Agents of Reconciliation: Agency-Affirmation Promotes Constructive Tendencies Following Transgressions in Low-Commitment Relationships

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Abstract

Conflicting parties experience threats to both their *agency* and *morality*, but the experience of agency-threat exerts more influence on their behavior, leading to relationship-destructive tendencies. Whereas high-commitment relationships facilitate constructive tendencies despite the conflict, we theorized that in low-commitment relationships, affirming the adversary's agency is a prerequisite for facilitating more constructive tendencies. Focusing on sibling conflicts, Study 1 found that when commitment was low (rather than high), agency-affirmation increased participants' constructive tendencies toward their brother/sister compared with a control/no-affirmation condition. A corresponding morality-affirmation did not affect participants' tendencies. Study 2 replicated these results in workplace conflicts and further found that the positive effect of agency-affirmation in low-commitment relationships was mediated by participants' wish to restore their morality. Study 3 induced a conflict between lab participants and manipulated their commitment. Again, in the low- (rather than high-) commitment condition, agency-affirmation increased participants' wish to restore their morality, leading to constructive behavior.

Keywords

interpersonal reconciliation, the needs-based model, relationship-commitment, agency-affirmation, identity-restoration

According to international mediator Marc Gopin (2004), any analysis of the dynamics between conflicting parties, whether it is siblings quarreling over their inheritance or colleagues disputing office space, must take into account that "what goes on between people cannot be separated from what is going on within people" (p. 14). Consistent with this observation, social-psychological research suggests that transgressions cause damage not only at the *inter*personal level, that is, by decreasing the conflicting parties' mutual trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989) and sense of shared values (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010) but also at the *intra*personal level by threatening the involved parties' positive identities.

In particular, according to the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), victims experience threat to their *agentic identity*, that is, their sense of being competent, influential social actors, who are able to control their own outcomes, whereas perpetrators experience threat to their positive *moral identity*. These identity threats lead to corresponding motivational states, such that victims experience a heightened need to restore their agentic identity, whereas perpetrators aim to restore their moral identity. The model further argues that the restoration of victims' sense of

agency through empowering messages from their perpetrators (e.g., acknowledgment of the victims' value and competence), and the restoration of perpetrators' moral identity through accepting messages from their victims (e.g., conveying empathy and understanding despite the wrongdoing), should address their psychological needs and consequently increase victims' and perpetrators' conciliatory, relationship-constructive tendencies.

While the needs-based model originally focused on contexts in which the roles of "victim" and "perpetrator" were distinct and mutually exclusive, most conflicts are characterized by mutual transgressions. In these contexts, despite the fact that both parties transgressed against each other, their experience of victimization seems to be psychologically more profound than their experience of perpetration (Baumeister, 1996). Thus, even when the parties in conflict

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realize that they too have behaved immorally and hurt the other party, they still tend to perceive themselves as the conflict's "true" victim, hold a grudge, demand an apology from the other party (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; see also Kearns & Fincham, 2005, for self-serving biases following interpersonal transgressions), and might even retaliate to get even (Frijda, 1994). Consistent with theorizing that conflicting parties may feel agentic and empowered by receiving an apology from the other party (Tavuchis, 1991) or taking revenge (Frijda, 1994), we argue that one core motivation for these behaviors between conflicting parties is their need to restore their impaired agentic identity.

This argument is consistent with the findings of research on conflicts characterized by the blurred, "dual" roles of victims and perpetrators (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014; Study 1). Using an experimental paradigm in which lab participants were led to transgress against each other, this study found that in terms of identity threats, "dual" conflicting parties (i.e., who were victims and perpetrators simultaneously) resembled both victims and perpetrators. Like victims, they experienced a threat to their agency (e.g., felt they had insufficient control) compared with both the perpetrators and the control participants who were not involved in the conflict. Like perpetrators, they experienced a threat to their moral identity (e.g., were concerned that the other party thought they behaved unfairly), compared with both the victims and control participants. In terms of actual behavior, the victims' experience of threat to their agency translated into relationship-destructive behavior (i.e., vengeful denial of resources from the other party), whereas the perpetrators' experience of threat to their morality translated into constructive behavior (i.e., donation of resources to the other party). As for "duals," similar to victims, their experience of agency-threat translated into destructive behavior; unlike perpetrators, however, their experience of morality-threat failed to translate into constructive behavior. As such, duals' ultimate behavior resembled that of victims.

The finding that conflicting parties' experience of threat to their agency exerted more influence on their behavior than the threat to their morality implies that the parties in conflicts involving mutual transgressions are preoccupied primarily with their agency-related needs, which are apparently experienced as more pressing than their corresponding morality-related needs. This possibility is consistent with findings that people's self-evaluations are more strongly linked to their agency than to their morality, suggesting that one's own agency "influences self-evaluations and emotional responses to a higher extent than own morality" (Wojciszke, 2005, p. 181). Unfortunately, the conflicting parties' efforts to restore their agency (e.g., through attempts for retribution) might further escalate the conflict. The goal of the present research was to develop a strategy to prevent conflicting parties' pressing need for agency from translating into destructive behavior.

Relationship-Destructive Behavior Following Transgressions in High- and Low-Commitment Relationships

In the case of valuable relationships, conflicting parties' tendency to engage in destructive behaviors such as taking revenge or avoiding further interactions with the other party (McCullough et al., 1998) is highly costly because it can lead to the loss of the substantial resources invested in these relationships. According to evolutionary view, "the forgiveness system" has evolved to prevent such losses and allow the preservation of valuable relationships despite the occurrence of transgressions (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013). Consistent with this view, partners' investment in a given relationship was shown to predict their level of relationship-commitment, defined as having a long-term orientation toward the relationship and concern for the interests of the partner and the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Commitment level, in turn, has been associated with readiness for self-sacrifice for the good of the relationship, increased willingness to inhibit impulses to react destructively and instead react constructively in response to a transgression by the partner), and increased forgiveness and reduced grudge and vengeance following betrayal (see Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2011, for a review). In high-commitment relationships, thus, the conflicting parties' immediate motivation to behave in a destructive manner is transformed into constructive behavior (McCullough et al., 2013; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

By contrast, in low-commitment relationships in which individuals primarily focus on their own personal needs rather than on the interests of their partner and/or the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998), this type of transformation is less likely to occur. Hence, in line with SimanTov-Nachlieli and Shnabel's (2014) findings, as long as low-commitment conflicting parties' need for agency remains unaddressed, it may lead to destructive tendencies. Here, however, we theorized that addressing conflicting parties' pressing need for agency would allow their (otherwise unprioritized) need for morality to "come to the fore" and exert greater influence on their behavior, thus promoting more constructive tendencies. This reasoning is consistent with the general principle underlying Maslow's (1943) classical model of human needs.

But how can conflicting parties' agency be restored without destructive acts such as vengeance? One strategy is through an apology by the other party to the conflict. Apologies, which empower their recipients and restore their agentic identity (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), have the ability to set in motion a dramatic, "almost magical" transformation in relationships (Tavuchis, 1991). However, they also put the person who apologizes in a vulnerable position. Therefore, conflicting parties who fear that their conciliatory gesture will not be reciprocated or even be used against them are often unwilling to take the risk involved in apologizing (Leunissen, De Cremer, & Reinders Folmer, 2012). Another

strategy is conveying empowering messages by noninvolved third party, who are less vulnerable and hence more willing to express such messages. However, research found that empowering messages failed to promote conciliatory tendencies when their source was a third party, rather than the other party to the conflict (Shnabel, Nadler, & Dovidio, 2014). In light of these limitations, and drawing on research by Woodyatt and Wenzel (2014), we examined the possibility of *self*-affirmation of agency.

