emotions (Iyer & Leach, 2008; Schaller & Abeyesinghe, 2006; Kamans, Otten, & Gordijn, in press). Therefore, the powerful might not even need to use any forms of conflict. By contrast, powerless groups are likely to anticipate a defeat. As such these conflicts are very self-relevant for the powerless (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Indeed, research showed that the powerless are more likely to use unconstructive forms of conflict behavior than the powerful when a defeat seems likely (Kamans, Spears, Otten, Gordijn, & Livingstone, 2009; Tausch, Becker, Spears, & Christ, 2009).

In this paper we assume that powerless groups will usually anticipate a defeat, while the powerful can usually take their victory for granted but that groups nevertheless differ in the extent to which they believe this is likely to happen. When groups are aware that power does not necessarily determine victory and defeat other dynamics come into play.

Under these circumstances the powerful might feel threatened because their victory cannot be taken for granted any longer (Hornsey, Spears, Cremers, & Hogg, 2003; Turner & Brown, 1978) which might promote oppressive and unconstructive conflict behavior by the powerful (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). On the other hand, for the

powerless group, when the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat decreases it might give rise to opportunities (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2004), as their loss does not seem inevitable. When the powerless perceive opportunities, and cognitive alternatives to the status quo, they are likely to challenge the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). What we propose in the current paper is that these challenges are likely to take constructive forms, so as not to upset the powerful outgroup and waste their opportunities (Kamans et al, 2009).

Although it is possible to make predictions about specific forms of conflict behavior, conflict behavior is *complex* and *multi-faceted* (Van de Vliert, 1997); people might yell at the other group, while at the same time, they might combine this with more constructive forms of conflict behavior. In order to allow for such complexity we will therefore look at the *relative degree* to which people use both constructive as well as unconstructive forms of conflict behavior.

When the likelihood of power determining victory and defeat is low, we expect the powerless to clearly prefer constructive behavior over unconstructive behavior, while the powerful do this to a lesser extent. When the likelihood of power determining victory and defeat is high we expect the opposite pattern, such that the powerless prefer unconstructive forms over constructive forms. Putting it in more technical terms, when the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes is low, the interaction between power and type of conflict behavior should be driven by an increase in constructive behavior for the powerless. When the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes is high, we expect a different pattern; an increase in unconstructive behavior for the powerless. In the current paper we measure both participants' action tendencies and their actual behavior.

Method

Participants and design

After categorizing themselves as a member of an opinion group, 63 Dutch University Students

(62% female; mean age = 21.94, $SD = 2.40$) were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (power low/high) x 2 (likelihood of conflict outcome low/high) design. Participants received €10 as compensation.

Procedure

Participants were seated in separate cubicles behind a computer screen. The experiment was framed as a study on debating via computer networks. The topic of debate was the allocation of financial support to one of two community projects (construction of parking lots or aid for illegal immigrants). Allegedly, only one project could receive the financial aid. Participants indicated which project they wanted to represent, and were assigned to a group of people sharing that opinion¹.

Participants then wrote two arguments supporting their opinion. During the debate, consisting of two rounds, the argument written by the participant as well as the arguments written by the alleged others appeared one by one on the screen. Participants rated the quality of each argument on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (excellent) and commented on it briefly (maximum six words). After participants read and evaluated an argument, the evaluations given by the participant's ingroup as well as by the outgroup members appeared on the screen. Then another screen appeared showing all individual ratings as well as the overall rating per argument (for all arguments that had been rated at that moment). After that the next argument appeared. The sequence in which the arguments were presented was: participant's, outgroup member's, ingroup member's, and outgroup member's argument.

Power was manipulated by varying the amount of influence of the participant's group in the debate. In order to portray this power differences as natural and legitimate, we created groups that differed in size, which then resulted in less or more voice in the debate (see Devos, Silver, Mackie & Smith, (2002) for a manipulation of power via group size); group size (four vs. two members) determined how

much influence groups had in the debate (four vs. two evaluations). As a consequence, the overall grade that an argument received consisted of the four grades given by the powerful group and two grades given by the powerless group. Therefore, the powerful group influenced the overall evaluation to a greater extent. Because the groups differed in size, we told participants that from each group two arguments were used. The group whose arguments were best evaluated would win the debate.

Likelihood of power determined conflict outcome was manipulated by giving information about the outcome of a prior study. Specifically participants read that during this study thirteen groups had the same composition as their group (a minority or a majority group in favor of a parking lot project). We then gave information about the outcome of these previous debates in which we varied the likelihood that power is an important factor in determining victory and defeat. That is, in the *low likelihood* condition participants read that from the previous debates with similar composition (i.e., thirteen), eight were won (low-power condition) or lost (high-power condition) by the other opinion group, and that therefore, it was uncertain whether power would determine victory and defeat this time. In the *high likelihood* condition participants read that the other group won/lost twelve of these thirteen debates and that it was very likely that this would happen again.

