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Expressing Equivalence of Responsibility and Victimhood: How Message Directionality Affects Perception of Speakers' Willingness to Reconcile

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The present research investigates the effect of discourse framing in messages that acknowledge mutual victimhood or responsibility by one of the involved parties in a dual conflict. Building on the theory of asymmetric similarities (Tversky, 1977), across four experiments, we hypothesize and test the idea that directional framing affects perceptions of speakers' empathic concern and level of perspective taking, and hence, their perceived willingness to reconcile with the opposing party. Study 1 ($N = 270$) examined these questions from an observer perspective, while Studies 2 ($N = 251$), 3 ($N = 146$), and 4 ($N = 147$) changed participants' perspective from observers to actors. Results consistently showed that discourses that put the focus on speakers' own stance (i.e., "You are just as responsible as I am") produce a less positive impact on recipients than formally equivalent discourses that are framed to focus on the conflicting party's stance (i.e., "I'm just as responsible as you are") or nondirectional discourse (i.e., "We're both responsible"). Furthermore, the effect of discourse directionality on perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile is mediated by recipients' perceptions that speakers are empathetic and displaying high levels of perspective taking, with empathic concern emerging as the relatively stronger pathway. Findings provide valuable insights into the role of language framing on conflicting parties' reconciliation tendencies.

Keywords: conflict, competitive victimhood, language framing, directionality, reconciliation

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When an offense has been committed, victims' willingness to reconcile increases when offenders acknowledge their victims' suffering and their own responsibility regarding the committed offense (Hameiri et al., 2023; Suzuki, 2024). Having offenders express such acknowledgment messages to their victims is undoubtedly difficult to obtain in the context of unilateral wrongdoings, given the moral and identity threat that these messages convey (Wenzel et al., 2020). Yet, it might be even more difficult to achieve in disputes that involve mutual transgressions because of each party's biased tendency to consider themselves as the primary victim in the conflict (Noor et al., 2012; Shnabel, 2018). In addition, assuming that one party is willing to take the first step, they will have to decide how to formulate the acknowledgment message. The goal of the present article was to tackle this issue and examine how the linguistic framing of acknowledgment messages affects recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile.

We conduct our research in the context of interpersonal conflicts involving mutual wrongdoings and examine the effects of messages

that acknowledge equivalence in responsibility or victimhood in the conflict. Building on the classic work of Tversky (1977) that examined asymmetric similarities (e.g., "A is like B" is not equivalent to "B is like A") and on more recent developments on the effect of language framing (Bruckmüller & Braun, 2020; Chestnut & Markman, 2018), we postulate that equivalence statements will differentially impact recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile depending on whether equivalence is expressed in a directional (i.e., "one target contributed as much as the other") or nondirectional (i.e., "both targets contributed equally") way. More importantly, when speakers express equivalence in a directional way, the influence of speakers' discourse will depend on whether directionality is framed to focus the attention on their own stance (e.g., "You are just as responsible as I am") or on the stance of the opposing party (e.g., "I'm just as responsible as you are"). As detailed later, this effect of discourse framing on recipients' perception of the speakers' willingness to reconcile will be mediated by their perception that speakers lack empathic concern and perspective taking.

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The present research is innovative in several aspects. First, prior research has demonstrated that expressing acknowledgment of victimhood (Hameiri et al., 2023) or accepting responsibility through apology (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Robbenolt, 2013) contributes to de-escalating conflict between victims and offenders. However, little attention has been paid to how these discourses should be formulated to effectively promote reconciliation. To address this gap, the present research examines the effect of (non)directional framing in terms of responsibility and/or victimhood on recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile.

Second, our research also contributes to the literature on language framing in general and discourse directionality more particularly. Indeed, while extant research has examined directionality effects on recipients' perception of external social objects (e.g., how gender perceptions are affected by directionality, Chestnut & Markman, 2018), our research is the first to directly contrast speakers and their interaction partner on the predicate, that is, the dimension of comparison.

Finally, while reconciliation processes have primarily been studied in the context of intergroup conflicts, far fewer studies have explored how they unfold in interpersonal contexts, particularly those comprising mutual transgressions (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). Yet, most day-to-day conflicts involve the simultaneous embodiment of dual roles, in which individuals assume the roles of both victim and offender (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2017). The current research addresses this neglected domain by focusing on interpersonal dual conflicts characterized by mutual transgressions.

Willingness to Reconcile

Reconciling conflicting parties yields several positive outcomes, such as closure of the emotional episode and its psychological burden, increased compliance with agreement terms and conditions, and a change in relational dynamics while empowering parties to address future conflicts (Demoulin, 2021). Identifying factors that enhance parties' willingness to reconcile is thus crucial. In this domain, Shnabel and Nadler (2015), for instance, have proposed that offenders and victims have distinct fundamental needs (offenders: belonging and morality; victims: assertiveness and control), and that addressing these needs plays a pivotal role in influencing the parties' willingness to reconcile (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). One way to address the needs of victims and to increase their willingness to reconcile is by having perpetrators acknowledge their past wrongdoing (Hameiri et al., 2023) and offer sincere apologies for the harm inflicted (Daly, 2006), that is, having perpetrators recognize their victims' suffering and take responsibility for the committed offense (Suzuki, 2024).

While the content of acknowledgment messages is important in promoting reconciliation tendencies among victims, the way these messages are shaped should not be overlooked. Indeed, evidence regarding the effects of discourse framing on message recipients abounds in the literature, as seen, for example, in the classic "Asian disease problem" experiment, in which Tversky and Kahneman (1981) showed that rewording decision options (emphasizing the number of people who will die vs. those who will survive) is sufficient to have people shift their decisions from one health program to the other. Framing cues used in discourses are thus integrated into recipients' prior knowledge to draw inferences, shape comprehension, and guide decision making (Graesser et al., 1997).

Of interest here, research examining the effects of discourse framing also exists in the literature on transgressions and wrongdoings. For instance, several studies have shown that offenders using discourse framing emphasizing their agency (e.g., "I am sorry I offended you") rather than those omitting it (e.g., "I am sorry you were offended") are perceived by their victims as taking more responsibility for the occurrence of the negative event and, in turn, benefit from more favorable judgments (Wang & McGlone, 2020). Similarly, organizations' denial strategies in the face of crises were received more positively by the public when using passive (e.g., "responsibility is categorically rejected") rather than active (e.g., "we categorically reject responsibility") verb voice (Fannes & Claeys, 2023). Yet in another domain, when people read about the negative actions of a fictitious politician, they were more confident that the politician would not be reelected when the descriptions of the past action used an imperfective (e.g., "was taking hush money") rather than perfective ("took hush money") framing (Fausey & Matlock, 2011). Indeed, imperfective framing emphasizes the ongoing nature of the action, while perfective framing suggests the completion or end state of the action. Finally, in the case of violent protests, blame ascription to actors varied as a function of whether the described events were framed using regular transactive verbs or reciprocal ones ("protesters attacked police officers" vs. "protesters clashed with police officers"; Hart, 2018). In sum, the effect of discourses that acknowledge past transgressions or wrongdoings is as much a matter of content as it is a matter of word choice, sentence structure, and syntax.

The framing studies reviewed in this section examined reconciliation processes in transgressive contexts that focused exclusively on instances of unilateral wrongdoing involving clearly identifiable victims and perpetrators. Yet, conflicts often imply instances of wrongdoing within a dynamic interplay of roles (Noor et al., 2012; SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014).

Dual Conflicts

In contrast to the traditional dichotomy that distinguishes offenders from victims, most day-to-day disputes involve the simultaneous embodiment of dual roles, whereby parties concurrently assume the roles of victims and offenders (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2017). Reconciliation in these cases might be even more difficult to achieve, as parties might be tempted to wait for their opponent to make the first move. Indeed, despite being mutual, perceptions of wrongdoing in dual conflicts are not immune to egocentric biases. For instance, parties often mistakenly believe that the initial hostile move was made by their opponent and that they themselves have only engaged in legitimate retaliatory actions, that is, a biased punctuation of conflict (Kahn & Kramer, 1990, in Thompson et al., 2006; Thompson & Lucas, 2014). In addition, experiences of victimization also weigh more heavily on parties than their experiences of perpetration, with opposing parties recalling experiences of victimization better, for a longer time, and with greater detail (Mazziotta et al., 2014). These biases, in turn, can transform into a competition over victimhood primacy between the parties, that is, competitive victimhood (Noor et al., 2012), a phenomenon that has led Shnabel (2018) to envisage a "somewhat pessimistic outlook on the reconciliation potential of individuals and groups involved in dual conflicts" (p. 81).