Self-Affirmation and Restoration of Positive Identity

According to self-affirmation theory (G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988), behavioral or cognitive events that bolster the perceived integrity of the self (i.e., the person's overall image as adequate) can protect individuals from psychological threats encountered in their environment. Self-affirmation interventions, which commonly involve short writing tasks (e.g., instructing participants to write about their core values; see G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014), have been found to fortify the self and reduce psychological threats. For example, self-affirmation interventions successfully buffered African American students against stereotype threat, namely, the fear of being devalued due to their stigmatized identity, and led to improved academic performance (G. L. Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). Because stereotype threat can be viewed as a special case of identity threat (G. L. Cohen et al., 2009), these findings gave rise to the hypothesis that in contexts of interpersonal conflicts in which the threats to the conflicting parties' identities serve as barriers to reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), self-affirmation interventions may effectively remove these barriers and promote conciliatory, constructive behavior.

Woodyatt and Wenzel's (2014) findings support this possibility. They found that when perpetrators (i.e., students describing interpersonal offenses they had recently committed) reaffirmed the values violated by the offense, their positive moral identity was restored, resulting in genuine (i.e., nondefensive) self-forgiveness and increased constructive tendencies toward their victims. Importantly, their results also indicated that general self-affirmations that did not focus on the moral values breached by the transgression failed to facilitate constructive tendencies.

One question that may arise, however, is why affirming perpetrators' morality did not make them feel that they have "moral licensing" to behave in an antisocial manner (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010), leading to *less* constructive tendencies toward their victims. The likely answer is that "moral licensing" effects are obtained when one's morality is reassured in the absence of moral threat. However, in the presence of an acute moral threat (due to the commission of transgression), the affirmation of transgressors' morality satisfies their pressing psychological need for morality, thus freeing them to attend to their

victims' needs and make conciliatory attempts (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). In a similar manner, if one's agency-related needs are relatively dormant, affirming one's competence and self-determination can activate—rather than satisfy—her agency-related needs. However, in the present research, we examined the effects of agency-affirmation in the presence of an acute agency-threat (due to one's involvement in a dual conflict), that is, when participants' agency-needs were already highly activated. We theorized that under these circumstances, an agency-affirmation should satisfy the conflicting parties' pressing need for agency, thus freeing them to attend to the other party and make conciliatory attempts.

The Present Research

Our main hypothesis was that because conflicting parties are primarily concerned about restoring their agentic identity, which leads to destructive tendencies (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014), self-affirmations focused on reassuring their agency should effectively increase constructive tendencies. Admittedly, while this hypothesis is consistent with research demonstrating that individuals who enjoy more agency show reduced aggressive behavior following transgressions (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006), it may appear to contradict the widespread notion that "power corrupts" (Kipnis, 1972). This seeming contradiction can be resolved by considering that under certain circumstances power may lead to prosocial rather than "corrupt" behavior. Indeed, power leads to several outcomes that may potentially be destructive to interpersonal relationships, such as decreased compassion and perspective-taking (see Guinote, 2016, for a review). However, experiencing power also leads individuals to be more persistent in pursuing their goals (Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008). Hence, when individuals' goal is to maintain a particular relationship, power may facilitate constructive tendencies and inhibit destructive ones. In line with this reasoning, Karremans and Smith (2010) found that victims of transgressions who experienced more power had a greater tendency to forgive their perpetrators. In a similar vein, Overall, Hammond, McNulty, and Finkel (2016) found that men who possessed power in their romantic relationships either chronically or situationally (representing "relationship power" and "situational power," respectively) exhibited less aggressiveness toward their partners in conflict situations (whereas possessing neither type of power led to heightened aggressiveness).

We further hypothesized that self-affirmation that is *not* focused on agency-restoration should fail to increase relationship-constructive tendencies. To test this hypothesis, we examined a corresponding morality-affirmation. If the affirmation of conflicting parties' morality fails to promote constructive tendencies, this would suggest that not every positive affirmation of the self can "do the trick." Our decision to use morality-affirmation as the appropriate

alternative to agency-affirmation was based on "the Big Two" literature, which claims that social targets such as the self and other individuals are judged along two fundamental dimensions termed *agency* and *moral-social* (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013). Agency and morality have also been identified as the two identity dimensions that are critically impaired in conflicting parties (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). Theoretically, morality-affirmation could promote conciliatory behavior because, according to the social labeling literature (e.g., Kraut, 1973), it can activate one's self-perception as moral, leading to increased constructive behavior consistent with the label of "a moral individual." Indeed, the affirmation of perpetrators' moral identity was found to increase their conciliatory, constructive tendencies toward their victims (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). Nevertheless, we predicted that morality-affirmation would not promote constructive behavior in the type of dual conflicts examined here since the conflicting parties are primarily concerned about restoring their agency.

We also hypothesized that the positive effect of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies would be particularly pronounced in low-commitment relationships in which partners are mostly concerned about their own needs (in this case, the need for agency, which leads to destructive tendencies). The effect of agency-affirmation was expected to be less pronounced in high-commitment relationships in which partners' concern for the relationship inhibits destructive tendencies and promotes constructive tendencies despite the conflict (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Finally, we hypothesized that the positive effect of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies in low-commitment relationships would be mediated by the conflicting parties' increased need for morality, that is, their wish to restore their positive moral identity. Specifically, we theorized that the restoration of low-commitment conflicting parties' agency may allow their otherwise unprioritized need for morality to come to fore and exert greater influence on their tendencies toward the other party, resulting in their attribution of more importance to being fair and just toward the other conflict party. By contrast, in high-commitment relationships, which partners are strongly motivated to preserve, the need for morality should be in forefront even in the presence of conflict. This is because being just and fair toward one's partner is essential for relationship maintenance—as research conducted within the framework of equity theory reveals that people are likely to leave relationships in which they feel that they are not being treated fairly (e.g., Yum, Canary, & Baptist, 2015). Hence, high-commitment conflicting parties are likely to give relatively high prioritization to their morality-related needs even *without* agency-affirmation.

We tested these hypotheses in a set of three studies. Studies 1 and 2 used recall procedures, such that after reporting their level of commitment to the relationship with their siblings (Study 1) or workplace colleagues (Study 2) participants had to recall and write about conflicts involving mutual transgressions within these relationships. Similar recall procedures have been successfully used in previous studies of interpersonal transgressions (e.g., McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Using a three-cell experimental design, after recalling the conflict with their sibling or colleague, participants were randomly assigned to a control/no-affirmation condition, an agency-affirmation condition in which they completed short writing exercises that reaffirmed their agentic identity, or a morality-affirmation condition in which they reaffirmed their moral identity. We expected that (a) agency-affirmation, but not morality-affirmation, would increase participants' constructive tendencies toward their sibling (Study 1) or colleague (Study 2) compared with the control condition, and (b) this effect would be more pronounced in low-commitment as compared with high-commitment relationships (i.e., a two-way interaction). Study 2 further tested whether the interaction between agency-affirmation and relationship-commitment on constructive tendencies was mediated by participants' increased need for morality (i.e., the wish to be just and fair toward their colleague).

