Cross-national examination of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias as a function of different types of accounts

Seiji Takaku,1 Jeffrey D. Green2 and Ken-Ichi Ohbuchi3
1Social and Behavioral Sciences Division, Soka University of America, Aliso Viejo, California, 2Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, USA, and 3Department of Psychology, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

In two cross-national studies, we investigated the existence of a perpetrator–victim account estimation bias and how this bias can be reduced or eliminated when estimating the perpetrator’s use of a mixed account; that is, an account in which the perpetrator not only apologizes but also explains mitigating and justifiable circumstances. Japanese and American participants took either the perspective of the perpetrator or the victim and estimated the likelihood of the perpetrator’s use of each account. The results supported our hypothesis in both national samples. The implications of the bias and the role of the mixed account in reducing it are discussed.

Key words: accounts, cross-cultural, mixed account, perpetrator–victim account bias.

Introduction

Conflict occurs in almost every interpersonal and intergroup relationship. Regardless of its significance or severity, the conflict usually starts with one party (i.e. perpetrator) engaging in an untoward act against another party (i.e. victim). Furthermore, because the consequences often are severe if the perpetrators are held responsible for such an undesirable act (Baumeister, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1999; Weiner, 1995), the perpetrators often try to either reduce or avoid responsibility for the offence or to manipulate a more positive impression of themselves in the hopes of increasing the odds of being forgiven. At the same time, because there are many important consequences for the victims if the perpetrator is found to be blameless (e.g. Exline & Baumeister, 2000), the victims often try to ensure that the perpetrator is held responsible for the crime and is punished accordingly.

In fact, past research has documented that these differential motives that are held by each party have been found to play a significant role in causing and maintaining conflicts (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997; Takaku, Lee, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2005). For example, Baumeister et al. (1990) asked their participants to describe an incident in which they either angered or were angered by another. They found that the stories that were told from the perspective of the victim were significantly more likely to contain statements that portrayed the perpetrator as a sinner who intentionally violated a moral code (e.g. no apology was offered, no regret was perceived, the offence was a senseless and malicious act). In contrast, the stories that were told from the perpetrator’s perspective were significantly more likely to contain statements that portrayed the perpetrator in a more positive light (e.g. mitigating circumstances were present, a genuine apology was offered, the offence was unintentional or even justifiable). Furthermore, when describing their stories, the participants were not aware of these discrepancies, possibly because they believed their interpretation of the event to be an accurate description of reality and, thus, they felt no need to be questioned. Such unrecognized discrepancies, the authors argued, contribute significantly to prolonging and possibly exacerbating conflict.

Similar findings also were reported by Stillwell and Baumeister (1997), who asked their participants to read a hypothetical conflict scenario from either the victim’s or the perpetrator’s perspective. The use of a hypothetical scenario was an improvement from the original study by Baumeister et al. (1990) because it enabled the researchers to control for the potential confounding variable of recalling past incidents that differed in severity. The account bias was replicated under these more controlled conditions.

Thus, it is clear that both the victim and the perpetrator possess different (or even opposite) motives to construct stories about the same transgressive event in a way that will support and justify their desired ends. In the present study, we extended this line of research across two nations (Japan and the USA), using a similar hypothetical scenario method as used by Stillwell and Baumeister (1997). However, our study differs from the Stillwell and Baumeister study in that, rather than directly examining how different the stories that are told by the perpetrator are from those told by the victim (i.e. ‘perpetrator–victim account bias’), we specifically investigated the extent to which the perpetrator
expects to provide five different accounts when accused of committing a wrongdoing – apology, excuse, justification, denial and mixed account – and the extent to which the victim expects the perpetrator to provide each of these accounts. We hypothesized a discrepancy between their estimations of the extent to which the perpetrator is likely to provide each type of account based on different types of self-serving motives and biases that are held by each party (e.g. Baumeister et al., 1990; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Stillwell and Baumeister, 1997; Thomson, Neale, & Sinaceur, 2004). In order to differentiate the present work from past research (Baumeister et al., 1990; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997), we term the phenomenon under investigation as ‘perpetrator–victim account estimation bias’.

**Types of accounts and perpetrator–victim account estimation bias**

**Types of accounts**

Researchers define accounts as verbal explanations by an individual who has been accused of committing a wrongdoing (e.g. Ohbuchi, 1999; Schoenbach, 1990; Takaku, 2000; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001; Weiner, 1995) and have identified the following two types of accounts: (i) responsibility-accepting accounts, such as apology; and (ii) responsibility-avoiding accounts, such as excuse, justification and denial. Apology is a statement in which an accused person admits full responsibility and/or blame for the wrong that has been committed (e.g. ‘I am so sorry. It is my fault.’) An excuse is a statement in which an accused person attempts to minimize personal responsibility for the wrong that has been committed by attributing it to external, uncontrollable and/or unstable causes (e.g. ‘I was not on time because I got caught in traffic.’) The individual acknowledges the offence, but deflects full responsibility in the matter. Justification is a statement in which an accused person attempts to either belittle the damage done or disavow responsibility by appealing to higher moral principles (e.g. ‘I did not finish the project because I had to take my child to the hospital.’) The individual takes full responsibility for the act, but reinterprets the inappropriateness of the behaviour, based on extenuating circumstances. Denial is a statement in which an accused individual rejects having any personal causal association with the wrong (e.g. ‘I didn’t do it.’) In addition to these accounts, although they have not been investigated in past account research, the perpetrator potentially could provide a ‘mixed account’ that includes both apology and some type of responsibility-avoiding account, such as excuse and/or justification, rather than giving an isolated account (e.g. apology only). It is possible that the base rates for mixed accounts are rather high relative to individual accounts in isolation.