Assuming, nevertheless, that one party is willing to make the first move, messages that recognize the opposing party's suffering or

their own responsibility in the conflict will likely take the form of mutual (e.g., “we both share responsibility”) rather than unilateral (e.g., “I am responsible”) acknowledgment. Indeed, several lines of research have suggested that human beings are prone to act defensively following their own wrongdoings (Wenzel et al., 2020) because of the social and moral identity threat the wrongdoing imposes on their self-image (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Defensive strategies include moral disengagement (Bandura, 2016), self-exoneration (Cornish et al., 2018), or shame displacement (Ahmed, 2001), but also the reduction of one’s responsibility by sharing it with others. In the case of dual conflicts, acknowledgment of mutual suffering or mutual responsibility might therefore be quite common.

This being said, and as was the case for unilateral wrongdoings, it is not sufficient to consider the content of acknowledgment messages; we should also pay attention to the shape of these messages delivered to the opposing party. Taking into consideration what we just discussed about the expected use of mutual acknowledgment messages, language framings of interest in this research are those that are comparative in nature, that is, those that include both targets (i.e., speakers and their conflicting party recipient) and that imply equivalent levels for both targets on the predicate, that is, the dimension along which targets are related (Chestnut & Markman, 2018; i.e., similar levels of victimhood or responsibility).

Directionality Framing

In comparative statements, formal equivalence between two targets on a predicate can be expressed using either directional or nondirectional framing. Equivalence is expressed in a directional way when a subject-complement syntax is used in which Target A is evaluated as similar to Target B, who serves as a referent (e.g., “A has suffered as much as B”). When equivalence is nondirectional, neither target serves as the referent point for the other (i.e., “A and B both suffered”).

In directional statements, the target that occupies the subject position is the one that is the focus of attention (Moore & Kim, 2003; Windschitl et al., 2003), and the target that is placed in the complement position is the referent against which the subject is being evaluated. Importantly, the decision to assign a specific target to the subject or complement position in a sentence is not random. As a matter of fact, people have a spontaneous preference for directional statements in which the complement position is occupied by the most complex (Tversky, 1977), informative (Bowdle & Gentner, 1997), or prominent target given a specific predicate (Chestnut & Markman, 2018). For example, people will generally prefer sentences stating that “Zebras are like horses” rather than the reverse because “when discussing similarity, we usually think of horses, the more prototypical animal, as an appropriate reference point for zebras rather than vice versa” (Chestnut & Markman, 2018, p. 2230).

One important consequence of directionality is that it affects the focus of attention. Whether in comparative statements (Tversky, 1977) or in comparative judgments (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004), the focus of attention is drawn more to the subject of the sentence than to the referent to which it is compared, that is, the complement. That is, people retrieve more information about the subject than the complement (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004) and take into consideration more the absolute standing of the subject on the predicate than the absolute standing of its complement (e.g., Moore & Kim, 2003).

How would directionality framing in acknowledgment messages of equivalent victimhood or responsibility affect the interpretation of recipients? As discussed before, in dual conflicts, opposing parties, each on their side, tend to overweigh their own experience of victimization and consider themselves as the primary victims in the conflict. When speakers thus express equivalent victimhood or responsibility in the form of “I am as much a victim as you are” and “you are as much responsible as I am,” they frame their message to focus the attention on their own stance regarding the conflict as they put the focus on their own victimhood and on the other party’s responsibility in the conflict (i.e., self-focused directional discourses [SFDDs]). In sharp contrast, when speakers frame their equivalence statement in the form of “you are as much a victim as I am” and “I am as much responsible as you are,” they focus the attention on the opposing party’s stance regarding the conflict, underlining their own responsibility and the other party’s suffering (i.e., other-focused directional discourses [OFDDs]).

Given the importance of acknowledging one’s own responsibility and the suffering of the other in reconciliation processes (Suzuki, 2024), we propose that OFDD would elicit higher willingness to reconcile than self-focused ones (SFDD). Nondirectional discourses (NDDs: “we are both responsible for this situation” and “we are both victims in this situation”), because they do not imply a difference in focus on one conflict stance or one target to the detriment of the other, should fall in between SFDD and OFDD in recipients’ perceptions.

In line with the above reasoning, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Recipients’ perceptions of speakers’ perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile will be lowest in SFDD, highest in OFDD, and will fall in between the two when speakers use NDD.

The Mediating Role of Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern

In the present section, we propose that these effects are attributable to the signaling function of directional discourse, which communicates the speaker’s level of empathic concern and perspective taking.

Individuals often rely on others’ verbal and nonverbal behaviors to interpret social situations and determine appropriate responses (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Extensive research on framing effects (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981) indicates that the manner in which information is presented can significantly influence both cognitive processing and behavioral responses. In negotiation contexts, for example, framing one’s message in terms of offers rather than demands has been shown to reduce concession aversion among counterparts (Trötschel et al., 2015). Moreover, communicative framing affects not only immediate behavioral responses—such as the likelihood of concessions—but also relational outcomes, including perceptions of speakers’ trustworthiness (Lee & Ames, 2017). Recipients thus use communicative framing to infer otherwise unavailable information about a speaker’s intentions toward them. Importantly, such inferences based on how speakers frame information tend to be accurate (McKenzie & Nelson, 2003).

Building on this literature, we argue that directional discourse functions as a form of framing that enables recipients to infer speakers’ underlying intentions. Specifically, OFDD positions the recipient’s perspective at the center of the message, which is likely

to be interpreted as an indication that the speaker is adopting the recipient's viewpoint. This, in turn, should lead recipients to infer heightened levels of empathic concern and perspective taking.¹ Conversely, when the discourse is self-focused (SFDD), and the speaker's own stance is foregrounded, such inferences should reverse, leading recipients to perceive lower levels of empathic concern and perspective taking. Finally, the nondirectional nature of NDD should promote ambiguous perceptions of speakers' perspective taking and empathic concern, leading recipients to estimate those between OFDD and SFDD.

These inferences are consequential, as perceived perspective taking and empathic concern are positively associated with a range of relational outcomes, including increased interpersonal liking, greater self–other overlap, and enhanced prosocial intentions (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2014). Relatedly, Berndsen et al. (2018) found that victims were more likely to express trust and forgiveness when they believed that offenders had taken their perspective. In the context of our study, we therefore expect these mechanisms to translate into recipients' higher perceptions of willingness to reconcile on the part of speakers when exposed to OFDD as compared to SFDD, with NDD falling in between.

In line with the above reasoning, we thus propose:

Hypothesis 2: The effect of message framing (SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) on recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile will be mediated by their perception of speakers' perspective-taking tendencies and empathic concern.

Overview

In four experiments, we examined the effect of (non)directional framing on recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile. As previously stated, we hypothesized that recipients' perceptions of speakers' perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile will be lowest in SFDD, highest in OFDD, and will fall in between the two when speakers use NDD (Hypothesis 1). We further predicted that the effect of message framing (SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) on recipients' perceptions of speakers' willingness to reconcile would be mediated by their perceptions of speakers' perspective taking and empathic concern (Hypothesis 2).

The first two studies used a 3×2 experimental design that manipulated Directionality (SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) and Predicate (victimhood vs. responsibility). Prior research has demonstrated that expressing acknowledgment of victimhood (Hameiri et al., 2023) or accepting responsibility through apology (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Robbennolt, 2013) can both help de-escalate conflict between victims and offenders. However, although these two types of communication may partially overlap (i.e., speaker-expressed acknowledgment of victims' suffering being associated with perceptions that speakers accept their responsibility, and vice versa; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), they are conceptually distinct (Voca et al., 2023) and have rarely been examined in parallel. Among the few studies addressing this issue, Nadler and Liviatan (2006) found that acknowledging the victim's suffering had a more substantial impact on willingness to reconcile than accepting responsibility in the context of intergroup unilateral transgression conflicts. Therefore, our first two studies examined these two types of acknowledgment in parallel, with their difference examined in an exploratory manner. Having shown similar directionality effects for discourses that use parties' victimhood and

responsibility as predicates, follow-up studies focused solely on responsibility as a predicate. The methodological information for each study can be found in Table 1.