Despite their advantage of eliciting high psychological involvement, one limitation of the recall procedures used in Studies 1 and 2 is that because they rely on retrospective memories the conclusions drawn from them might be limited to past conflicts that have already been thought about and processed. Study 3 addressed this limitation by testing the effectiveness of agency-affirmation in a context of a current (rather than past) conflict. For this purpose, we induced a conflict over valuable resources between participants who were invited to the lab to work in dyads, and manipulated (rather than measured) their relationship-commitment. Thus, Study 3 used a 2 (agency-affirmation [with, without]) × 2 (commitment [high, low]) between-subjects design. It tested whether agency-affirmation would increase constructive tendencies especially in low-commitment relationships, and whether this interactive effect would be mediated by participants' increased need for morality. Together, the three studies aimed to shed light on the dynamics between conflicting parties who have transgressed against each other, and develop a practical strategy to improve it.

Study 1

Participants in Study 1 reported their commitment to their relationship with their sibling, wrote about a conflict in which both themselves and their brother/sister transgressed against each other, and were then randomly assigned to the three experimental conditions (agency-affirmation, morality-affirmation, and no-affirmation/control). Following the manipulation, participants were reminded of the conflict they wrote about, and indicated their tendencies pertaining to their relationship with their sibling. We predicted a two-way interaction such that when relationship-commitment was low, but not when it was high, agency-affirmation would increase constructive tendencies (e.g., forgiveness) compared with the

control condition. The morality-affirmation condition, by contrast, was not expected to differ from the control condition, regardless of commitment level.

Method

Participants. Participants were 126[1] Israeli undergraduate students majoring in a range of disciplines, including social sciences (37%), psychology (26%), engineering/exact sciences (19%), and other subjects—life sciences, medicine, law, and so on (18%). They completed the study in exchange for payment. Five participants who failed to follow the experimental instructions (e.g., could not recall a dual conflict with their sibling or, contrary to instructions, wrote about an episode in which they felt *non*agentic) were excluded from the sample. In addition, to avoid the disproportionate influence of single observations on our analysis (McClelland, 2000), one outlier whose studentized residual was greater than three was excluded from the sample.[2] Thus, the final sample was made up of 120 participants (66 women, *M* age = 24.35, *SD* = 3.17).

Materials and procedure. Participants were invited to participate in a lab study about "family relationships." All the instructions and procedures were computerized. To reduce potential "statistical noise" due to the fact that constructive tendencies such as forgiveness differ across different types of family relations (e.g., parents are more forgiving toward their children than the other way around; Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008), we focused on conflicts between siblings (single children, constituting 7.4% of the sample, referred to a conflict with a close family member who was not their sibling).[3]

The study consisted of three parts. In the first, participants reported their level of commitment to the relationship with their sibling, using four 9-point items (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*) taken from the Rusbult et al. (1998) scale (e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my brother/sister," α = .88). Next, participants were asked to recall and write about a recent conflict with their sibling in which both they and their brother/sister had transgressed against each other. Participants had to explain the reason(s) for the conflict and elaborate on how and why they were hurt by their sibling as well as how and why their sibling was hurt by them. Participants wrote about various issues such as disputes over household chores and resources, ideological and personal disagreements, chronic tardiness, acts of selfishness, dishonesty and betrayals of trust, neglect and rejection, and jealousy. In addition to the open-ended description, participants provided some background information about the conflict, including its severity (1 = *not at all severe* to 7 = *very severe*), and time of occurrence (1 = *in the recent days* to 5 = *over a year ago*).

In the second part of the study, participants were assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. In the control/ no-affirmation condition, participants were asked to recall and write about things they did the previous afternoon. In the agency-affirmation condition, consistent with the "Big Two" literature's (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013) conceptualization of agency as representing traits such as competence, resiliency, influence, and self-determination, participants were asked to write about an episode in their lives *outside the relationship with their brother/sister* in which they felt assertive, self-determined, influential, competent, resilient, or having inner strength. In the morality-affirmation condition, consistent with the conceptualization of fairness and care for others as core moral foundations (Haidt, 2007), participants wrote about an episode outside the relationship with their brother/sister in which they were fair, moral, thoughtful, or considerate toward other people. These manipulations were modified from Knowles, Lucas, Molden, Gardner, and Dean (2010) who also used self-affirmations focused on one particular identity dimension. As manipulation checks, in the two affirmation conditions, three items measured the extent to which the writing exercise affected participants' sense of agency (e.g., "writing about this episode made me feel that I am assertive," α = .85); three additional items measured the extent to which it affected their moral identity (e.g., "writing about this episode made me feel that I am a moral person," α = .87).

In the third part of the study, participants were reminded of the conflict they had written about in the first part, and were asked to imagine that this conflict had occurred that day. Participants then completed six 7-point items (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*), taken from McCullough, Root, and Cohen's (2006) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM), which represented benevolent tendencies toward their sibling (e.g., "Even though his or her actions hurt me, I still have goodwill for him or her") as well as avoidant tendencies (e.g., "I find it difficult to act warmly toward him or her"; reverse-scored).[4] Items were averaged to form the measure of constructive tendencies; α = .81. Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks

Sense of agency. Participants reported feeling more agentic in the agency-affirmation condition, *M* = 5.55, *SD* = 1.23, than in the morality-affirmation condition, *M* = 4.42, *SD* = 1.46, $t(76) = 3.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .152$.

Sense of morality. Participants reported feeling more moral in the morality-affirmation condition, *M* = 5.67, *SD* = 1.13, than in the agency-affirmation condition, *M* = 4.84, *SD* = 1.38, $t(76) = 2.93$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .102$.

Main analysis. To test our hypotheses that compared with the control condition—(a) agency-affirmation would promote constructive tendencies among participants with low (but not

high) commitment (i.e., a two-way interaction) and (b) morality-affirmation would not promote constructive tendencies (regardless of commitment level)—we conducted a regression analysis with constructive tendencies as the dependent variable. The predictors were the experimental condition (coded as two dummy variables with the control condition as the reference group), commitment (mean-centered), and the interaction terms (i.e., the products of the Agency-Affirmation vs. Control Contrast × Commitment, and of the Morality-Affirmation vs. Control Contrast × Commitment). This regression model was significant, $F(5, 114) =$ 10.59, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .317$.