**Preferred accounts by the perpetrator, as estimated by the perpetrator**

Past research consistently has shown that perpetrators prefer to provide a responsibility-avoiding account (an excuse, a justification or a denial) significantly more than a responsibility-accepting account (an apology) when they want to satisfy their responsibility-avoidance motive (i.e. a motive to avoid harmful consequences, such as a demand for a large amount of compensation, punishment, lowered public trust or lowered self-esteem) (Baumeister et al., 1990; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Holtgraves, 1989; Itoi, Ohbuchi, & Fukuno, 1996; McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Ohbuchi, Suzuki, & Takaku, 2003; Schoenbach, 1990; Takaku, 2000; Takaku et al., 2001). However, their estimation of providing a responsibility-accepting account actually might be higher than their estimation of providing a responsibility-avoiding account because that is what societies expect the perpetrator to do and there is a great deal of pressure on the perpetrator to comply with such near-universal social norms. In addition, they also might estimate the likelihood of providing a responsibility-accepting account to be higher than the likelihood of providing a responsibility-avoiding account simply because the act of estimation of using each account (not the actual use of it) is governed more by their ‘impression-management motive’ (i.e. wanting to be perceived by others as a polite, mature and moral individual who is willing to take full responsibility for one’s actions) than by their responsibility-avoidance motive (see Ohbuchi et al., 2003). In other words, when estimating, perpetrators do not have to worry too much about various harmful consequences that follow from being found ‘guilty’.

**Preferred accounts by the perpetrator, as estimated by the victim**

As for victims, because their immediate, gut-level reaction toward the offence that they suffered would be to hold the perpetrator responsible for the wrongdoing and punish the perpetrator (i.e. responsibility-promoting motive), especially so that they ‘could avoid sharing any of the blame and to maximize their own claim on the sympathy of others’ (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997, p. 1159), they believe that an apology would be the most appropriate and satisfying account for the perpetrator to provide. However, they are most likely to estimate that the perpetrator would not provide an apology because of a well-documented correspondence bias that prompts the victim to attribute the cause to the perpetrator’s internal personality characteristics (Jones & Davis, 1965; Takaku, 2000; Weiner, Graham,
What about mixed accounts?

In many, if not most situations, the perpetrator wants to satisfy both the responsibility-avoidance and impression-management motives simultaneously as much as possible. Trying to manage both of these opposing motives is a delicate balancing act, but a mixed account that includes both apology and some type of responsibility-avoiding account, such as legitimate excuse and justification, might help the perpetrator to have the best of both worlds. Thus, it is quite possible that a mixed account might be preferred and, thus, expected to be used by the perpetrator more than pure apology, pure excuse or pure justification.

Likewise, because the victim also expects the perpetrator to try to satisfy both of these self-serving motives, the victim might very well expect the perpetrator to provide a mixed account as much as, if not more than, pure responsibility-avoiding accounts, especially when the mitigating and justifiable circumstances that are expressed in their excuse and justification are verifiably legitimate.

Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned rationales regarding the estimation of using each account by the perpetrators and the victims, we developed the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a. As the perpetrators’ impression-management motive is being triggered more than their responsibility-avoidance motive when estimating the use of each account, the perpetrators’ estimation of the likelihood that they would use an apology would be significantly higher than the victims’ estimation and the victims’ estimation of the likelihood that their perpetrator would use excuse, justification and denial would be significantly higher than the perpetrators’ estimation of this likelihood (i.e. the presence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias).

Hypothesis 1b. There would be a smaller discrepancy between the perpetrators’ estimation of their use of mixed accounts and the victims’ estimation (i.e. the absence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias) because mixed accounts not only help the perpetrators to satisfy both the responsibility-avoiding and impression-management motives, but also mollify the victim because they contain an apology.

Perceived satisfaction of each account to the victim

An ongoing discussion of the perpetrators’ and the victims’ estimation of the perpetrators’ use of each account as a function of their uniquely held motivational biases further indicates that both parties might agree on how satisfying each type of account would be to the victim. In other words, when the perpetrators’ account choice is dictated by their desire to manage their good impression to their victim and the public, they become more likely to align their account choice with their perception of how satisfying each account would be to their victim (i.e. the more satisfying a given account is perceived to be to their victim, the more likely they would use it). Thus, we developed Hypothesis 2a: Both the perpetrators and the victims would agree that an apology is more satisfying to the victims than excuse, justification or denial.