All studies reported in the article were preregistered, and all data are available online (https://osf.io/xv4aj/?view_only=8b408365a99a4610a4d2451ad3a2c120; Kasper & Demoulin, 2025). We reported how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures used in the studies.

Study 1: Responsibility Versus Victimhood Discourse From an Observer Perspective—Scenario Method

Method

Participants

We recruited our sample on the crowdsourcing platform Prolific. Participants were invited to complete our questionnaire in exchange for monetary compensation (5 min/£0.65). We preregistered a recruitment target of 251 participants (270 to allow for a 20 participant loss) to detect a small to medium effect size ($f = .25$), with an α of .05 and power set at .95 for a 2×3 between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA; G*Power, Faul et al., 2007). A preliminary study was conducted ($N = 270$), but sociodemographic data (gender, age, educational level) could not be retrieved due to a technical issue (see Supplemental Materials). Here, we present the replication of this pilot study. After excluding nine participants who failed attention check questions, our final sample included 261 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.74$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.75$) with 58.6% women ($M_{\text{age}} = 45.43$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.88$) and 39.5% men ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.12$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.63$; two participants were nonbinary/third gender, and three participants preferred not to say). Most of them (39.1%) held a bachelor's degree (20.7% some college, 15.7% high school, 19.9% master's degree, 4.2% PhD, and one participant "other") and reported being from the United Kingdom (83.5%). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 2 (predicate: victimhood vs. responsibility) $\times$ 3 (directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) conditions.

Procedure

After being informed that the study was about sentence interpretations and providing informed consent, participants were invited to imagine themselves as a manager handling a conflict between two collaborators. It was specified that both employees blamed each other on several grounds and felt that they were the main victims of

¹ Empathy involves sharing and understanding others' emotional states, whereas perspective taking refers to the cognitive process of understanding others' thoughts and intentions (Klimecki, 2019). Although both constructs can yield beneficial outcomes, they exert both overlapping and distinct effects (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). For example, empathic concern is more strongly associated with supportive behaviors, whereas perspective taking has been shown to facilitate value creation in negotiation contexts (Gilin et al., 2013; see also Longmire & Harrison, 2018, for a meta-analysis). Given the discursive focus of the present research, one might expect cognitive inferences (i.e., perceived perspective taking) to play a more central role than affective inferences (i.e., perceived empathy). In addition, some prior research also conceptualizes empathy as an outcome of perspective taking (Ku et al., 2015), suggesting a potential serial mediation from perspective taking to empathy. However, in the initial phase of this study, we opted to assess the impact of discourse directionality on both constructs simultaneously, without formulating any differential hypotheses. Potential distinctions in their effects are addressed in the General Discussion section.

Table 1
Summary of Methodological Information for All Studies

Study	Perspective	Method	Predicate
Study 1 ^a	Observer	Scenario	Responsibility versus victimhood
Study 2	Actor	Scenario	Responsibility versus victimhood
Study 3 ^a	Actor	Prisoner's dilemma	Responsibility
Study 4	Actor	Autobiographical recall	Responsibility

^a A preliminary study, as well as the replication of Study 1 (at the intergroup level) and Study 3, can be found in Supplemental Materials.

the conflict (for the detailed scenario, see Supplemental Materials). Participants were then informed that the manager had organized a meeting to manage the conflict, and during the discussion, one collaborator expressed an acknowledgment message of equivalent victimhood or responsibility to the other party. Our manipulation was embedded in this message. We manipulated the predicate (victimhood vs. responsibility) and the directionality of the discourse (SFDD ["You are just as responsible for this situation as I am," "I'm just as much a victim in this situation as you are"] vs. NDD ["We're both responsible for this situation," "We're both victims in this situation"] vs. OFDD ["I'm just as responsible for this situation as you are," "You are just as much a victim in this situation as I am"]). After reading the scenario, participants were required to indicate their perceptions of speakers' perspective taking, empathic state, and willingness to reconcile.²

Measures

All scales were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Perception of perspective taking (inspired by Siem & Barth, 2019) comprised three items (e.g., "The person mainly sees things from her or his own perspective" [reversed]; $\alpha = .87$). The higher the score, the more the speaker is perceived as taking the perspective of the opposing party.

Empathic state (Batson et al., 1988) measured with six items (i.e., sympathetic, moved, compassionate, tender, warm, soft-hearted; $\alpha = .88$). The higher the score, the more empathic the speaker is perceived.

Willingness to reconcile (adapted from Shnabel et al., 2009) comprised six items ("The person is willing to act for promoting reconciliation"; "The person is willing to express goodwill toward the other party"; "The person is willing to decrease the tension"; "The person's message attests to the person's good intentions"; "The person's message is designed to increase the proximity between the parties"; "The person's message aims at improving the atmosphere"; $\alpha = .89$). The higher the score, the more the speaker is perceived as being willing to reconcile with the other party.

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all dependent variables are presented in Supplemental Table S11.

Results

Effect of Directional Discourse

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted 2 (Predicate: victimhood vs. responsibility) $\times$ 3 (Directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) between-subjects ANOVAs on perspective taking, empathic concern,

and willingness to reconcile.³ The means (*SD*) of dependent variables for each condition are reported in Table 2.

In line with Hypothesis 1, we found a main effect of Directionality on the perception of the speaker's empathic concern, $F(2, 255) = 27.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .18$; perspective taking, $F(2, 255) = 15.71, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$; and willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 255) = 35.88, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .22$. The main effect of predicate and the Predicate $\times$ Directionality interaction on perspective taking and willingness to reconcile were not significant ($F_s < 0.83, p_s > .362$), while these main and interaction effects on empathic concern were significant. While the main effect shows that empathic concern was perceived as higher in the victimhood condition compared to the responsibility one, $F(2, 255) = 6.34, p = .012, \eta_p^2 = .02$, the interactive effect indicated a differential influence of the predicate in the SFDD condition, $F(2, 255) = 5.82, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .04$, which was not observed in the NDD and OFDD ones. Specifically, participants inferred lower levels of empathic concern when speakers discussed responsibility in a self-focused way ($M = 2.34, SD = 0.81$) than when they expressed themselves on victimhood using the same kind of self-focused discourse ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.93$).

Examining further the main effect of Directionality, post hoc analyses were conducted using Bonferroni correction. As indicated by the subscripts in Table 2, the means of NDD and OFDD did not differ from one another on any variables except for empathic concern, while the means of the SFDD condition significantly differed from the other two conditions on all three variables (details of these analyses are provided in the Supplemental Materials).

² We also measured the perception of speakers' guilt, the perception of message credibility, and the perception of speakers' anger and victimization. For article coherence, we opted for not including these variables. Yet all measures and results have been reported in Supplemental Materials. Globally, results on these measures support our hypothesis that SFDD discourses are particularly problematic as they are associated with higher perceived anger and higher perceived victimization on the part of the speaker.

³ All preregistrations of the studies reported in the present article were framed using a different typology. To improve the clarity of the results and align with theoretical framework, we presented the discourses based on the focus of attention: self-focused (e.g., "I am as much a victim as you are"/"you are as much responsible as I am"), other-focused (e.g., "you are as much a victim as I am"/"I am as much responsible as you are"), or nondirectional (e.g., "we are equally victims"/"we are equally responsible"). Importantly, although the presentation is different, the hypotheses are exactly the same. As a result, our preregistration hypothesized an interaction between the predicate (responsibility vs. victimhood) and the description ("you as much as me" vs. "we equally" vs. "me as much as you"). Given the fact that we aggregated conditions as a function of their focus, this interaction effect should then be reflected in a main effect of directionality.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics as a Function of Directionality (Study 1)

Variable	Study 1		
	SFDD	NDD	OFDD
Empathic concern	2.65 (0.92) _a	3.12 (0.64) _b	3.48 (0.61) _c
Persp. taking	2.50 (1.02) _a	3.21 (0.98) _b	3.28 (1.02) _b
Wt. reconcile	3.14 (0.92) _a	3.96 (0.68) _b	4.01 (0.63) _b

Note. Means sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from one another, based on *post hoc* comparisons with Bonferroni corrections (*post hocs* were run separately for each variable). Values in parentheses indicate standard deviations. SFDD = self-focused directional discourse; NDD = nondirectional discourse; OFDD = other-focused directional discourse; Persp. taking = perspective taking; wt. reconcile = willingness to reconcile.