In line with previous findings (Rusbult et al., 2011), commitment ($M = 6.38$, $SD = 1.75$) had a significant positive effect ($\beta = .76$, $p < .001$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.36, 0.73]) such that greater commitment predicted more constructive tendencies. The main effects of morality-affirmation and agency-affirmation, and the Morality-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction were nonsignificant (βs < .10, ps > .321). The predicted Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction was significant ($\beta = .28$, $p = .013$, 95% CI = [−0.59, −0.07]). Probing this interaction using the Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) computational tools, which implement the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify the region of significance for an effect, revealed that agency-affirmation significantly increased constructive tendencies when commitment was relatively low ($Z_{commitment} \leq -1.05$) but not when it was relatively high ($Z_{commitment} > -1.05$).[5]

Taken together, these results supported our theorizing. Consistent with previous findings (Rusbult et al., 1998), commitment increased participants' constructive tendencies toward their sibling despite the conflict between them. Of direct relevance to this study, morality-affirmation did not affect constructive tendencies, whereas agency-affirmation did. As expected, the latter effect was particularly pronounced in relationships characterized by low (rather than high) commitment.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to extend Study 1 in three ways. First, while Study 1 focused on family conflicts, different social contexts and relations prescribe different expectations and norms of conduct (Fiske, 1991). For example, feeling agentic (e.g., competent, assertive, and self-determined) may be even more crucial in an achievement-oriented setting such as one's workplace than in a relationship-oriented setting such as one's family. To extend the generalizability of our conclusions, Study 2 examined conflicts between colleagues in workplace settings. The second goal of Study 2 was to test whether the positive effect of agency-affirmation in low-commitment relationships would be mediated by participants' heightened need for morality. We predicted that once their agentic identity was restored,
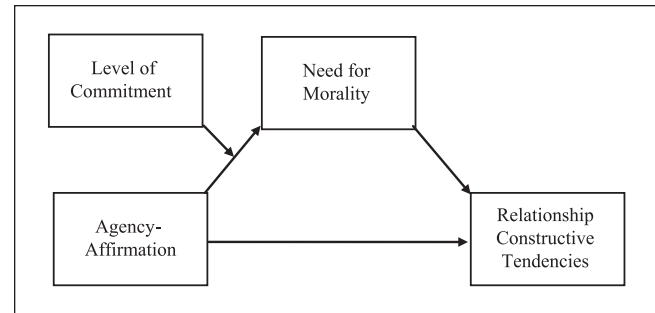

Figure 1. Conceptual model (Studies 2 and 3).

these participants would attribute greater importance to moral considerations (i.e., being just and fair toward their colleague), in an attempt to restore their positive moral identity (see Figure 1 for the proposed model). The third goal of Study 2 was to rule out an alternative explanation for our findings. Specifi]'ation may have induced a greater sense of positive identity than morality-affirmation in the participants. If so, positivity per se, rather than the specific content of the affirmation, could account for the observed increase in constructive tendencies. To rule out this possibility, Study 2 examined the extent to which the affirmations of agency and morality increased participants' sense of positive identity, to control for the putative effect of differences in positivity on the observed effect of agency-affirmation.

The design and procedure of Study 2 were similar to those of Study 1 except that participants recalled conflicts at their workplace. After assignment to the three experimental conditions, participants completed the dependent measures, which included sense of positive identity, need for morality (the proposed mediator), and constructive tendencies toward their colleague (the outcome variable). Whereas morality-affirmation and its interaction with commitment were not expected to affect constructive tendencies, agency-affirmation was expected to increase constructive tendencies among low-commitment conflicting parties. This effect was expected to persist when controlling for participants' sense of positive identity. Also, as illustrated in Figure 1, we predicted a conditional indirect effect (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) such that the positive effect of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies in low-commitment relationships would be mediated through participants' need for morality (i.e., greater attribution of importance to being just and fair toward their colleagues).

Method

Participants. Participants were 101 Israeli undergraduate students enrolled in various disciplines, including social sciences (34%), engineering/exact sciences (23%), life sciences/medicine (21%), psychology (15%), and other subjects (7%). They completed the study in exchange for payment. Four

participants who failed to follow the experimental instructions and one outlier (see Study 1) were excluded from the sample (see Note 2). The final sample was thus composed of 96 participants (52 women, *M* age = 25.28, *SD* = 4.42).

Materials and procedure. The study was computerized and presented as investigating workplace conflicts. Because different types of relationships (e.g., equality matching vs. authority ranking) involve substantially different norms of conduct (Fiske, 1991), to reduce potential statistical noise, we focused on one type of workplace relations—those between colleagues (i.e., rather than bosses/subordinates). Participants were asked to think about a colleague at their workplace (or at school/university, if they had not been employed) with whom they had a conflict that involved mutual transgressions. As in Study 1, we first measured commitment (adapted to the context of collegial relations, α = .89). Participants were then asked to recall and write about a recent conflict with their colleague in which they both felt deeply offended. They wrote about various issues, including disputes over office space and environment, task-related disagreements, ideological and interpersonal disagreements, chronic tardiness, insults and disrespect, acts of selfishness and exploitation, and dishonesty and betrayal of trust. Participants also provided background information about the conflict, including its severity and time of occurrence (see Study 1).

Next, participants were assigned to the agency-affirmation, morality-affirmation, or control condition (see Study 1). In all three conditions, two 7-point items measured the extent to which the task affirmed participants' positive identity (e.g., "the writing task made me think about positive aspects of myself," *r*(96) = .79, *p* < .001), three items measured participants' sense of agency (e.g., "the writing task made me feel that I am assertive," α = .90), and three items measured their sense of morality (e.g., "the writing task made me feel that I am a moral person," α = .95).

Participants were then reminded of the conflict they had written about earlier and were asked to imagine that this conflict had occurred that day. Three 7-point items adapted from SimanTov-Nachlieli and Shnabel (2014) assessed participants' need for morality (e.g., "It is important to me to act fairly toward my colleague"; α = .70). Finally, fifteen 7-point items measured participants' constructive and destructive tendencies. Six items were taken from the TRIM (see Study 1). Nine additional items were adapted from Kurdek's (1994) Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) which measures concrete behavioral action tendencies, such that three items measured *positive problem solving* (e.g., "Finding alternatives that are acceptable to each of us"), three items measured *withdrawal* (e.g., "Withdrawing, acting distant and not interested," reverse-scored), and three items measured *retaliatory conflict engagement* (e.g., "Launching personal attacks," reverse-scored). Items were averaged to obtain a single score of constructive tendencies, α = .89. Upon completion, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Manipulation checks

Sense of agency. The effect of experimental condition on participants' sense of agency was significant, $F(2, 93) = 10.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .177$. Participants felt more agentic in the agency-affirmation, $M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.22$, compared with either the control, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.62$, $t(93) = 4.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .161$, or the morality-affirmation condition, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.77$, $t(93) = 3.43$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .112$. The morality-affirmation condition did not significantly differ from the control, $t(93) = 0.65$, $p = .516$.

Sense of morality. The effect of experimental condition on participants' sense of morality was significant, $F(2, 93) = 5.81$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .111$. Participants felt more moral in the morality-affirmation, $M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.60$, compared with either the control, $M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.86$, $t(93) = 3.40$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .111$, or the agency-affirmation condition, $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.44$, $t(93) = 2.01$, $p = .048$, $\eta_p^2 = .041$. The agency-affirmation condition did not significantly differ from the control, $t(93) = 1.35$, $p = .181$.