The victim also might find a sincere mixed account as satisfying as an apology because, after all, it contains an apology, the presence of which might very well holistically alter the interpretation of an excuse or justification that follows it. That is, against the backdrop of a sincere apology by the perpetrator, an excuse or justification might be seen as more palatable and less responsibility-avoiding and not obviate the odds of forgiveness. Thus, we developed Hypothesis 2b: Both the perpetrators and the victims would view a mixed account to be as satisfying as a pure apology.

Taken together, we predict that, although both the perpetrators and the victims agree on the satisfaction level of each account, the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias would still be observed for the apology, excuse, justification and denial accounts, but not for the mixed account.

Perpetrator–victim account estimation bias in cross-cultural settings

Many self-serving biases are culturally bound and are not necessarily exhibited by people from East-Asian cultures with high collective values (e.g. Heine, 2005; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To the extent that the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias can be viewed as a form of self-serving bias, it is reasonable to hypothesize that East Asians should be less likely to exhibit this bias. However, recent studies provide evidence that some forms of self-serving bias extend beyond Western cultures (see Kobayashi & Brown, 2003; Kobayashi & Greenwald, 2003; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003), especially in conflict situations (Takaku
et al., 2005) or along dimensions that are highly valued by members of the respective cultures (Cai, Sedikides, Brown, & Wang, 2009; Gaertner, Sedikides, & Chang, 2009; Kam et al., 2009; Yamaguchi, Chunchi, Morio, & Okuma, 2009). As this debate is still ongoing, we further explore this issue in the present study.

Present study

Two studies were conducted in both Japan and the USA to investigate the prevalence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias. The participants from both nations were randomly assigned either to the perpetrator or to the victim role and they imagined a series of hypothetical conflict scenarios. In Study 1, we tested the bias by using scenarios that depicted three different types of conflict under three different contexts in order to examine the robustness of the bias: (i) a conflict that resulted from one person not fulfilling his/her responsibility for a final class project; (ii) a conflict that resulted from an academic competition at school; and (iii) a conflict that resulted from a work-related competition. Having the participants read and react to the identical hypothetical conflicts (rather than recalling past offences) is important because it allows for testing of the effects of perspective manipulation and nation on the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias more precisely without the aforementioned potential confounding variables. In Study 2, we attempted to replicate and extend the findings by addressing some shortcomings that were found in Study 1.

Study 1

Method

Participants. One-hundred-and-thirty-eight Japanese participants (59 female and 47 male; mean age = 20.48 years) were recruited from a public university in north-eastern Japan, as well as Japanese foreign students (17 female and 15 male; mean age = 19.92 years) attending universities in the USA. The Japanese participants were limited to those who were born and raised in Japan until they were at least 18 years old.1 One-hundred-and-twenty-one American participants were recruited from the same liberal arts college (27 female and six male; mean age = 20.24 years) and a state university (62 female and 26 male; mean age = 21.85 years) in the USA. The American participants were limited to those who were born and raised in the USA (70% Caucasian, 21% African American, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian American and 2% did not report their ethnicity). The participants received course credit for taking part in this study.

Design. The study employed a 2 (nation) × 2 (perspective) × 5 (type of account given/received) mixed-model factorial design. Culture was defined by the participants’ nationality (i.e. US compared to Japanese). Perspective was manipulated between-participants: individuals were randomly assigned to either the victim or the perpetrator role for the scenarios. The type of account was manipulated within-participants: individuals were presented with five different possible accounts given by the perpetrator (see Appendix I for the complete text of the five accounts that were provided in each scenario).

Procedure. The study was conducted online by using web-based teaching and learning software called ‘Angel’ (Blackboard, Washington, D.C., USA). An experimenter randomly sent out one of two hyperlinks that directed the participants to either the transgressor survey or the victim survey. The instructions for both the transgressor and the victim surveys were:

The following scenario describes a conflict situation that took place between you and your classmate (or your rival company’s employee in Scenario 3). While you read the following scenario, please try to imagine how you would think, feel and behave if something like this really happened to you.

The actual manipulation of the perspective was accomplished in the scenarios.

Three scenarios were developed to test our hypotheses. In order to test the robustness of the bias under investigation, we wrote the scenarios to vary across several dimensions that might affect the participants’ responses, including competitive versus cooperative dilemmas, school versus work settings and the possibility of invoking a social identity. Scenario A described two students working on a final class project together. They were at risk of receiving a failing grade for the course because one of the students did not complete his/her part of the project. Scenario B described two students competing for a research grant; one student won the competition by blackmailing the main judge. Scenario C described two employees from rival companies competing for the best placement of their new product in a grocery store; the employee from one company moved the rival company’s product to the side and placed the former company’s product in the prime location. The complete scenarios from the transgressor’s perspective are in Appendix II.