Specifically, the perception of the speaker's perspective taking was higher in NDD ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.98$) and OFDD ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.02$) than in SFDD ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.02$). Similarly, the perception of the other's willingness to reconcile was higher in NDD ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.68$) and OFDD ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.63$) than in SFDD ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.92$; see Figure 1). The perception of the speaker's empathic concern was significantly lower in the SFDD condition ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 0.92$) than in the NDD condition ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.64$), and lower in NDD than in the OFDD condition ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.61$).

In sum, results show that participants perceived speakers as taking more of the perspective, being more empathic, and being more willing to reconcile when using other-focused directional and NDDs, in contrast to an SFDD. This difference in discourse directionality did not depend on whether the predicate focused on parties' victimhood or responsibility in the conflict, except for empathic concern.

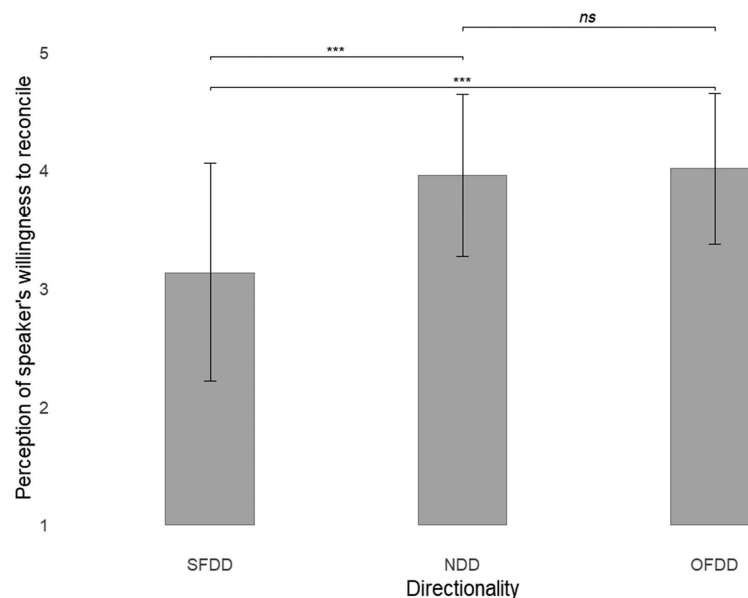
Mediating Role of Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern on Willingness to Reconcile

To test Hypothesis 2, we computed mediation analyses (Process Model 4, Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap samples. Based on the above-reported results, we computed two orthogonal contrasts to reflect directionality. Contrast 1 (C1) opposed SFDD (coded -2) to NDD and OFDD (both coded 1), and Contrast 2 (C2, the residual contrast of C1) opposed NDD (coded -1) to OFDD (coded 1), with SFDD coded 0. We entered C1 as a predictor, C2 as a covariate, and empathic concern and perspective taking as mediators. As expected (Hypothesis 2), results confirmed that the effect of Directionality (C1) on speakers' perceived willingness to reconcile is mediated by both speakers' perceived empathic concern ($b = .10$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.06, .15]) and perspective taking ($b = .07$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.04, .10]).

As our ANOVA results reported above showed that the effect of Directionality on empathic concern was moderated by the type of predicate, we also explored a moderated mediation model (Process Model 7), entering Predicate as a moderator on the first step of the mediation process. Results showed that while the indirect effect via perspective taking is significant in both the victimhood ($b = .06$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.02, .11]) and the responsibility conditions ($b = .07$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.04, .11]) the indirect effect via empathic concern only reached significance when discourse focused on parties' respective responsibilities ($b = .15$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.09, .21]; victimhood condition, $b = .04$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [-.001, .10]; index of moderated mediation, $b = .10$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.03, .17]).

In sum, Study 1 (and replications, see Supplemental Materials) presents first insights into the impact of message framing on people's perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile. Results revealed that

Figure 1
Effect of Directionality (SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) on the Perception of the Speaker's Willingness to Reconcile (Study 1)



Note. SFDD = self-focused directional discourse; NDD = nondirectional discourse; OFDD = other-focused directional discourse; ns = not significant.

*** $p < .001$.

NDDs and discourses that focus on the other party's stance regarding the conflict were perceived as more empathetic and as demonstrating a higher perspective taking. These inferences, in turn, led external observers to infer a higher willingness to reconcile on the part of the speaker. Interestingly, Study 1 (but not the pilot study) also pointed to a differential effect between discourses that focus on victimhood and responsibility on participants' perceived empathic concern toward the speaker. Future studies are needed to confirm this specific effect on perceived empathic concern.

Study 2: Responsibility Versus Victimhood Discourse From an Actor Perspective—Scenario Method

Study 1 examined the effect of message directionality among observers not involved in the conflict. Studies 2–4 aimed to change this perspective and explore the responses of involved parties. While framing effects should affect all recipients independently of their observer or actor status, we cannot exclude the possibility that involved parties in a conflict react differently than mere observers due, for instance, to the negative emotions they experience (Jones & Bodtker, 2001) or to their increased tendencies to interpret situations in a biased manner (Thompson & Lucas, 2014).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited on the crowdsourcing platform Prolific in exchange for monetary compensation. After excluding six participants who did not correctly answer the attention checks, the final sample included 251 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.69$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.17$) with 66.5% of women ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.73$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.19$) and 31.9% of men ($M_{\text{age}} = 44.73$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.19$; four participants were nonbinary or preferred not to say). In our sample, 92% of participants reported being from the United Kingdom (and 4% “American”). Most of them (43%) held a bachelor's degree (23.1% some college, 16.3% high school, 13.5% master's degree, 2.8% PhD, and 1.2% “other”). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 3 (directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) $\times$ 2 (predicate: victimhood vs. responsibility) conditions.

Procedure and Measures

The procedure used was exactly the same as that of the previous study, except that, this time, participants were asked to put themselves in the shoes of the opposing party that received the acknowledgment message from the speaker. Measures of perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile were identical ($\alpha s > .85$). Furthermore, participants were also asked to express their own willingness to reconcile with the speaker ($\alpha = .92$, six items, adapted from Shnabel et al., 2009, e.g., “I’m willing to act for promoting reconciliation”). Descriptive statistics and correlations for all dependent variables are presented in Supplemental Table S12.

Results

Effect of Directional Discourse

ANOVAs were computed as in previous studies. In line with Hypothesis 1, we found a main effect of Directionality on all

dependent variables: empathic concern, $F(2, 245) = 44.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .27$; perspective taking, $F(2, 245) = 19.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$; willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 245) = 55.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$, including participants' own willingness to reconcile with the speaker, $F(2, 245) = 30.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .20$. We also found an interaction effect between directionality and predicate on empathic concern, $F(2, 245) = 3.48$, $p = .032$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and on perceptions of speakers' willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 245) = 3.74$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. As in Study 1, participants perceived speakers' empathic concern under the SFDD condition to be lower when their discourse talked about responsibility ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.60$) than when it focused on victimhood ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.78$). No such difference occurred in the NDD and OFDD conditions. Unexpectedly, the Predicate also affected differently participants' perceptions of speakers' willingness to reconcile differently in the three conditions. While responsibility and victimhood discourse produced similar levels of reconciliation perceptions under SFDD (victimhood: $M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.87$; responsibility: $M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.70$), perceived willingness to reconcile was higher with the responsibility discourse than the victimhood one when framing was nondirectional (responsibility: $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.74$; victimhood: $M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.85$) or other-focused (marginally significant, $p = .052$, responsibility: $M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.83$; victimhood: $M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.92$).