Preliminary analysis

Sense of positive identity. The effect of experimental condition on participants' *general* sense of positive identity was significant, $F(2, 93) = 11.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .200$. Both the agency-affirmation, $M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.29$, and the morality-affirmation, $M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.54$, increased participants' sense of positive identity compared with the control, $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.64$, ts$(93) > 3.17$, ps $< .003$, η_p^2 s $> .097$. The difference between the two affirmation conditions was nonsignificant, $t(93) = 1.44$, $p = .153$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$. Importantly, participants' general sense of positive identity did not significantly correlate with their constructive tendencies, $r(96) = .11$, $p = .287$, and the results reported below persisted when it was controlled for.[6]

Regression analysis. As in Study 1, we conducted a regression analysis in which constructive tendencies were the dependent variable, and the predictors were the experimental condition (dummy-coded), commitment (mean-centered), and their interaction terms. The obtained regression model was significant, $F(5, 90) = 7.24$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .287$. Commitment ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.68$) had a significant positive effect such that greater commitment predicted more constructive tendencies ($\beta = .64$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.24, 0.63]). The main effects of agency-affirmation and morality-affirmation, and the Morality-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction were nonsignificant (βs $< .06$, ps $> .536$). The predicted Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction was significant ($\beta = .29$, $p = .018$, 95% CI = [−0.68, −0.07]). Agency-affirmation significantly increased constructive tendencies when commitment was relatively low ($Z_{commitment} \leq −0.62$) but not when it was relatively high (i.e., $Z_{commitment} > −0.62$).

Table 1. Conditional Indirect Effect: Agency-Affirmation × Commitment Interaction on Constructive Tendencies via Need for Morality (Study 2; *N* = 96).

	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Independent Variable-Mediator (agency-affirmation on need for morality)	0.38	0.32	1.21	.231
Moderator-Mediator (commitment on need for morality)	0.49	0.13	3.82	.000
Independent Variable × Moderator Interaction-Mediator (Agency-Affirmation × Commitment on Need for Morality)	−0.37	0.20	−1.84	.069
Mediator-Dependent Variable (need for morality on constructive tendencies)	0.43	0.07	6.31	.000
Direct effect (agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies controlling for need for morality)	0.00	0.22	0.00	.999

Conditional indirect effects of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies through need for morality

			95% CI	
Level of commitment	*B*	Boot *SE*	LL	UL
Low (1 *SD* below *M*)	0.435	0.24	0.03	0.98
M	0.166	0.16	−0.13	0.47
High (1 *SD* above *M*)	−0.102	0.27	−0.76	0.31

Note. Level of confidence = 95%. Bootstrap sample size = 1,000. The experimental condition was coded as "1" in the agency-affirmation condition and "0" in the control and morality-affirmation conditions. Commitment was mean-centered. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Main analysis. We used Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 7) to test the conceptual model presented in Figure 1. The results are presented in Table 1. The effect of agency-affirmation on participants' need for morality was nonsignificant (see first row of Table 1), whereas commitment had a significant positive effect (see second row). The Agency-Affirmation × Commitment interaction effect on the need for morality was marginally significant (see third row), such that agency-affirmation significantly increased participants' need for morality when commitment was low (1 *SD* below the mean), $t(90) = 2.37$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .059$, but not when commitment was high (1 *SD* above the mean), $t(90) = -1.23$, $p = .223$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$. As expected, participants' need for morality significantly predicted their constructive tendencies (see fourth row). The direct effect of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies (obtained when the mediator, need for morality, was controlled for) was nonsignificant (see fifth row). Most importantly, the indirect path, that is, agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies through need for morality, was significant when commitment was low but not when it was average or high (see lower part of Table 1). Note that the current approach to mediation (e.g., Preacher & Hayes, 2004) argues that rejecting the null hypothesis for the indirect effect is sufficient for establishing mediation. Hence, even though the effect on need for morality was only marginal, it is still possible to conclude that the indirect path of agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies through need for morality (among low-commitment participants) was statistically significant.

Discussion

Replicating Study 1's findings in the context of workplace conflicts, Study 2 further supported our theorizing. Again, agency-affirmation, but not morality-affirmation, promoted constructive tendencies among conflicting parties with low relationship-commitment—even though they both increased participants' general sense of positive identity. Moreover, the positive effect of agency-affirmation persisted even when participants' general sense of positive identity was controlled for. Hence, the effect of agency-affirmation cannot be accounted for simply as a general positivity effect. Finally, a mediation analysis revealed that agency-affirmation increased the wish to restore moral identity among participants whose commitment to the relationship with their colleague was relatively low, thus promoting more constructive tendencies.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to replicate the findings of Study 2 among conflicting parties involved in a current conflict instead of using retrospective methodologies. Orchestrating a dual conflict in a controlled experiment is a complex task. While the passive victim's role is relatively easy to induce in the lab (e.g., by having a confederate mistreat participants), inducing perpetration is more difficult because it paradoxically requires coaxing participants into transgressing against others, yet making them do so on *their own volition*. To overcome this limitation, we used a procedure, originally developed by SimanTov-Nachlieli and Shnabel (2014) in which participants were engaged in a computerized task in which both they and another participant allocated valuable resources (extra credit points) between themselves. They then received ostensible feedback that they and the other participant had behaved unfairly and violated the prevalent social norm. While it is typically the case that participants allocate more resources to themselves than to their partner,

the feedback was programmed such that in case participants used equal allocation they were informed that the norm was to allocate the points "generously"; if they allocated more points to their partner and then to themselves, they were informed that the norm was to allocate the points "very generously." Thus, regardless of their actual allocation, all participants perceived themselves as violating the common moral standard. This allowed us to create an actual conflict in the lab (rather than using retrospective or role-playing methodologies), yet without excluding any participants (thus avoiding a potential selection bias).

Following this induction of conflict, participants were randomly assigned to four experimental conditions, using a 2 (agency-affirmation [with, without]) × 2 (commitment [high, low]) between-subjects design. We then measured participants' need for morality as well as their prosocial, constructive behavior toward the other conflict party. Including the latter measure extended Studies 1 and 2, which focused on constructive tendencies but did not examine participants' actual behavior.

Study 3 also extended Studies 1 and 2 by examining participants' mood. Positive mood has been shown to increase prosocial behavior (e.g., Isen, 1999), and thus could serve as an alternative explanation for the effectiveness of agency-affirmation, in that agency-affirmation could improve participants' mood, and this mood-improvement would thus lead to their subsequent prosocial, constructive tendencies toward the other party. To rule out this possibility, Study 3 measured participants' mood after their assignment to the experimental conditions. We predicted a conditional indirect effect such that agency-affirmation would increase participants' need for morality in the low-commitment, but not in the high-commitment condition, and this increase, in turn, would lead to constructive behavior toward the other party. This effect was expected to persist when controlling for participants' mood.

Participants

Participants were 157 undergraduates who took part in the study in exchange for course credit. To verify that the valuable resource participants had to allocate between themselves was psychologically meaningful, participants who indicated in a presurvey that earning extra money was "not at all important for them" were not invited to take part in this study. Because we aimed to induce an actual dual conflict in the lab, six participants who erroneously believed despite the feedback they received (see below), that their or the other participant's allocation was "completely fair," or who did not believe that the other participant existed were excluded from the analysis (see Note 2). Thus, the final sample was made up of 151 students (118 women, *M* age = 22.86, *SD* = 2.13).