For each scenario, the participants were asked to rate, on nine-point scales, the likelihood that they would give (or receive if they were assigned as the victim) each of the five accounts. Note that the responsibility-avoiding accounts (i.e. excuses and justifications) were depicted in each scenario as justifiable accounts under truly mitigating
Table 1 Mean reported account usage by the perpetrators and the victims in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Perpetrators Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Victims Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>5.31 (0.14)</td>
<td>4.03 (0.17)</td>
<td>t(253) = 5.75, p &lt; 0.001, $\eta^2_p = 0.12$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>4.64 (0.13)</td>
<td>6.00 (0.12)</td>
<td>t(252) = -7.84, p &lt; 0.001, $\eta^2_p = 0.19$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>3.81 (0.13)</td>
<td>5.76 (0.15)</td>
<td>t(252) = -9.33, p &lt; 0.001, $\eta^2_p = 0.26$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>2.48 (0.12)</td>
<td>4.11 (0.14)</td>
<td>t(254) = -8.97, p &lt; 0.001, $\eta^2_p = 0.23$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed account</td>
<td>5.98 (0.15)</td>
<td>6.20 (0.12)</td>
<td>t(252) = -0.13, p = 0.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics column indicates the significance of the perpetrator-versus-victim comparison for each account (i.e. comparisons between the row means).

circumstances (i.e. not lies). In other words, the present studies investigated how these equally valid accounts were differentially expected to be given by the perpetrator as a function of perspective manipulation and nation.

Furthermore, to assess the perceived satisfaction of each account, the participants were asked: (i) How acceptable do you think this statement would be to him/her (or ‘to you’ if they were the victim)? and (ii) How satisfying do you think this statement would be to him/her (or ‘to you’ if they were the victim)? The Cronbach’s alphas of these items for all three scenarios for each country ranged from 0.80 to 0.97.

Translation of materials. The surveys were produced in both English and Japanese and the participants completed the questionnaire in their native language. The original English version of the questionnaire was first translated into Japanese, which was then translated back into English by a second translator to ensure equivalence in meaning.

Results

In order to examine the existence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias across nations, we conducted a 2 (nation) × 2 (perspective) × 5 (accounts) × 3 (scenario types) mixed-model ANOVA. The two-way interaction between perspective and accounts was significant ($F(4, 980) = 59.45, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.20$). In order to test our specific hypotheses, this interaction was further analyzed by a series of independent sample t-tests for each account as a function of perspective manipulation. Consistent with our hypotheses (see Table 1), the perpetrators’ estimated likelihood that they would use an apology in these hypothetical situations was significantly higher than that of the victims’ estimate. The perpetrators also reported that the estimated likelihood that they would use an excuse, justification and denial was significantly less than that of the victims’ estimate. Finally, no difference was found between the perpetrators’ and the victims’ estimations of the perpetrators’ use of a mixed account.

Perceived satisfaction level of each account. To test the effect of perspective and nation on the perceived satisfaction level of each account, we conducted a 2 (nation) × 2 (perspective) × 5 (accounts) mixed-model ANOVA on the perceived satisfaction indices, which revealed only a significant account main effect ($F(4, 976) = 713.60, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.75$). As shown in Table 2, a series of paired-sample t-tests revealed that both the perpetrators and the victims rated the apology ($M = 6.04, SE = 0.08$) to be significantly more satisfying than the mixed account ($M = 5.13, SE = 0.10$), followed by the excuse ($M = 3.19, SE = 0.08$), then the justification ($M = 2.66, SE = 0.06$); the denial ($M = 2.00, SE = 0.10$) was the least satisfying.

Although the mixed account was perceived as less satisfying than the pure apology, the overall results were consistent with our hypothesis. That is, the pattern of results corresponded well with the pattern of results that was obtained for the perpetrators’ estimation of their likelihood of using these accounts, but it was almost opposite to the victims’ estimation of the perpetrators’ likelihood of using these accounts (except for the mixed account, where there was correspondence).

Discussion

In summary, the results strongly supported our hypotheses that the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias was present for all, but the mixed, accounts regardless of nation. Furthermore, the results suggested that the...
impression-management motive was stronger than the responsibility-avoiding motive in these scenario studies because the perpetrators’ estimation of their use of each account corresponded well with their perception of how satisfying each account would be to the victim.

However, there were several limitations to this study. First, there is a question of whether the participants perceived each account as intended. For example, did they perceive the apology to be an apology rather than as an excuse, justification, denial or mixed account? Second, because the mixed account that was presented in all three scenarios was significantly longer than the other pure accounts, it is possible that the length of the account was responsible for the absence of the bias for the mixed account, not because it contains elements that are preferred by both the perpetrators and the victims as we argued. Third, because operationally defining culture by the participants’ nationality might be overly simplistic (see Matsumoto & Seung, 2006), it might be misleading to conclude that the bias is indeed observed regardless of the cultural background. We designed and conducted the second study to address these issues.

Study 2

Method

Participants. A total of 76 students (19 female and 12 male students from state and private universities in the USA, mean age = 23.4 years; 25 female and 20 male students from a public university in Japan, mean age = 23.7 years) participated in this study.

Design and procedure. As all the participants in Study 2 were students and the results from Study 1 indicated that the bias was present regardless of the type of conflict scenario, we used only the first scenario from Study 1 (i.e. the final project conflict scenario). As in Study 1, a mixed-model factorial design was used and the participants were randomly sent one of the two online surveys (i.e. either the perpetrator survey or the victim survey) in their native language.