Aside from these unexpected interactive effects, the main effect of directionality found on all variables replicated previous findings that SFDD leads perceivers to infer less perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile than NDD and OFDD (see Table 3). Participants perceived speakers as taking more of the perspective when using other-focused directional ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.11$) and NDDs ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.96$), in contrast to a SFDD ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.79$). The perception of the speaker's empathic concern was significantly lower in the SFDD condition ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.71$) than in the NDD condition ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.84$), and lower in NDD than in the OFDD condition ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.91$). Similarly, the perception of the speaker's willingness to reconcile was significantly lower in the SFDD condition ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.80$) than in the NDD condition ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.82$), and lower in NDD than in the OFDD condition ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.89$). Interestingly, these results also extended to participants' own willingness to reconcile, which was stronger in the OFDD condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.68$) and NDD condition ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.63$) than in the SFDD condition ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.93$).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics as a Function of Directionality (Study 2)

Variable	Study 2		
	SFDD	NDD	OFDD
Empathic concern	1.79 (0.71) _a	2.29 (0.84) _b	2.99 (0.91) _c
Persp. taking	1.70 (0.79) _a	2.31 (0.96) _b	2.63 (1.11) _b
Wt. reconcile—other	2.27 (0.80) _a	3.22 (0.82) _b	3.56 (0.89) _c
Wt. reconcile—self	3.13 (0.93) _a	3.80 (0.63) _b	4.00 (0.68) _b

Note. Means sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from one another, based on post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections (post hoc were run separately for each variable). Values in parentheses indicate standard deviations. SFDD = self-focused directional discourse; NDD = nondirectional discourse; OFDD = other-focused directional discourse; Persp. taking = perspective taking; wt. reconcile = willingness to reconcile.

Mediating Role of Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern on Willingness to Reconcile

Using the same steps in the procedure as in Study 1, we computed mediation analyses first with Process macro Model 4 and second with Model 7 (to take into account the interaction between Directionality and Predicate on empathic concern). In line with Hypothesis 2, results once again confirmed that the indirect effect of directionality on perceptions of speakers' willingness to reconcile via empathic concern ($b = .16, SE = .03, 95\% CI [.11, .21]$) and perspective taking ($b = .06, SE = .01, 95\% CI [.04, .09]$) was significant (Model 4). In addition, results of the Model 7 analysis reproduced the moderated mediation finding of Study 1 on the first path between Directionality and empathic concern. Yet, this time, the indirect effect via empathic concern was significant for both the victimhood ($b = .11, SE = .03, 95\% CI [.05, .17]$) and the responsibility condition ($b = .21, SE = .03, 95\% CI [.15, .28]$), although it was stronger in the latter than the former (index of moderated mediation, $b = .11, SE = .04, 95\% CI [.03, .19]$).

The same mediation analyses were conducted on own willingness to reconcile (Model 4 and second with Model 7). The indirect effect via empathic concern ($b = .06, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.03, .10]$) and via perspective taking ($b = .05, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.03, .08]$) was significant (Model 4). Furthermore, the indirect effect via empathic concern was stronger for the responsibility condition ($b = .08, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.04, .14]$) than the victimhood condition ($b = .04, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.01, .08]$; Model 7, index of moderated mediation, $b = .04, SE = .02, 95\% CI [.01, .09]$).

Study 3: Responsibility Discourse From an Actor Perspective—Prisoner's Dilemma Method

In Study 3, we deemed it important to attempt to replicate our findings in a real conflicting context. To this aim, we used a variation of the prisoner's dilemma game in order to induce a situation of low-intensity dual conflict. Due to the very few differences in effects observed between the victimhood and responsibility conditions across studies, we chose to solely assess the impact of responsibility statement framings, as the effect of directionality was stronger in this condition (for perception of speaker's empathy and willingness to reconcile). We also include behavioral measures (prosociality, cooperativeness, and conciliatory communication) to examine whether framing discourses affects the concrete behavior. Due to the few differences observed between NDD and OFDD in Studies 1 and 2, we revised our Hypothesis 1: Recipients' perceptions of speakers' perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile, as well as their own willingness to reconcile and prosocial behaviors, will be higher when speakers use OFDD or NDD than when they use SFDD (Hypothesis 1b).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the participant pool at our university in exchange for course credit validation. After having excluded 34 participants who chose "cooperation" in the first two rounds and 10 participants who failed manipulation or attention check items, our final sample included 146 second-year undergraduate students⁴

($M_{age} = 19.80, SD_{age} = 2.24$) with 93.7% women and 5.7% men (one participant nonbinary). In our sample, 89.7% of participants reported being from Belgium. Furthermore, 4.8% indicated they believed that the other player in the room was a friend. This variable was entered as a covariate in the analyses ("proximity"). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three (directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) conditions.

Procedure

After being informed that the study was about "a decision-making process in a game context" and providing informed consent, participants were invited to participate in a five-round iterated prisoner's dilemma game with another student in the experimental room. In fact, all participants were playing against a computer-preprogrammed player. The experiment's interface was developed using Excel and coded in VBA language (for a screenshot of the interface, refer to the Supplemental Materials). Participants were informed that during the game, they would have to choose between two options: "cooperate" and "not cooperate," and that the other player would make a similar choice. They were further notified that their score would be computed based on the combined choices of both players. To introduce a transgressive situation, the fictitious counterpart was preprogrammed to "not cooperate" during the first two rounds. Furthermore, to incentivize participants to engage in transgressive behavior, we offered the opportunity to win a 100-euro voucher for the top 20 players. Consequently, opting to "cooperate" resulted in a loss of 60 points for the participant while the fictitious player scored 60 points. Conversely, if the participant chose not to cooperate, both players lost 20 points each. Most of the participants (44.5%) chose "not cooperate" for both the first and second rounds (32.8% chose "cooperate" followed by "not cooperate," 32.3% chose "not cooperate" followed by "cooperate"). The initial choices of participants were included as covariates in our analyses.

Following the second round, participants were informed that they would be able to communicate with the other player and that the other player had been randomly selected to send the first message. Participants then received a message from the fictitious counterpart, in which our manipulation was embedded. To make the message more ecologically valid and suitable for the language typically used by young students, the message was pretested among a sample of 67 undergraduate psychology students. As in previous studies, we manipulated the directionality of discourse (SFDD [This sucks! You messed up as much as I did, so it is as much your fault as mine—*Ça craint! T'as autant déconné que moi donc c'est autant ta faute que la mienne*] versus NDD [This sucks! We both messed up, so it is both our faults—*Ça craint! On a tous les deux déconné donc c'est notre faute à tous les deux*] versus OFDD [This sucks! I messed up as much as you did, so it is as much my fault as yours—*Ça craint! J'ai autant déconné que toi donc c'est autant ma faute que la tienne*]).

After reviewing the message, participants were invited to respond (referred to as "conciliatory communication"). This response was then coded by three independent judges, who were blind to the

⁴ Due to a technical issue, the verification item for experimental conditions was not collected for 32 out of the total 191 participants (prior to exclusions). For all the data, the correct recall rate was 91.82%. Given this acceptable recall rate, we decided to retain participants missing this verification data. After exclusions, 23 out of the final 146 participants were included without this data.

research hypotheses, on a scale ranging from -2 (defensive, negative response showing little openness; not aiming to resolve potential tensions and possibly intending to maintain a negative relationship or even worsen potential tensions) to 2 (open, constructive, and positive response aimed at easing potential tensions or maintaining a relationship that appears positive), with zero being a neutral response (neutral response, neither positive nor negative, with little information about the person's intentions or their feelings toward the other person). Interrater reliability was assessed using the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), indicating moderate agreement between raters ($ICC = 0.71$, 95% CI [.60, .80], $p < .001$). Participants then proceeded to the third round, after which they were asked to assess the fictitious player's perspective taking, empathic state, and willingness to reconcile, as well as their own willingness to reconcile, using the same measures as in the previous study ($\alpha_s > .82$). Following this, participants were prompted to select between sending easy or difficult questions to the other player, potentially allowing them to increase their gains. This measure was developed in order to assess participants' prosociality (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2017). Finally, participants resumed the game and completed the final two rounds. We measured the players' cooperativeness by scoring the last three rounds ($1 = \text{cooperation}$; $0 = \text{no cooperation}$, score ranging between 0 and 3). Then, they responded to sociodemographic measures and a manipulation check (i.e., "What message did the other player send you?"). Descriptive statistics and correlations for all dependent variables are presented in Supplemental Table S13.