To create a *conflict*, we programmed the responses of the other group to be very negative and unfair. That is, the arguments allegedly written by the participant's ingroup received low evaluations (6.5 and 4.5 out of 10 points), accompanied with negative remarks like "naïve and short minded", while the arguments written by the outgroup were evaluated positively (both 8.5 out of 10 points), accompanied with positive remarks like "very well written". This way, we created a situation in which the outgroup makes it less likely that the ingroup gets access to valued resources, and in which the outgroup provokes the ingroup. We chose these two elements because obstruction and irritation are

both characteristics of a conflict situation (Van de Vliert, 1997).

Right before the first evaluation round started, participants filled in the manipulation checks. After the first round action tendencies were measured. All items were measured on 7-point scales (1 = absolutely not, 7 = very much). Participants then had to send a message about their impression of the debate via the network to the other group. These messages were coded for the use of constructive or unconstructive conflict behavior. After this, we informed participants that the second round of debate would not take place.

Manipulation checks

Two items were averaged to test whether our power manipulation (*power check*) was successful (e.g., "during the debate, my group has less power than the other group", $r(63) = .62, p < .001$). Likewise two items were averaged (*likelihood check*) to measure whether our likelihood of power determined conflict outcome worked, (e.g., "I am certain who will win the debate", $r(63) = .50, p < .001$).

Conflict tendencies

To measure *constructive conflict tendency*, we averaged two items (e.g., "I would talk to the other group about their behavior", $r(63) = .52, p < .001$). Likewise, two items were averaged to measure *unconstructive conflict tendency* (e.g., "I would call the other group names", $r(63) = .30, p = .019$).

Conflict behavior

Two raters blind to conditions, coded the messages participants had written to the outgroup on a scale running from very unconstructive (-3) to very constructive (3). Criteria for constructive conflict behavior were: reference to a common goal or common identity; reference to ingroup *and* outgroup goals; prevalence of meta-conversation about the debate. Criteria for unconstructive conflict behavior were: use of threat or demands, no reference to goals of the

outgroup, negative tone and/or abusive language. Messages of four participants were treated as missing values because they misunderstood the assignment. We considered the two coders to be in agreement whenever ratings differed by no more than one point (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987); agreement existed in 71.7% of the cases. We also computed interclass correlations using a two-way random model and consistency definition (McGraw & Wong, 1996; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). This correlation had a value of $r = .72$, which is "good" (Cicchetti, & Sparrow, 1981). The ratings of both raters were averaged and used as a measure of quality of conflict behavior.

Results

Manipulation checks

An ANOVA with power and certainty as factors on the *power check* showed a main effect of power, $F(1, 59) = 56.18, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .49$. As expected, people in the low-power condition felt more powerless ($M = 4.62, SD = 1.34$) than people in the high-power condition ($M = 2.22, SD = 1.11$). There were no other effects, F 's < 1 .

An ANOVA with the same factors as predictors on the *likelihood check* showed that in the high likelihood condition ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.22$) people were marginally more certain about the conflict outcome than in the low likelihood condition ($M = 2.80, SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 59) = 3.48, p = .06, \eta^2_p = .056$. There were no other effects, F 's < 1.99 .

Conflict tendencies

We first conducted a factor analysis to test whether constructive conflict behavior and unconstructive conflict behavior were indeed different concepts. We specified that factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 should be retained. This revealed a two factor solution explaining 72% of the variance. Varimax rotation further showed that the two unconstructive items loaded strongly on the first factor (.73 and .85), while the two constructive items loaded strongly on the second factor (.91 and .80). Therefore, we were

confident that our measures of constructive and unconstructive conflict behavior indeed tapped two different concepts.

In order to grasp the complexity of conflict behavior, we looked at the constructive and unconstructive tendencies simultaneously. We predicted that type of action would interact with certainty of outcome, but that the patterns would be different depending on one's power position (three way interaction). In this study we created a zero-sum type of conflict. Although these types of conflict are often characterized by destructive forms of conflict behavior, within our experimentally induced conflict situation participants scored higher on the measures of constructive conflict tendencies ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.45$) than on the measures of unconstructive tendencies ($M = 1.89, SD = .81$). We Z-transformed the two different conflict tendencies in order to compare them.

We then used a repeated measure analysis with power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcome as between participant factors and type of action tendency (constructive vs. unconstructive) as within participant factor. This analysis showed no effect of type of action, $F < 1$, no interaction between type of action and power, $F < 1$, and a significant two-way interaction between likelihood of power determined conflict outcome and type of action, $F(1, 59) = 4.62, p = .036, \eta^2_p = .07$. More importantly, the expected three-way interaction between type of action tendency, power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcome was significant, $F(1, 59) = 7.05, p = .010, \eta^2_p = .11$.