In order to address the issue of whether each account is being perceived by the participants as intended, we first provided them with a definition of each account. Upon reading each possible statement that could be given by the perpetrator, we asked them to indicate which type of account they thought each of the given statements was (i.e. apology, excuse, justification, denial and mixed account). In order to address the second issue regarding the length of the mixed account, we matched the length of the other accounts (i.e. apology, excuse, justification and denial) with the length of the mixed account without changing the meaning of each account (see Appendix III). Furthermore, to define culture more specifically, we included the Horizontal/Vertical Individualism/Collectivism scale that was developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998). Among the four values (i.e. Horizontal/Individualism, Horizontal/Collectivism, Vertical/Individualism and Vertical/Collectivism) that are measured by this scale, we specifically examined the extent to which the participants from the two countries differed on the Horizontal/Individualism and Horizontal/Collectivism dimensions, as the core attributes of these dimensions were considered to be motivationally most relevant in account selection research (see Ohbuchi, Takaku, & Shirakane, 2006). Those individuals who score highly on the Horizontal/Individualism scale tend to believe that they are unique and different from the group. Those change in status and value equality and freedom. Individuals in this category like to do their own thing. Those who score highly on the Horizontal/Collectivism scale perceive others individuals in the group as equals and share common goals and values.

Results

Were the Japanese participants more collectivistic and the American participants more individualistic? As predicted, the Japanese participants were significantly more horizontally collective (M = 6.05, SD = 0.78) than the American participants (M = 5.56, SD = 1.03) (t(66) = −2.20, p < 0.05) and the American participants were significantly more horizontally individualistic (M = 5.39, SD = 1.07) than the Japanese participants (M = 4.72, SD = 1.01) (t(66) = −2.20, p < 0.05). Importantly, these cultural value scores did not correlate significantly with any of the main dependent variables (r < 0.20, p > 0.40).

Intended meaning of each account. To examine whether each account was perceived by the participants as intended, we carried out a χ²-test for each account. The results indicated that all the statements were perceived by the participants as intended (for each account, the percentage of correct classification was >83%, which was significantly higher than the chance level of 20%; χ² > 90, p < 0.001). Those participants who did not perceive them as intended were excluded from further analyses.

Perpetrator–victim account estimation bias. To examine the existence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias across nations, we conducted a 2 (nation) × 2 (perspective) × 5 (accounts) mixed-model ANOVA. The two-way interaction between perspective and accounts was significant (F(4, 288) = 18.33, p < 0.001, η²p = 0.20). In order to test our specific hypotheses, this interaction was...
Table 3  Mean reported account usage by the perpetrators and the victims in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Perpetrators Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Victims Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>6.79 (0.39)</td>
<td>5.16 (0.36)</td>
<td>$t(69) = 3.75, p &lt; 0.01, \eta^2_p = 0.01$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>4.74 (0.35)</td>
<td>6.49 (0.32)</td>
<td>$t(61) = -3.64, p &lt; 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.15$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>2.69 (0.25)</td>
<td>5.68 (0.34)</td>
<td>$t(66) = -7.15, p &lt; 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.41$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>1.28 (0.12)</td>
<td>3.65 (0.39)</td>
<td>$t(74) = -5.79, p &lt; 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.31$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed account</td>
<td>7.02 (0.34)</td>
<td>7.22 (0.28)</td>
<td>$t(67) = -0.43, p = 0.67$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistics column indicates the significance of the perpetrator-versus-victim comparison for each account (i.e. comparisons between the row means).

Table 4  Mean account satisfaction ratings in Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Perpetrators Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Victims Mean (SE)</th>
<th>Overall Mean (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>5.75 (0.30)</td>
<td>6.13 (0.18)</td>
<td>5.94 (0.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>4.67 (0.29)</td>
<td>4.45 (0.13)</td>
<td>4.56 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>2.73 (0.10)</td>
<td>2.53 (0.16)</td>
<td>2.63 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>1.41 (0.10)</td>
<td>1.21 (0.04)</td>
<td>1.31 (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed account</td>
<td>6.51 (0.29)</td>
<td>6.39 (0.17)</td>
<td>6.45 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means within the column that do not share superscripts differ significantly at $p < 0.01$.

As in Study 1, the overall pattern of results was consistent with our hypotheses. That is, the pattern of results corresponded very well with the pattern of results that was obtained for the perpetrators’ estimation of their likelihood of using these accounts, but it was almost opposite to the victims’ estimation of the perpetrators’ likelihood of using these accounts (except for the mixed account, where there was correspondence). It is interesting that, for this study, the mixed account was perceived to be significantly more satisfying than the pure apology. We will consider some implications of this difference in the General discussion section.