Results

Effect of Directional Discourse

To test Hypothesis 1b, we conducted a 3 (directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD) between-subjects ANOVAs on the perception of the fictitious player's perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile, as well as on participants' own willingness to reconcile, their conciliatory communication, prosociality, and cooperativeness. Doing so, we controlled for gender (as previous studies have shown gender effects in the prisoner's dilemma game; e.g., Dorrrough & Glöckner, 2019), participants' decision during the first two rounds (cooperate vs. not cooperate), and their perceived proximity to other participants in the room (participants in our participant pool are psychology students following the same program, making the probability of them knowing or being friends with other participants in the room particularly high. We thus controlled for their perceived proximity, as this variable has been shown to affect decisions in prisoner's dilemma games; Mienaltowski & Wichman, 2020).⁵ The means (standard deviations) of dependent variables for each condition are reported in Table 4.

In line with prior results and Hypothesis 1b, we found an effect of Directionality on the perception of the other player's empathic concern, $F(2, 137) = 23.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .25$; perspective taking, $F(2, 137) = 4.17$, $p = .017$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$; willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 137) = 30.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .31$; on own willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 137) = 10.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$; on their cooperativeness, $F(2, 137) = 3.19$, $p = .044$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$; and on their prosociality, $F(2, 137) = 3.15$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Yet, the effect of Directionality did not reach significance for participants' conciliatory communication, $F(2, 126) = 1.16$, $p = .317$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Post hoc analyses were then conducted using Bonferroni corrections (see subscripts in Table 4). Participants

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics as a Function of Directionality (Study 3)

Variable	Study 3		
	SFDD	NDD	OFDD
Empathic concern	2.20 (0.63) _a	2.94 (0.84) _b	3.23 (0.79) _b
Persp. taking	2.68 (0.86) _a	3.24 (1.08) _b	3.15 (1.05) _{a,b}
Wt. reconcile—other	2.17 (0.65) _a	3.07 (1.02) _b	3.56 (0.85) _c
Wt. reconcile—self	3.46 (0.73) _a	4.05 (0.76) _b	4.01 (0.64) _b
Conciliatory communication	0.38 (1.08) _a	0.65 (0.91) _a	0.38 (0.96) _a
Prosociality	3.43 (1.99) _a	4.33 (1.31) _b	3.96 (1.66) _{a,b}
Cooperativeness	1.07 (0.93) _a	1.57 (1.12) _a	1.48 (0.95) _a

Note. Values in parentheses indicate standard deviations. Means sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from each other, based on post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections (post hoc were run separately for each variable). The difference between SFDD and OFDD was marginally significant for perspective taking ($p = .081$). The difference between NDD and SFDD was marginally significant for the cooperativeness ($p = .055$). SFDD = self-focused directional discourse; NDD = nondirectional discourse; OFDD = other-focused directional discourse; Persp. taking = perspective taking; wt. reconcile = willingness to reconcile.

perceived the other player as taking more of their perspective in the NDD condition ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.08$) compared to the SFDD condition ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.86$), whereas OFDD ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.05$) did not significantly differ from either SFDD or NDD. Similarly, participants' prosociality was higher in NDD ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.31$) than in SFDD ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.99$), while OFDD ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.66$) did not significantly differ from either. Participants also perceived a higher speaker's empathic concern in both NDD ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.84$) and OFDD ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.79$) than in SFDD ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 0.63$). Similarly, own willingness to reconcile was higher in NDD ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.76$) and OFDD ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.64$) compared to SFDD ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.73$). The perception of speaker's willingness to reconcile showed a linear increase from SFDD ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.65$) to NDD ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.02$) to OFDD ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.85$). Cooperativeness did not significantly differ across conditions, although the difference between SFDD ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 0.93$) and NDD ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.12$) was marginal ($p = .055$).

In sum, the SFDD condition led to lower inferences on most outcomes compared to the NDD condition. Differences between SFDD and OFDD were less consistent but similarly indicated lower inferences in the SFDD condition. In line with previous results, NDD and OFDD did not significantly differ on most

⁵ Without controlling for these variables, the effects remained the same: empathy, $F(2, 143) = 21.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .24$; perspective taking, $F(2, 143) = 3.23$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$; willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 143) = 28.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$; own-willingness to reconcile (self-reported), $F(2, 143) = 8.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$; conciliatory communication, $F(2, 134) = 1.18$, $p = .312$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; cooperativeness, $F(2, 143) = 3.66$, $p = .028$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$; except prosocial behavior, which was marginally significant, $F(2, 143) = 3.02$, $p = .052$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. For the mediation analyses, the indirect effect of directionality remained significant via empathy for willingness to reconcile (other), $b = .20$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.14, .27]; own willingness to reconcile, $b = .07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.03, .13]; prosocial behavior, $b = .10$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [.002, .21]; and cooperativeness, $b = .13$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.06, .20], and via inferences of perspective taking only for willingness to reconcile (other), $b = .03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.005, .06] (own willingness to reconcile: $b = .006$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [−.01, .03]; prosocial behavior: $b = −.03$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [−.10, .02]; cooperativeness: $b = −.01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [−.04, .01]).

outcomes (except for the speaker's willingness to reconcile). Participants perceived the other player as taking more of their perspective, being more empathic, and being more willing to reconcile, and reported higher willingness to reconcile, prosociality, and cooperativeness (marginally) when exposed to other-focused directional or NDD compared to a SFDD. Unexpectedly, discourse directionality did not influence conciliatory communication (SFDD, $M = 0.38$, $SD = 1.08$; NDD, $M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.91$; OFDD, $M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.96$). This result could be explained by the length of the messages written by the participants and thus reflect a bottom effect, as most participants provided very brief responses to the other player (word count: $M = 8.46$, $SD = 7.33$; $Mdn = 7$, minimum = 1, maximum = 56), such as "yes," "me too," or "indeed."

Mediating Role of Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern on Willingness to Reconcile and Prosociality

To assess mediation effects, the same contrast codes were used as in our previous studies (i.e., C1 contrasts SFDD to NDD and OFDD, while C2 is the orthogonal contrast that tests NDD against OFDD). Using Process Model 4, we conducted mediation analyses with C1 as the predictor, perspective taking and empathic concern as mediators, willingness to reconcile (other and self), prosociality and cooperativeness as dependent variables, and C2, proximity, gender, and choices during the first two rounds as covariates. Mediation analyses were conducted separately for each dependent variable. In line with Hypothesis 2, results revealed that the effect of Directionality on willingness to reconcile (other) was mediated by participants' perceptions that the other player was empathetic ($b = .20$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.13, .26]) and taking their perspective ($b = .03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .07]). Furthermore, the indirect effect of directionality was also significant via inferences of empathic concern for own willingness to reconcile ($b = .08$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.03, .14]), prosociality ($b = .12$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [.004, .24]), and cooperativeness ($b = .15$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [.07, .23]), but not via inferences of perspective taking for any of these outcomes (own willingness to reconcile: $b = .003$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.02, .03]; prosociality: $b = -.04$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.12, .02]; cooperativeness: $b = -.02$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.05, .01]).

Study 4: Responsibility Discourse From an Actor Perspective—Autobiographical Recall Method

In Study 4, we attempted to replicate our findings in a more ecologically valid conflicting context. To this aim, we used an autobiographical recall methodology. This method offers a more ecological context for understanding how individuals process responsibility statements in the context of real-life conflicts, thereby enhancing the external validity of our findings.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited on social networks. After excluding 34 participants who did not correctly answer the attention checks, the final sample included 147 participants ($M_{age} = 39.11$, $SD_{age} = 15.46$) with 81.6% of women ($M_{age} = 37.73$, $SD_{age} = 14.64$) and 15.6% of men ($M_{age} = 47.50$, $SD_{age} = 17.99$; four participants were nonbinary

or preferred not to say). In our sample, 73.5% of participants reported being from France and 17.7% from Belgium. Most of them (41.1%) held a master's degree (23.4% bachelor's degree, 19.1% high school, 7.1% PhD, 2.8% "other"). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions (directionality: SFDD vs. NDD vs. OFDD).