Materials and Procedure

Participants came to the laboratory in groups of six to 10 and began the experiment together. Participants were told they would take part in a study on "decision making under uncertainty," involving an interaction between two players, themselves and another participant, who were connected via the laboratory's computer network. In reality, there was no other player and all instructions, procedures and interactions were computerized. Participants were informed that beyond the 15 credit points they would earn for their participation, they had the opportunity to earn up to 35 *bonus* credit points. They were then asked to divide the bonus between themselves and the other player—$M_{\text{allocation to partner}}$ = 15.64 [*SD* = 4.23], significantly below 17.5 points, representing equal allocation, *t*(150) = −5.41, *p* < .001.[7] Following the allocation, participants received bogus feedback that both they and the other player had allocated the bonus unfairly, violating the prevalent social norm.

Two items assessed the success of this manipulation ("to what extent, according to the feedback, was [your/the other player's] allocation": 1 = *completely fair* to 7 = *completely unfair*). Both means were significantly (*p*s < .001) above the midpoint, *M* = 5.12, *SD* = 1.67 and *M* = 5.54, *SD* = 1.36, indicating that, as intended, participants believed that both they and their partners behaved unfairly. Participants' allocation of credit points to their partners did not correlate with their perceptions of their partners' unfairness, *r*(151) = −.03, *p* = .752, yet had a marginal negative correlation with their perceptions of own unfairness, *r*(151) = −.16, *p* = .052, such that allocating less to the partner was associated with higher perceptions of own unfairness.

Next, we administrated the experimental manipulations. Participants assigned to the agency-affirmation condition were asked to write about an episode in which they felt agentic (see Study 1), whereas participants in the no-affirmation condition were asked to write about their morning routine (a common control condition in self-affirmation studies; for example, G. L. Cohen et al., 2009). Following the manipulation check for sense of agency (see Study 2, α = .93), a short version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), comprised of six 5-point items (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*), measured participants' mood (e.g., "I feel happy"; α = .87).

Next, participants assigned to the high-commitment condition learned that the other player was a student in the same department (which means that they are about to participate in the same academic program for the next 3 years), and that the experimenters were considering running an additional study whose goal was to facilitate positive relationships between students in the department. This study would involve a face-to-face interaction in which they would be matched up with the other player. Participants provided their email for further coordination. By contrast, participants assigned to the low-commitment condition were not provided with information that might lead to anticipation of a future interaction with the other player. This operationalization is consistent with the conceptualization of commitment as having a long-term orientation toward the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Moreover, due to people's general motivation to maintain

interpersonal harmony (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), anticipating an interaction with a partner leads to a host of prosocial behavioral changes that resemble those occurring in high-commitment relations (e.g., attitude alignment; Davis & Rusbult, 2001). A manipulation check measured participants' belief that they would interact with the other player in the future (1 = *unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*).

Participants were then reminded of their previous unfair allocations and completed the measure of need for morality (see Study 2; α = .79). Finally, participants learned that in the last phase of the experiment, both players would exchange trivia questions (selected from a preprepared list of questions, arranged by level of difficulty) and their success on this task would determine the weight given to their previous allocation in the final payoff of bonus credit points, such that if one player failed and the other succeeded, the payoff would be determined *solely* by the latter's allocation. If both either answered correctly or failed, the final payoff would be calculated as the average of their previous allocations. Participants' understanding of this explanation was verified on a short quiz. Participants were then asked to indicate the difficulty level of the trivia question they choose for the other player, using a 7-point scale (1 = *very difficult* to 7 = *easy; M* = 4.18, *SD* = 1.62). Asking difficult questions meant blocking the other player's influence on the final payoff—a relationship-destructive behavior, whereas asking easy questions meant giving them influence—a relationship-constructive behavior. Participants were then asked to complete a random trivia task (from a preprepared list). To ensure confidentiality, the final payoff was given to each participant individually at the end of the experiment. Participants were thanked and debriefed by email.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks

Sense of agency. A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of agency-affirmation on participants' sense of agency, $F(1, 147) = 73.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .332$; Ms = 5.12 (SE = 0.15) and 3.23 (SE = 0.16) in the agency-affirmation and control conditions. The effect of commitment, $F(1, 147) = 0.14$, $p = .708$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and the two-way interaction, $F(1, 147) = 0.52$, $p = .472$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, were nonsignificant.

Sense of commitment. A two-way ANOVA revealed a marginal effect, in the intended direction, of the commitment condition on participants' long-term orientation toward the relationship, $F(1, 147) = 2.74$, $p = .099$, $\eta_p^2 = .018$, Ms = 3.92 (SE = 0.17) and 3.51 (SE = 0.18) in the high-commitment versus the low-commitment conditions. The effects of agency-affirmation, $F(1, 147) = 1.50$, $p = .223$, $\eta_p^2 = .010$, and the two-way interaction, $F(1, 147) = 0.92$, $p = .339$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$, were nonsignificant.
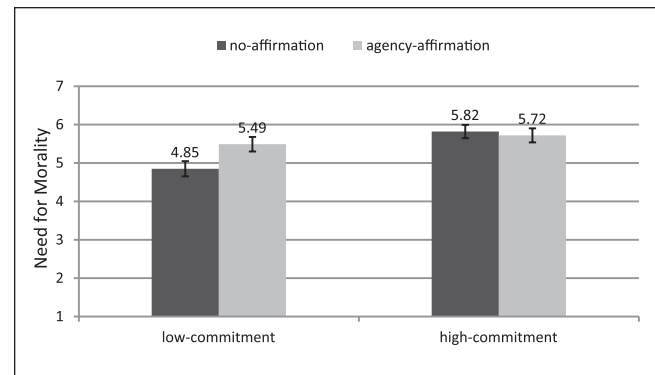

Figure 2. Means and standard errors of participants' need for morality in the four experimental cells (Study 3).

Preliminary analysis

Positive mood. A two-way ANOVA revealed a negative effect of agency-affirmation on positive mood, $F(1, 147) = 4.08$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .027$, Ms = 5.27 (SE = 0.13) and 5.63 (SE = 0.13) in the agency-affirmation and control conditions. This made it possible to rule out positive mood as an alternative explanation. The effect of commitment, $F(1, 147) = 1.77$, $p = .185$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$, and the two-way interaction, $F(1, 147) = 0.01$, $p = .941$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, were nonsignificant. Importantly, the results reported below persisted when controlling for positive mood.[8]

Need for morality. A two-way ANOVA revealed that commitment significantly increased participants' need for morality, $F(1, 147) = 10.34$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .066$, Ms = 5.77 (SE = 0.13) and 5.17 (SE = 0.14). The effect of agency-affirmation was nonsignificant, $F(1, 147) = 2.08$, $p = .151$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$. Most importantly, as seen in Figure 2, the expected Agency-Affirmation × Commitment interaction was significant, $F(1, 147) = 4.00$, $p = .047$, $\eta_p^2 = .026$. Planned comparisons revealed that agency-affirmation did not affect participants' need for morality in the high-commitment condition, $t(147) = 0.41$, $p = .682$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$. By contrast, and in line with expectations, in the low-commitment condition agency-affirmation significantly increased participants' need for morality, $t(147) = 2.34$, $p = .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .036$.