**Discussion**

Past research has shown that, in conflict situations, both the perpetrators and the victims construct a self-serving account of the conflict (i.e. the perpetrator–victim account bias) (Baumeister et al., 1990; Kears & Fincham, 2005; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997; Takaku et al., 2005). In this study, we argued that, because of differential self-serving motives that are held by the perpetrators and the victims, they not only construct a self-serving account of the conflict, but they also differentially estimate the likelihood of the perpetrators’ provision of each of the possible accounts (apology, excuse, justification, denial and mixed account).

Specifically, we hypothesized that, while the perpetrators’ estimation of their providing an apology would be significantly higher than the victims’ estimation, the perpetrators’ estimation of their providing avoid accounts (i.e. excuse, justification and denial) would be significantly less than the victims’ estimation. We argued that this ‘perpetrator–victim account estimation bias’ is likely to be observed because when perpetrators are estimating their likelihood of using each account, they are more motivated to save face than to avoid personal responsibility in the wrongdoing. At the same time, however, the victims are not only motivated to hold the perpetrators responsible for the wrongdoing, but are cognitively more inclined to commit the correspondence bias in which they...
make more internal than external attributions for the wrongdoing (Jones & Davis, 1965; Takaku, 2000; Weiner et al., 1991). However, we further argued that the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias might not be observed when the perpetrators and the victims estimate the likelihood of the perpetrators’ provision of the mixed account because it seems to satisfy both parties’ self-serving motives. The results from the current two studies strongly confirmed our hypotheses.

**Prevalence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias across nations**

As the debate about the universality of various cognitive and motivational biases is still raging (see Heine, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2003), we explored this issue further. The results from the two experiments revealed that the bias extended beyond the Western nations by showing that the national variable did not interact with any of the other independent variables. For the participants in Japan as well, when they take the perspective of the perpetrator, they estimate that they would be more likely to apologize for a particular offence than when they take the perspective of the victim. However, when they take the perspective of the victim, they estimate that the perpetrator would be more likely to provide responsibility-avoiding accounts significantly more than when they take the perspective of the perpetrator. In other words, whereas the perpetrators are convinced that their perpetrator is a less mature and moral being who rarely will take personal responsibility for the wrongdoing by providing excuses, justifications and/or denials. These disparities in their estimation of the perpetrators’ account usage, as a function of the perspective that is taken, clearly indicate that, regardless of their status as the perpetrator or the victim, people across nations seem to fall prey to various motivational and cognitive biases in many conflict situations, which then become potential causes for prolonging the conflict and hindering the resolution process. We speculate that this phenomenon seems to be a universal phenomenon because humans are hardwired to act defensively in conflict situations. The interpretation of a conflict in a way that will support the person’s self-righteous views or motives is just one such example.

**Function of the mixed account.** One of the most exciting findings from the current research is how the bias was reduced or even eliminated in both nations for the mixed account, in which the perpetrators not only apologize but also provide excusable and justifiable circumstances that led them to act in the way that they did. This finding was fascinating because one could argue that emphasizing various mitigating and justifiable circumstances could potentially diminish the perceived sincerity and genuineness of the apology, thereby reducing the likelihood that the perpetrator would be perceived positively by the victim. However, if truly mitigating and justifiable circumstances existed, it would require the perpetrator to emphasize such circumstances while providing an apology. This interpretation was further supported by the findings that, in all the hypothetical scenarios, both the perpetrators and the victims perceived the mixed account to be as satisfying as, if not more satisfying than, an apology. Both the apology and mixed account, in turn, were more satisfying than excuse, justification and denial.

Thus, though speculative, it seems reasonable to argue that if verifiable mitigating and justifiable circumstances that contributed to the offence exist, the perpetrators should not only apologize, but also emphasize those circumstances, which in turn might increase the victims’ motive to forgive the perpetrators. However, if such circumstances are not verifiable, then the perpetrators simply should apologize without commenting on those unverifiable circumstances, as they potentially could reduce the perceived genuineness of the apology, which in turn might decrease the victims’ motive to forgive the perpetrators.

**Correspondence between the perceived satisfaction level of each account and the estimated account usage, as a function of perspective manipulation**

As predicted, the results from the current studies also indicated that the likelihood of the perpetrators’ estimation of using each account mirrors their beliefs about how much their victim would be satisfied with each account. In other words, because they believed that responsibility-accepting accounts (i.e. apology and mixed account) are more satisfying to the victim than responsibility-avoiding accounts (i.e. excuse, justification and denial), they reported that they would use responsibility-accepting accounts significantly more than responsibility-avoiding accounts. This finding further underscores the point that, in conflict situations in which the likelihood or severity of punishment is low, the impression-management motive (i.e. wanting to be perceived positively by the victim and others) becomes stronger than the motive to avoid punishment, which in turn might lead the perpetrator to use (or expect to use) more responsibility-accepting accounts. However, in conflict situations in which the likelihood or severity of punishment is high, the motive to avoid punishment might be stronger than the impression-management motive, which in turn leads the perpetrator to use (or expect to use) more responsibility-avoiding accounts than responsibility-accepting accounts (see Ohbuchi et al., 2003).