Procedure and Measures

The procedure used was an autobiographical recall. First, participants were asked to reflect on and describe an ongoing conflict with another person. Because conflicts encompass various characteristics, we measured factors such as the proximity and level of commitment with the opposing party; the seriousness, the intensity, the frequency, the duration, and the emotional charge of the conflict; the significance of the issue and expected future contact; impact on other close individuals; and the perceived responsibility.⁶ Participants then imagined receiving a message (experimental conditions) from the person with whom they are in conflict. The message was designed to reflect a real-life communication ("Hi, I took some time to reflect on our dispute. I realize that it's [NDD] 'both of our faults, and we're both responsible' vs. [SFDD] 'your fault as mine, and you're just as responsible as I am' vs. [OFDD] 'my fault as yours and I'm just as responsible as you' for this conflict. I would like us to discuss it over coffee sometime soon."). After reviewing the message, participants were invited to respond (i.e., "conciliatory communication"). As in the previous study, this response was coded by three independent judges, who were blind to the research hypotheses, on a scale ranging from -2 (defensive and negative response showing little openness, not aiming to resolve potential tensions, and possibly seeking to maintain a negative relationship or aggravate tensions) to 2 (open, constructive, and positive response aimed at easing potential tensions and reflecting a willingness to reconcile). Interrater reliability was assessed using the ICC, indicating excellent agreement between raters (ICC = 0.92, 95% CI [.89, .94], $p < .001$).

Measures of perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile (other and own) were identical ($\alpha > .87$), as in previous studies. Descriptive statistics and correlations for all dependent variables are presented in Supplemental Table S14.

Results

Effect of Directional Discourse

To test Hypothesis 1b, ANOVAs were computed as in previous studies. We found a main effect of Directionality on empathic concern, $F(2, 144) = 3.72$, $p = .027$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, and others' willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 144) = 4.75$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. This effect was not significant for perspective taking, $F(2, 144) = 2.97$, $p = .054$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, and for participants' own willingness to reconcile,

⁶ Controlling for these variables, the effects remained the same: empathy, $F(2, 133) = 3.98$, $p = .021$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$; perspective taking, $F(2, 133) = 2.57$, $p = .080$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$; willingness to reconcile, $F(2, 133) = 4.83$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$; own-willingness to reconcile (self-reported), $F(2, 133) = 2.21$, $p = .114$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; behavioral reconciliation, $F(2, 133) = 1.58$, $p = .210$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. For the mediation analyses, the indirect effect of directionality remained significant on willingness to reconcile (other) via empathy ($b = .07$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI [.02, .13]) and not via inferences of perspective taking ($b = .01$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI [-.01, .03]). Descriptive statistics and correlations between factors and outcomes are presented in Supplemental Table S15.

$F(2, 144) = 1.26, p = .287, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and conciliatory communication, $F(2, 144) = 0.69, p = .506, \eta_p^2 = .01$.

The main effect of directionality found on empathic concern and others' willingness to reconcile replicated previous findings showing that SFDD leads perceivers to infer less empathic concern and willingness to reconcile than NDD or OFDD (see Table 5). Specifically, participants perceived a higher speaker's empathic concern in the NDD condition ($M = 3.14, SD = 0.81$) compared to the SFDD condition ($M = 2.68, SD = 0.90$), whereas OFDD ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.89$) did not significantly differ from either SFDD or NDD. In addition, participants perceived a higher speaker's willingness to reconcile in both NDD ($M = 3.73, SD = 0.70$) and OFDD ($M = 3.71, SD = 0.70$) conditions compared to the SFDD condition ($M = 3.31, SD = 0.89$). Finally, discourse directionality did not affect the perception of the player's perspective taking (SFDD: $M = 2.34, SD = 1.04$; NDD: $M = 2.85, SD = 1.12$; OFDD: $M = 2.77, SD = 1.25$), own willingness to reconcile (SFDD: $M = 3.44, SD = 1.06$; NDD: $M = 3.63, SD = 0.88$; OFDD: $M = 3.73, SD = 0.79$), or conciliatory communication (SFDD: $M = 0.30, SD = 1.39$; NDD: $M = 0.56, SD = 1.44$; OFDD: $M = 0.60, SD = 1.29$).

Mediating Role of Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern on Willingness to Reconcile

Using the same steps in the procedure as in previous studies, we computed mediation analyses first with the Process macro Model 4 to test Hypothesis 2. Results showed that the indirect effect of Directionality on perceptions of speakers' willingness to reconcile via empathic concern, $b = .07, SE = .03, 95\% CI [.02, .13]$ was significant, but not via perspective taking, $b = .02, SE = .01, 95\% CI [-.002, .04]$.

General Discussion

Our research program examined the effect of a party's discourse, stressing the equivalence of conflicting parties' victimhood or responsibility in dual conflicts. Specifically, we examined how discourse directionality affects recipients' perception of the speaker's perspective taking and empathic concern and, as a consequence, their inferences regarding the speaker's willingness to reconcile. Building on the asymmetric similarity theoretical framework (Tversky, 1977),

which suggests that, when an equivalence is expressed directionality using a subject-complement structure, attention is drawn more to the subject than to the complement (i.e., the focalism phenomenon, Windschitl et al., 2003), we hypothesized and found that directional discourses that reflect in the sentence's subject speakers' own stance in the conflict (e.g., "You are as responsible as me") are perceived as less empathic and denoting less perspective taking than directional discourses whose subject echoes speakers' opponent stance (e.g., "I am as responsible as you"). This difference in the perception of speakers' perspective taking and empathic concern further led message recipients to infer a lesser willingness to reconcile on the part of the speakers. These findings were replicated online with scenarios (Studies 1 and 2) and in the laboratory (Study 3), and results held independently of whether discourses made reference to conflicting parties' victimhood (Study 1 and replications and Study 2; see Supplemental Materials) or responsibility (all studies), whether recipients acted as external observers (Study 1 and replications) or as stakeholders (Studies 2–4) in the conflict, and whether the dispute concerned an interpersonal (all studies) or an intergroup context (replication of Study 1).⁷

As robust as our findings are, they were not self-evident in the first place. Indeed, the impact of our manipulation could, in fact, have been quite different. First, other-focused discourses, by drawing attention to speakers' responsibility and recipients' suffering, might have actually increased recipients' feelings of victimhood and thus decreased their willingness to reconcile. Second, as noted in the introduction, in comparative statements, the target in the complement position serves as the referent against which the subject is evaluated (Chestnut & Markman, 2018). Accordingly, one might have hypothesized the opposite pattern of results, reasoning that statements such as "you are as much a victim as me" and "I am as responsible as you" implicitly assign the roles of victim and offender to the speaker and the recipient, respectively—since "I" is the referent for victimhood and "you" the referent for responsibility. However, the consistent findings across the present set of studies indicate that, although the referent roles might initially appear self-serving, what is actually at play in directional discourse about victimhood and responsibility is the extent to which the subject of the sentence is attributed victimhood or responsibility.

We also hypothesized that NDDs would fall in between the two directional conditions (Hypothesis 1). Although the NDD proved indeed more efficient than the self-focus directional discourse, its effect on the dependent variables was largely similar to the effect of the other-focus directional discourse (Hypothesis 1b). That is, although past research had shown that directional discourses prompt asymmetric perceptions of similarity that are absent in nondirectional

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics as a Function of Directionality (Study 4)

Variable	Study 4		
	SFDD	NDD	OFDD
Empathic concern	2.68 (0.90) _a	3.14 (0.81) _b	2.99 (0.89) _{a,b}
Persp. taking	2.34 (1.04) _a	2.85 (1.12) _a	2.77 (1.25) _a
Wt. reconcile—other	3.31 (0.89) _a	3.73 (0.70) _b	3.71 (0.70) _b
Wt. reconcile—self	3.44 (1.06) _a	3.63 (0.88) _a	3.73 (0.79) _a
Conciliatory communication	0.30 (1.39) _a	0.56 (1.44) _a	0.60 (1.29) _a

Note. Means sharing the same subscript letter are not significantly different from each other, based on post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections (post hocs were run separately for each variable). Values in parentheses indicate standard deviations. SFDD = self-focused directional discourse; NDD = nondirectional discourse; OFDD = other-focused directional discourse; Persp. taking = perspective taking; wt. reconcile = willingness to reconcile.