To interpret this interaction, we looked at the effects within the high likelihood and the low likelihood conditions separately. Within the high likelihood condition there was no significant interaction between type of action and power, $F < 1$. When we nevertheless looked at the difference between the means (simple effects; see Figure 1 upper panel), there was a trend (in the predicted direction) that powerless groups tended to be more unconstructive than powerful groups, $F(1, 59) = 3.28, p = .075$. With regard to constructive conflict tendencies, there was no difference between powerless and powerful groups, $F < 1$.

Furthermore, although the powerless tended to have a higher average z-score on unconstructive tendencies, this difference was not significant $F < 1$. Likewise, the powerful did not prefer one type of action over the other, $F < 1$, and in fact scored low on both types of action tendencies.

Within the low likelihood of outcome condition, we did find the predicted interaction between type of action and power, $F(1, 59) = 7.16, p = .010, \eta^2_p = .11$. Figure 1 (lower panel) shows that this interaction was indeed driven by a large increase in constructive action when groups were powerless rather than powerful, $F(1, 59) = 10.51, p = .002$, and a small, but non significant decrease in unconstructive action when it seemed unlikely that power would determine conflict outcomes, $F < 1$. Further, the powerless clearly

preferred constructive forms of conflict behavior over unconstructive forms of behavior, $F(1, 61) = 4.06, p = 0.48$. The powerful showed a marginally significant difference in preference for unconstructive forms over constructive forms of action, $F(1, 61) = 2.88, p = .095$, which was caused by the fact that the powerful tended to refrain from constructive action.

Conflict behavior

Although the results regarding the action tendencies confirmed our predictions, we also wanted to find evidence for the predictive validity of our factors on actual conflict behavior. An ANOVA with power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcomes as predictors of quality of actual conflict behavior showed that there was no main effect of power, $F < 1.89$, or likelihood of power determined conflict outcome, $F < 1$, while the expected interaction between power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcome was significant, $F(1, 56) = 4.45, p < .039, \eta^2_p = .07$. Figure 2 shows that although all groups behaved in a constructive way, the extent to which they behaved constructively clearly differed depending on condition. When the likelihood that power determined victory and defeat was low, low-power groups behaved much more constructively than high-power groups, $F(1, 56) = 5.18, p = .027$.

Figure 1. The combined effect of power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcome on constructive and non-constructive conflict tendencies.

Figure 2. The combined effect of power and likelihood of power determined conflict outcome on how constructively (+) or unconstructively (-) people behaved towards the outgroup.

When the likelihood of power determined victory and defeat was high, there was no difference between low-power and high-power groups, $F < 1$. Although powerless groups behaved less constructively when they thought that the likelihood of a defeat was low compared to high, this difference did not reach significance $F(1, 56) = 1.80$, ns. Powerful groups were marginally less constructive when they thought that the likelihood of a victory was low compared to high, $F(1, 56) = 2.81$, $p = .099$.

Discussion

Conflicts between groups often are perceived as zero-sum situations, where the one group's success depends on the other group's loss. These types of conflict situations are often very competitive and hostile and can easily escalate. With this paper we wanted to explore whether these typically competitive conflicts can develop in a more constructive way as well. To this extent we investigated the role of (a) group power and (b) the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat on (c) the tendency to display unconstructive versus more constructive conflict behavior towards the outgroup.

We expected that when the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes is low, especially the powerless would engage in constructive behavior, meaning that the interaction between power and type of conflict behavior should be driven by an increase in constructive behavior for the powerless. When the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes is high, we expect an opposite pattern; an increase in unconstructive behavior for the powerless. In the current paper we measured both participant's action tendencies and their actual behavior.

The results show that when the likelihood that power determines victory and defeat is low, powerless groups display more constructive conflict tendencies than the powerful. With respect to unconstructive conflict tendencies, the powerful and the powerless did not differ. A similar pattern was found on the behavioral measure; when the likelihood that the powerless would lose was low

the powerless wrote constructive messages to the outgroup, while the messages written by members of high-power groups were less constructive. Taken together this shows that the powerless act delicately when a loss is avoidable, whereas the powerful are far from delicate when their victory is uncertain.

When the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes is high, an opposite pattern emerged. That is, the powerless tended to behave, marginally, more unconstructively than the powerful, while there was no difference between the powerful and the powerless in constructive conflict tendencies. Also, with regard to the way people actually behaved, power did not seem to matter much.