Constructive behavior. A two-way ANOVA revealed that the effect of agency-affirmation on participants' constructive behavior (choice of nondifficult questions) was nonsignificant, $F(1, 147) = 0.04$, $p = .843$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$. Commitment marginally increased participants' constructive behavior, $F(1, 147) = 3.77$, $p = .054$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$; Ms = 4.42 (SE = 0.18) versus 3.90 (SE = 0.19) in the high- and low-commitment conditions. Unexpectedly, the Agency-Affirmation × Commitment interaction did not reach significance, $F(1, 147) = 0.29$, $p = .593$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. Ms = 4.00 (SD = 1.78), 3.81 (SD = 1.75), 4.37 (SD = 1.45), and 4.46 (SD = 1.52), in the

Table 2. Conditional Indirect Effect: Agency-Affirmation × Commitment Interaction on Constructive Behavior via Need for Morality (Study 3; *N* = 151).

	B	SE	t	p
Independent Variable-Mediator (agency-affirmation on need for morality)	0.64	0.27	2.33	.021
Moderator-Mediator (commitment on need for morality)	0.97	0.26	3.69	.000
Independent Variable × Moderator Interaction-Mediator (Agency-Affirmation × Commitment on Need for Morality)	−0.75	0.37	−2.00	.047
Mediator-Dependent Variable (need for morality on constructive behavior)	0.32	0.11	2.96	.004
Direct effect (agency-affirmation on constructive behavior controlling for need for morality)	−0.13	0.26	−0.51	.612

Conditional indirect effects of agency-affirmation on constructive behavior through need for morality

			95% CI	
Commitment	B	Boot SE	LL	UL
Low = 0	0.209	0.13	0.01	0.55
High = 1	−0.034	0.07	−0.18	0.11

Note. Level of confidence = 95%. Bootstrap sample size = 1,000. The affirmation condition was coded such that it was attributed the value of "1" in the agency-affirmation and "0" in the control/no-affirmation condition. The commitment condition was coded such that it was scored "1" in the high-commitment and "0" in the low-commitment conditions. The interaction between agency-affirmation and commitment level on need for morality was not moderated by participants' initial allocations of credit points to their partner (i.e., the three-way interaction was nonsignificant, *b* = .036, *SE* = 0.09, *p* = .682). Also, the indirect effect of agency-affirmation in the low-commitment condition through need for morality persisted, *b* = .13, *SE* = 0.09, 95% CI = [0.005, 0.400], when controlling for participants' initial allocations. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

control/low-commitment, agency-affirmation/low-commitment, control/high-commitment, and agency-affirmation/high-commitment conditions. Because a significant total effect is not necessary for mediation to occur (Preacher & Hayes, 2004), we nevertheless proceeded to the main analysis, namely, testing for a conditional indirect effect.

Main analysis. As in Study 2, we used Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 7) to test for the conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1. The results are presented in Table 2. As seen in its third row, the expected Agency-Affirmation × Commitment interaction effect on the need for morality was significant (note that this interaction was interpreted in the preliminary analysis above). As seen in the fourth row, as expected, participants' need for morality positively predicted their constructive behavior. The direct effect of agency-affirmation on constructive behavior (obtained when need for morality was controlled for) was nonsignificant (see fifth row). Most importantly, as seen in the lower part of Table 2, the indirect path, that is, agency-affirmation on constructive behavior through need for morality, was significant in the low-commitment but not in the high-commitment condition. These findings support the assumption that agency-affirmation can be an effective strategy in facilitating conflicting parties' attentiveness to their moral needs, and subsequent constructive behavior, not only in past conflicts but also in current, ongoing conflicts.

General Discussion

Three experiments, using methodologies involving recall of real-life conflicts and the induction of conflict in the lab,

provided consistent support for our theorizing. Study 1, which focused on sibling conflicts, found that affirming the adversary's agency through short writing exercises, which reassured her agency through reminding her of situations unrelated to the conflict in which she was agentic, increased her conciliatory tendencies. As expected, this increase was more pronounced in relationships characterized by relatively low commitment in which the conflicting parties are mostly concerned about their own needs (in this case, the need for agency), than in high-commitment relationships, in which the conflicting parties are more willing to sacrifice their own needs for the sake of the relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Moreover, a corresponding morality-affirmation failed to affect constructive tendencies thus pointing to the importance of restoring the *specific* identity dimension whose impairment is psychologically the most critical to conflicting parties, namely, their sense of agency. Study 2, which focused on conflicts between colleagues, replicated these findings and pointed to the conflicting parties' increased need for morality, namely, their wish to restore their moral identity, as mediating the positive effect of agency-affirmation in low-commitment relationships. Study 3 replicated the latter effect among participants involved in conflicts induced ad hoc while manipulating (rather than measuring) commitment. In addition, simple positivity and mood effects were ruled out as alternative explanations.

At the practical level, these findings suggest that beyond fostering a positive orientation toward the *other* party (e.g., through increasing empathy toward him or her; McCullough et al., 1997), interventions intended to increase constructive tendencies following conflicts may benefit from using self-affirmation techniques whose target is the conflicting parties'

own identities and specifically their agentic identity. This is important given that the directly involved parties are often unwilling to empower each other (e.g., Leunissen et al., 2012) and that empowerment by third parties does not facilitate reconciliation (Shnabel et al., 2014).

At the theoretical level, the present research complements Woodyatt and Wenzel's (2014) previous work in demonstrating the critical role of identity-restoration processes for interpersonal reconciliation: While Woodyatt and Wenzel pointed to the importance of morality restoration among perpetrators, the present research points to the importance of agency-restoration among conflicting parties who transgressed against each other and often view themselves as the conflict's "real" victims (Noor et al., 2012).

Beyond the extension of the needs-based model, our findings, along with those of Woodyatt and Wenzel (2014), extend self-affirmation theory (G. L. Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988) in two ways: first, by demonstrating the utility of affirmation interventions in facilitating interpersonal reconciliation through ameliorating threats to the conflicting parties' identities; and second, by demonstrating that the effectiveness of self-affirmation interventions may depend on the "match" between the type of threat and the content of the affirmation. While this is somewhat inconsistent with Steele's (1988) earlier suggestion that threats posed to the self in one domain can be effectively addressed through self-affirmation of other, unrelated domains, it is consistent with more recent findings. For instance, self-affirmation exercises successfully mitigated threats of social rejection when participants focused on social belonging themes, but not when they focused on other themes (Knowles et al., 2010). From a broader perspective, this suggests that the content of self-affirmation intervention may matter (i.e., influence the affirmation's effectiveness)—an issue which has been overlooked in earlier theorizing, yet gained more attention in recent research (e.g., Burson, Crocker, & Mischkowski, 2012).

Our theoretical focus on the role of identity-restoration in reconciliation processes also extends and complements the highly related research of Karremans and Smith (2010), which found that greater relationship power was associated with greater forgiveness to the relationship-partner following transgressions. While these findings are generally consistent with ours, in Karremans and Smith's studies the positive effect of power emerged in *high*-commitment relationships— exactly the opposite of the effect of agency-affirmation. The differences between the closely related concepts of agency and power (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003), however, may explain this apparent discrepancy. Whereas having power means exerting asymmetric control over resources in social relationships (Galinsky et al., 2003), having agency means the "experience of oneself as the agent of one's own actions—and not of others' actions" (David, Newen, & Vogeley, 2008, p. 523; see also Van Dijke & Poppe's, 2006, distinction between *social vs. personal* power). Karremans

and Smith either measured or primed social power, whereas we manipulated one's agentic identity (i.e., *personal* power).