⁷ Overall, results were highly consistent across studies, showing that other-focused and NDDs produce more positive outcomes than self-focused communications. On several occasions, other-focused discourses also differed from nondirectional ones, indicating that the former might even be more effective at promoting reconciliation than the latter. Future research should further investigate this less stable finding to better understand the conditions under which it occurs. Finally, participants' inferences regarding speakers' willingness to reconcile were more consistent across studies than their own willingness to reconcile. Although somewhat disappointing, this latter finding is not surprising, given the conceptual proximity between our independent variable (i.e., speakers' framing of the situation) and perceived willingness to reconcile on the part of the speaker (as compared to the recipients' own willingness to reconcile). A table summarizing consistencies and differences across studies can be found in the Supplemental Table S20.

speeches (Chestnut & Markman, 2018), when directionality is framed in a nonself-serving way, it leads recipients to infer similar intentions to those inferred from the NDD.

Importantly, our findings offer a nuanced contribution to the understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying reconciliation. Specifically, while both empathic concern and perspective taking were examined as potential mediators, our results revealed that empathic concern had a more prominent role in promoting reconciliation. This is in line with prior research in the domain of negotiation, which showed that empathic concern had a stronger effect on prosocial intentions and behaviors, such as the willingness to reconcile, whereas perspective taking was more closely associated with value creation (Longmire & Harrison, 2018). More related to the present findings, recent research (Fannes & Claeys, 2022) confirms that recipients are more receptive to emotional (i.e., empathic concern) than cognitive (i.e., perspective taking) expressions of empathy, leading them to evaluate senders of such communication more positively and to display more empathic responses themselves.

Our findings also extended to the additional measure of participants' own willingness to reconcile (Studies 2 and 3, but not Study 4) and prosociality (Study 3), but not to conciliatory communication (Studies 3 and 4). In Study 4, exploratory analyses (reported in Supplemental Table S16) suggested that conciliatory communication appeared to be shaped by conflict-related factors such as its duration and the level of commitment between the individuals. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of reconciliation discourses might depend on the relational dynamics and the nature of the conflict, in line with previous research. Indeed, apologies or messages acknowledging the victim's suffering can yield variable, sometimes even counterproductive, effects on reconciliation, particularly when the speaker is perceived as lacking trustworthiness (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006) or in long-term and persisting conflicts (Bobowik et al., 2010). Aside from these potential modulating variables, the absence of effect on conciliatory communication in Study 3 might also be partly explained by the very brief responses that participants wrote (absence of variance due to a bottom effect) or by the fact that the prisoner's dilemma method involved a low-intensity dual conflict, which may not have generated a sufficient degree of engagement to elicit substantial behavioral responses.

The contribution of our research is multiple and speaks to both the literature on conflict and on language framing. First, regarding the former, our research is among the few that investigate reconciliation processes in interpersonal dual conflicts. Indeed, most of the available studies on mutual transgressions have focused on instances of violent intergroup rather than interpersonal conflicts (SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014). This is why the very concept of competitive victimhood is in fact defined as an intergroup phenomenon (Noor et al., 2012) and has so far been only scarcely applied to instances of interpersonal transgressions. Second, regarding language framing, our research innovates in examining directional effects in the context of an interaction and in statements that explicitly compare the speaker's stance on the predicate to the recipient's stance on this predicate. Interestingly, in our specific context in which speakers and recipients disagree on their respective positions on the predicate, having speakers focalize their speech on recipients' stance rather than on their own seems sufficient to substantially decrease the difference traditionally observed between nondirectional and directional discourses (Chestnut & Markman, 2018). This being said, in our study, we used measures of perspective taking, empathic concern, and

willingness to reconcile; future research could be conducted to establish whether such a decrease also occurs on more traditional measures such as perception of similarity between the subject and the referent (Tversky, 1977) and perception of a message' truth or acceptability (Lux et al., 2024).

Limits and Future Research

As interesting as they are, our studies are not without some limitations. First, in all four studies, equivalence statements were expressed explicitly. That is, both conflicting parties were directly compared to one another, and equivalence in victimhood or responsibility was explicitly stated. In common language, comparative frames do not always need to be explicit. In the domain of stereotyping, for instance, providing information about a group characteristic in an explicit directional comparative way ("Men are braver than women") is perceived differently than the unilateral attribution of the characteristic to one group ("Men are brave"), which implicitly suggests that the comparative group (i.e., women in this case) possesses the characteristic to a lesser extent (Lux et al., 2024). Because of the divergent perceptions that are triggered by explicit and implicit frames, we conducted an exploratory poststudy (and a replication; see in Supplemental Materials). This poststudy compared the two message framings that proved to be the most functional (i.e., NDD and OFDD) to an other-focused comparative framing that suggests implicitly similar levels of responsibility ("I have my share of responsibility") between conflicting parties. Contrary to our expectations (i.e., implicit statements would be viewed as reflecting more positive attitudes of the speaker), implicit statements produced the same inferences as explicit directional discourses that stress how much one's own responsibility is of similar amplitude to that of the opponent. This finding can be explained by the focalism phenomenon (Windschitl et al., 2003). Focalism in comparative judgments implies that when explicit directional statements are used, observers focus on the subject in the sentence to the neglect of the referent. Because of this, and as stated by Lux et al. (2024), implicit and explicit comparative framings might produce equivalent judgments and interpretations because "people treat them both as explicit ones" (p. 139). In our case, this is reflected in the fact that implicit framing leads to similar inferences of perspective taking, empathic concern, and willingness to reconcile as OFDD. These initial findings highlight a potentially valuable direction for future investigation.

Second, future research is needed to more thoroughly investigate concrete behaviors and the underlying motivations when conflicting parties interact, and how the latter affect the dynamic of their interactions. Indeed, while in interactions, human beings often act very differently than what they assume they would do when merely imagining what their behavior would be (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001) because social norms are not equally salient in the imagined situation (McCann & Honeycutt, 2006). Future studies could also examine the underlying motivations for using NDD and OFDD. Drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), individuals driven by intrinsic motivations (e.g., genuine commitment to reconciliation) may be more inclined to adopt other-focused directional messages, which explicitly acknowledge the other's perspective. In contrast, extrinsic motivations (e.g., authority presence, organizational norms; Gagné & Deci, 2005) may lead individuals to prefer nondirectional messages, which could represent a lower cost way to express shared responsibility.

Third, future investigations should be conducted on the various factors that potentially moderate the effects that were found. The relative advantage of NDD and OFDD in promoting reconciliation might be reduced under some conditions, like conflict duration or level of commitment. Indeed, high proximity relationships might prompt individuals to react positively to their partners even if their partners' behaviors are not as desirable as expected (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2017).

Fourth, the present studies examined the roles of perspective taking and empathic concern inferences in the relationship between discourse's directionality and recipients' perception of speakers' willingness to reconcile. While we assessed both empathic concern and perspective taking as potential mediators, the literature offers divergent perspectives on whether these constructs function as parallel or serial mediators (Ku et al., 2015; Longmire & Harrison, 2018). The present study did not aim to address this distinction; rather, we examined empathy and perspective taking as parallel mediators to evaluate their simultaneous contributions. Future research could explore whether these constructs operate in parallel or in a serial sequence in order to clarify their interplay in reconciliation processes. In addition, theories of conflict have put forward how much parties' morality and empowerment needs are often at the heart of reconciliation dynamics (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). Further research should thus examine how directionality might affect opponent parties' need for morality and empowerment.

Fifth, variations in language cues and framings are numerous, and their effects are still largely unexplored in the context of mutual wrongdoings. In particular, future research could examine the relative impact of messages that imply or do not imply speakers' and recipients' agency ("we offended one another" vs. "we felt offended"; Wang & McGlone, 2020) or that suggest the ongoing or end-state nature of the action ("we were aggressing one another" vs. "we aggressed one another"; Fausey & Matlock, 2011).

Finally, investigations on discourse framing in conflict management should not be restricted to the sole study of bilateral communication between the conflicting parties. Indeed, when conflict is intense or difficult to manage, parties often rely on third parties' help. Third-party interventions can be of multiple types, ranging from deciding who is right and who is wrong (e.g., arbitration) to suggesting solutions to the conflict (e.g., conciliation) or to assisting parties in the management process (e.g., mediation; Goldberg et al., 2020). There, too, language framing might be of particular importance. Taking the case of directionality, for instance, third parties who opt for suggesting equivalent responsibility using directional language might inadvertently put the focus on one conflict party to the detriment of the other and be perceived, as a result, as taking sides and departing from their impartiality.

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