Possible limitations

The reason why the results are less outspoken in the high likelihood condition might be due to the fact that powerful groups do not need to invest in conflict behavior, constructive or otherwise; when their victory is certain their agreement with both types of conflict behavior is rather low. Therefore, an interaction would solely depend on a very high score on unconstructive action by the powerless. In addition, these unconstructive forms of behavior (expected for the powerless) are hard to get in a laboratory setting where involvement and investments are relatively low. This might also explain why we found that, on average, participants in this study tended to behave rather constructively. In the introduction we argued that group goals are often perceived to be negatively related, causing groups to engage in hostile and competitive conflict behavior. Although we did not find that in this experimental study, in society though, unconstructive forms of conflict behavior are likely to be more prevalent, especially in antagonistic intergroup settings (e.g., terrorism or violent oppression). Therefore, it might well be that some groups (e.g., powerless groups facing a likely loss or powerful facing an unlikely victory) clearly favor unconstructive conflict behavior over constructive conflict behavior when two groups have a long history of conflict.

Within our study we created a competitive intergroup setting in which group goals were negatively related. In this type of conflict group power and likelihood that power determines victory and defeat played an important role. However, within situations in which group-goals are positively interdependent, power might not be of relevance. When goals are positively related it is likely that there are little power differences (at least not with respect to the ability to determine conflict outcomes).

In the current studies, we manipulated power by varying group size. As such we used a different manipulation than the types often used in research on power (e.g., Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). We chose this manipulation because we wanted to manipulate group power instead of interpersonal power. By doing this, however, some may argue that we actually manipulated a majority-minority relationship. However, we took great care in ensuring that these differences in group size meant that people actually had more power and influence as a result (and there are many real world examples of power derived from majority group size). Moreover, the manipulation checks confirmed that people did indeed experience that they were or were not in control depending on the power manipulation.

We aimed to manipulate power and the likelihood that power determines conflict outcome independently. A critical reader might however wonder whether our likelihood manipulation did not accidentally influence our power manipulation. The manipulation checks ensured us that that was not the case. Further, it is important to note that although the likelihood manipulation is likely to influence the anticipated outcome, it did not influence the extent to which groups could exert influence. That is, although the powerful were, for example, insecure about whether they would win, they still had the same amount of power during the debate. As such, certainty of outcome might subjectively determine what it means to be powerful. However, it does not influence the objective level of power.

In this study, we predicted and showed that the powerless tend to be more constructive, while the powerful do not behave constructively when it is unlikely that power determines victory and defeat. The current study however does not yet provide a clear insight in the underlying process driving these effects. Based on a social identity perspective, it might be argued that the powerless are acting more constructively because they do not want to upset the powerful (Kamans et al., 2009), and that the powerful are defending their position (Turner & Brown, 1978). Based on the conflict and negotiation literature, it could be argued that the powerless attend more to the concerns and the perspective of others (Ebenbach & Keltner, 1998; Van Kleef, De Dreu, Pietroni, & Manstead, 2006), and, therefore, act more constructively (e.g., problem solving; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993), at least as long as there is still a chance that the conflict outcome can be affected positively (i.e., in the uncertain condition).

Implications

The current study shows that power and the likelihood that power determines conflict outcomes affect how groups *behave* in conflict situations, at least when this likelihood is low. Our studies further show that powerful groups are not always more coercive (i.e., when the likelihood of victory is high) and that they often are in luxurious position in which they do not need to fight (Kamans et al., in press). Therefore our study qualifies the idea that power always leads to action (Galinsky et al, 2003) or to aggression (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). On the other hand powerless groups do not always avoid or yield in conflicts. The powerless behave constructively when they do have a chance, but tend to be more on the unconstructive side when their position seems to be hopeless.

The study reported in this paper also elaborates on predictions made by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). And, although it is known that unstable power relations are likely to be conflictual (Turner & Brown, 1978) not much is known about *how* groups behave in these

unstable situations. What the current findings show is that when outcomes are not totally predetermined by power relations, powerless groups challenge in a constructive manner, while the powerful respond with relatively less constructive behavior.

In this study we found that powerful groups do not behave in a hostile manner when their power is under pressure (although their behavior becomes less constructive). Although, this might seem odd (Leach et al., 2002; Hornsey et al., 2003; Turner & Brown, 1978), the results regarding this are mixed (Spears, Greenwood, De Lemus, & Sweetman, in press), and it seems to be that the relation between threat and oppression is not so straightforward as is often assumed (Postmes & Smith, 2009). Postmes and Smith (2009) for example found that oppression of the outgroup by high status groups was only found when group norms supported this, emphasizing that oppression in response to threat does not always happen.

Conclusion

With this study we showed that within competitive intergroup settings it depends on the likelihood that power determines victory and how groups behave. The most striking findings concern the powerless as they tend to be very constructive when their loss is not predetermined, but become a bit more unconstructive when a loss seems inevitable. As such the studies show that is important to know how (powerless) groups perceive the likelihood of conflict outcomes in understanding their conflict reactions.

Notes

1. The majority chose the parking project.

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