These different manipulations have been theorized to facilitate reconciliation through setting different processes in motion: identity-restoration in the present research versus better ability to pursue one's goal in Karremans and Smith's (2010) research (whose argument is that people whose commitment to the relationship is high, as opposed to low, are motivated to behave in a constructive manner, and having power allows them to pursue this goal despite the impulse to behave destructively). The possibility that identity-restoration and power-enhancement manipulations have distinct effects is also consistent with Karremans and Smith's findings that conflicting parties' global self-esteem (i.e., the extent to which they feel satisfied with themselves) had a unique positive effect on their constructive tendencies, independent of their experience of power (Study 3). This finding suggests that above and beyond one's social power (i.e., control over others' resources), feeling satisfied with oneself increases forgiveness—consistent with the reasoning guiding the present research.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation to this work is that it might seem to imply that promoting conciliatory tendencies is an unequivocally positive goal. It is therefore important to clarify that conflicting parties' readiness to reconcile following severe transgressions (e.g., as in the case of spousal abuse) may be dysfunctional rather than adaptive. In terms of avenues for future research, it would be intriguing to explore the potential moderators of the effectiveness of agency-affirmation on promoting relationship-constructive tendencies. For example, interpersonal dispositions, such as one's tendency to forgive others (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005), may moderate the effectiveness of agency-affirmation, which should be especially effective among individuals predisposed to be *un*forgiving. In addition, recent research (Overall et al., 2016) has revealed that the link between low power (when it is both relational *and* situational) and relationship-destructive tendencies during conflict is stronger for men than for women, because being weak threatens men's very sense of masculinity (leading them to behave aggressively to reassert power). It may be therefore interesting to explore whether the effectiveness of agency-affirmation is moderated by participants' gender, such that men benefit from the restoration of their agentic identity more than women.

In terms of the generalizability of our findings, given the critical role of relationship type on forgiveness (Hoyt et al., 2005; Maio et al., 2008), future research should examine the effectiveness of agency-affirmation in additional contexts of relationships. For example, it may be the case that in relationships characterized by authority ranking (i.e., hierarchical relations, Fiske, 1991), constructive and destructive tendencies are determined primarily by the conflicting

parties' relative power (e.g., subordinates might inhibit their avoidant or vengeful tendencies, regardless of whether their identity-related needs were addressed). If so, identity-restoration processes in such contexts should have little influence on conflicting parties' behavior, unlike the patterns observed in the present research.

In conclusion, the present research provided evidence for the importance of affirming conflicting parties' agentic identity. Conflicts characterized by mutual transgressions in which both parties typically view themselves as the conflict's "real" victim (Noor et al., 2012) run the risk of escalation. Therefore, identifying strategies to replace the vicious cycle of mutual transgressions with an upward spiral of goodwill, especially in the absence of high relationship-commitment that may impede such escalation, has theoretical and practical importance.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at http://pspb.sage-pub.com/supplemental.

Notes

1. Due to feasibility considerations, in all the studies we set the target sample size a-priori to be 40 participants per cell (but reached a somewhat smaller sample size in Study 2). According to post hoc tests (using the G*Power software; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), the statistical power of the interaction (Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction on behavioral-tendencies) was .73 in Study 1 and .69 in Study 2. In study 3, the statistical power of the interaction on need for morality (the mediator) was .55, and the statistical power of the mediator's effect on the Dependent Variable (constructive behavior) was .76. Admittedly, these numbers are lower than J. Cohen's (1992) recommendation for power = .80. Notably, however, the pattern of results was consistent across three diverse studies, which increases our confidence in our conclusions.

2. Results generally persisted even when including all participants. Specifically, the Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction became marginal, $\beta = -.19$, $t(120) = -1.73$, $p = .085$, in Study 1, and remained significant, $\beta = -.26$, $t(95) = -2.03$, $p = .046$, in Study 2. The Morality-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction remained nonsignificant

in both studies, $ps > .268$. Also, the conditional indirect effect reported in Study 2 remained significant, $b = .47$, $SE = 0.25$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.048, 1.031]. In Study 3, the effect of Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction on the need for morality became marginal, $F(1, 153) = 3.53$, $p = .062$, $\eta = .023$; however, the conditional indirect effect reported in the main analysis remained significant, $b = .21$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.015, 0.590].

3. Results persisted with no change in statistical conclusions when excluding single children from the analysis.

4. The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM) also includes a Vengeance subscale (e.g., "I wish that something bad would happen to my brother/sister"). We refrained from using this scale because our pilot study ($N = 43$) revealed a floor effect, probably due to a strong social norm against taking revenge against family members (see Karremans & Smith, 2010, for a similar report on a floor effect for the TRIM's Vengeance subscale).

5. In Studies 1 and 2, which used retrospective methodologies, we also examined the effects of the background variables. Time of occurrence ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.25$ in Study 1; $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.37$ in Study 2) did not correlate with relationship-commitment in either Study 1, $r(120) = -.14$, $p = .130$ or Study 2, $r(96) = .01$, $p = .914$. Also, time of occurrence did not predict constructive tendencies in either Study 1, $r(120) = -.03$, $p = .764$ or Study 2, $r(96) = -.12$, $p = .235$. The severity of the offense ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.63$ in Study 1; $M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.63$ in Study 2) marginally correlated with relationship-commitment in both Study 1, $r(120) = -.16$, $p = .089$, and Study 2, $r(96) = .18$, $p = .072$. Furthermore, offense severity predicted significantly fewer constructive tendencies in both Study 1, $r(120) = -.48$, $p < .001$, and Study 2, $r(96) = -.23$, $p = .027$. Importantly, when offense severity was controlled for, the Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Relationship-Commitment interaction tended to persist in Study 1, $\beta = -.17$, $t(113) = -1.72$, $p = .088$, and persisted in Study 2, $\beta = -.24$, $t(89) = -2.11$, $p = .038$.

6. The Agency-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction remained significant, $p = .020$, whereas the Morality-Affirmation (vs. Control) × Commitment interaction remained nonsignificant, $p = .933$. The conditional indirect effect, that is, agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies through need for morality, remained significant when commitment was low, $b = .42$, $SE = 0.24$, 95% CI = [0.004, 0.951], but not when it was average, $b = .15$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI = [−0.199, 0.503], or high, $b = -.11$, $SE = 0.27$, 95% CI = [−0.836, 0.326].

7. For the six excluded participants, $M_{\text{allocation to partner}} = 18.00$ ($SD = 0.63$), slightly (yet nonsignificantly) above equal allocation, $t(5) = -1.94$, $p = .111$. Nevertheless, the pattern of results persists even when including these participants (see Note 2).

8. The expected Agency-Affirmation × Commitment interaction on need for morality persisted, $p = .048$, and so did the conditional indirect effect, that is, agency-affirmation on constructive tendencies through need for morality, in the low-commitment condition, $b = .23$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI = [0.012, 0.575]. Note that in a pilot study ($N = 43$) in which participants wrote about family conflicts, the effect of agency-affirmation could also not be accounted for by mood effects. This pilot included two conditions, agency-affirmation and morality-affirmation, and showed that these conditions (on a 5-point scale) induced similar levels of positive mood, $t(41) = 0.73$, $p = .467$; $Ms = 3.78$ ($SD = 0.83$) versus 3.61 ($SD = 0.74$).

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