In contrast, the victims’ belief about the likelihood of their perpetrator using each account varies inversely with
the perceived satisfaction level of each account. In other words, although the victims also reported that they would be more satisfied with responsibility-accepting accounts than responsibility-avoiding accounts, they believed that their perpetrator would give more responsibility-avoiding accounts than responsibility-accepting accounts. Once again, from a different perspective, the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias was also evident in these findings.

Although the overall pattern of results clearly supported our hypothesis regarding the correspondence between the perceived satisfaction level of each account and the estimation of the account usage, as a function of perspective manipulation, in both studies, there was a slight difference between the two studies with regard to the perceived satisfaction level of the apology and mixed account. In Study 1, the apology was perceived as significantly more satisfying than the mixed account, but in Study 2, this result was reversed. The Study 1 results were based on all of the three scenarios that were used, whereas the Study 2 results came from only a single scenario. In fact, when we only analyzed the Scenario 1 data in Study 1, we found no difference between the perceived satisfaction level of apology ($M = 5.75, SE = 0.12$) and that of the mixed account ($M = 5.71, SE = 0.13$). Thus, it is possible that the results from the other two scenarios in Study 1 contributed to this difference. However, regardless of this slight difference between the perceived satisfaction level of the apology and mixed account in the two studies, it is significantly more important to emphasize the finding that both the perpetrator and the victim agree that these two accounts are significantly more satisfying to the victim than the other accounts.

**Limitations and future directions**

Although the present research has shown consistently across all scenario experiments that the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias could very well extend beyond the Western nations and that the mixed account could reduce or even eliminate such bias, several limitations should be noted.

First, even though we found strong support for our hypotheses, all the limitations that are inherent in the hypothetical research paradigm must be acknowledged. It is impossible to know convincingly that individuals actually would behave as they said they would and whether or not the predicted effects are, in fact, caused by the psychological processes assumed in the hypotheses (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). For example, we do not know whether the estimation bias will, in fact, be observed in a real conflict, especially when there are high-stakes or harmful consequences of being found guilty (e.g. a demand for a large amount of compensation, punishment, lowered public trust or lowered self-esteem). In such situations, the perpetrators’ responsibility-avoidance motive becomes significantly higher than their impression-management motive and, as a result, the perpetrators would not prefer to provide an apology, but instead to provide various responsibility-avoiding accounts, the pattern that corresponds exactly with the victims’ estimation of what the perpetrators would do, which ultimately results in the absence of the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias. However, though the estimation bias might disappear in such real-life, high-stakes conflict situations, a different type of account bias, the one that was investigated by Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister et al., 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997), is likely to emerge in those situations. In other words, in such real-life situations, the perpetrators and the victims would start constructing stories about the same transgressive event in a way that would support and justify their desired ends as a direct result of such well-established cognitive and motivational biases as actor–observer bias, fundamental attribution error and naïve realism (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1996).

In any case, in order to further explore these issues, though difficult, future research should include an experimental manipulation of a conflict situation in the laboratory and direct measurement of the two types of motivational processes (i.e. responsibility-avoidance and impression-management motives). Also, to increase the ecological validity of the phenomenon, it would be interesting to ask, code and analyze the participants’ spontaneously generated responses to such a real-life conflict in an open-ended manner, rather than asking them to respond to close-ended questions.

Second, although we found the mixed account to be an effective account in reducing (or even eliminating) the perpetrator–victim account estimation bias, it would be interesting to see if these findings were due to the fact that the mitigating and justifiable circumstances that were depicted in the scenarios were true mitigating and justifiable circumstances. As such circumstances are not often verifiable in real-life, high-stakes conflict situations, a different type of account bias, the one that was investigated by Baumeister and his colleagues (Baumeister et al., 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997), is likely to emerge in those situations. In other words, in such real-life situations, the perpetrators and the victims would start constructing stories about the same transgressive event in a way that would support and justify their desired ends as a direct result of such well-established cognitive and motivational biases as actor–observer bias, fundamental attribution error and naïve realism (Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1996).

In conclusion, in order to start a resolution process of a given interpersonal conflict, it is important that the parties involved must first understand how their own interpretation of the conflict event, their own recollection of how they behaved in the
situation and their expectation of what the other party would do in the future might not be accurate and how such misinterpretation, misrecollection and misprediction could happen. This understanding then helps the parties involved in the conflict to become less self-righteous, which then helps them to see and appreciate the other party’s perspective, which is a necessary condition for any dispute resolution. We believe that the present research supported this view by showing how easily people’s views of what they think someone would do in a given conflict situation change by simply being assigned to the perpetrator or the victim role. However, in addition to finding this perpetrator–victim disparity in motives and cognitions, we also found some similarities between them as well, which, if emphasized, could help to resolve a dispute. Specifically, both the perpetrator and the victim seem to agree that any type of responsibility-accepting account (i.e. apology or mixed account) is the most satisfying account for the victim to receive. With this shared understanding, it is important for the perpetrators to apologize sincerely when they are, in fact, at fault and for the victims to accept the apology without doubting its sincerity. Furthermore, both the perpetrator and the victim seem to agree not only on the likelihood of the perpetrator using the mixed account, but also that it is one of the most satisfying accounts for the victim to receive. Thus, if there are truly verifiable mitigating and justifiable circumstances, providing a mixed account, not just a pure apology, would allow the perpetrators to share their view of reality with the victims while not ‘losing’ them. Thus, stepping out of one’s own small self, breaking free from self-serving viewpoints and embracing the idea that it takes two to resolve any conflict might, in the end, go a long way toward restoring a relationship.

Acknowledgements

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End notes

1. We analyzed the data with or without the Japanese foreign student samples, but the results did not change; therefore, this group was included as part of the overall Japanese sample.

2. We re-analyzed the data, including sex, as an additional independent variable, but none of the effects that were associated with sex was significant.

References


### Appendix I

#### Scenario A

You have been working with your classmate to prepare for an important final presentation. You decided to divide the work and come together the day before the presentation to finalize the presentation. Although you told your classmate that you may not be able to finish your share of work by then because you hadn’t been feeling well and you also had to finish another very important assignment for another class, s/he insisted that you must finish it and come together the day before to finalize the presentation. When the time came for you to get together with your classmate, you did not finish your share of work. As a result, you could not have a complete presentation and both of you received a failing grade on the presentation. Your classmate was very angry and confronted you about it.

#### Scenario B

Every year, your school sets aside a large amount of grant money, which is given to the winner of the annual campus-wide research grant competition among all students. To enter this competition, each student must write and submit a proposal, explaining the reasons why his/her research project should be given this grant, to the Dean of Students’ Office. A student who writes the most convincing proposal is selected as the sole winner of this research grant. You have been working on this draft for the last couple of months and it is coming together very well; however, there is another student on campus that writes a very convincing proposal and the rumour has it that the grant will be given either to you or to this other student. A week before the proposal deadline, you happened to find out about a scandal about the main judge of the competition. Though you felt
guilty, you went up to him and told him that you had heard about the scandal, but wouldn’t say anything to anyone if and only if he would help you win the competition because your project is socially more valuable than the other student’s project. A week later, the school announced that it was a very tight competition between your project and the other student’s project, but at the end, it was the main judge’s vote that made a difference and you won the competition. A day after this announcement, the main judge told the other student about how you used his scandal against him in order to win the competition. The other student became furious and confronted you and told you that s/he should have won the competition.

**Scenario C**

You have just started a new job working as a sales rep for a beverage company. This is a strictly commission-based job in which your income depends on how much you are able to sell your products to the local supermarkets and retail stores. You have recently been asked by the company to sell its newest beverage product, so you decided to go to the biggest supermarket in town. When you asked the store manager if it would be OK to put some samples of your new products on one of the store’s most visible shelves, he said it would be fine. However, because your rival company’s products were already placed on that shelf, you moved them to the side and put your samples in the middle. As expected, the sales of the new products skyrocketed. A week later, you went back to the supermarket to thank the manager for his help; however, when you got there, you were confronted by an angry sales rep from the rival company who said ‘Who gave you the permission to remove our products to the side from the middle of this shelf?’

**Appendix II**

**Five types of accounts used in each scenario**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Wording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for this. It is my fault. I would do anything to make up for this.’ (Scenarios A &amp; C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for what I did. I will rescind my victory so that you can have the grant.’ (Scenario B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>‘I wasn’t feeling well and could not complete the work.’ (Scenario A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I could not have done anything about what the judge did. It was his fault, not mine.’ (Scenario B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘The manager said I could put our product anywhere on the shelf!’ (Scenario C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>‘I had to finish another very important assignment for another class.’ (Scenario A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘My project is socially more valuable than your project!’ (Scenario B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I thought that the side section was more visible for your products.’ (Scenario C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>‘I did not do anything to make you feel so upset!’ (Scenarios A, B and C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed account</td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for this. It’s my fault, but I wasn’t feeling well and I had to finish another very important assignment for another class. I would do anything to make up for this.’ (Scenario A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for what I did. It’s my fault, I will rescind my victory, but it was also the judge’s fault. Plus, I really believe that my project is socially more valuable than your project.’ (Scenario B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for what I did. It’s my fault, but the manager said that I could put our product anywhere on the shelf and I thought that the side section was more visible for your products.’ (Scenario C)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix III**

**Five types of accounts used in Study 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Wording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for not completing my share of work. I should have completed it. It is my fault. I deeply apologize from the bottom of my heart. I would do anything to make up for this.’ (38 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>‘I wasn’t feeling well at all and could not get up from bed for several days. I tried to do my best to complete my share of work, but I simply could not do it. It wasn’t my fault.’ (39 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>‘Because I had to finish another very important assignment for another class, I simply did not have time to finish my part of the project. If you were in my situation, you would have done the same.’ (37 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>‘I did absolutely nothing wrong. I don’t know why you are so angry at me. I did not do anything to make you feel so upset! You are just over-reacting, so just cut it out.’ (35 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed account</td>
<td>‘I am very sorry for this. It’s my fault, but I wasn’t feeling well and I had to finish another very important assignment for another class. I would do anything to make up for this.’ (35 words)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>