The Difficulty of Reading Minds: Prediction Bias in Conflict and Its Psychological Mechanisms

Authors: Lu Jingyi, Qiu Tian, Chen Yuqi, Fang Qingwen, Shang Xuesong, Lu Jingyi

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Abstract

Widely prevalent prediction biases severely impede conflict management; therefore, addressing the challenges of conflict management necessitates investigating human prediction biases within conflicts. However, existing research predominantly examines prediction biases in non-conflict contexts, neglecting the distinctive nature of conflict. This project aims to overcome the current theoretical limitations by exploring the unique patterns of prediction bias in conflict events, along with their underlying psychological mechanisms and consequences. Specifically, it encompasses four primary objectives: (1) to investigate prediction biases in conflict events using corresponding non-conflict events as controls, thereby revealing the distinctive manifestations of prediction bias in conflicts and proposing a "bias amplification effect" specific to conflict events; (2) to examine the psychological origins of the "bias amplification effect"from a motivated cognition perspective, uncovering a "negativity-driven mechanism" ; (3) to assess the consequences arising from prediction bias under this "negativity-driven mechanism"; and (4) to design effective debiasing interventions. Ultimately, this project will construct a theoretical model of prediction bias in conflict events, foster a comprehensive understanding of prediction bias, advance behavioral decision theory, assist the public and social governance practitioners in accurately predicting others' behavior, enhance conflict management capabilities, and improve decision-making quality.

Full Text

Inaccurate Mind Reading: Misprediction in Conflicts and Its Psychological Mechanisms

LU Jingyi, QIU Tian, CHEN Yuqi, FANG Qingwen, SHANG Xuesong
(School of Psychology and Cognitive Science, East China Normal University, Shanghai 200062, China)

Abstract

The prevalence of misprediction severely hinders conflict management. To address this challenge, it is essential to investigate how humans mispredict others in conflict situations. However, existing research has primarily focused on misprediction in non-conflict contexts, overlooking the unique characteristics of conflicts. This project aims to break through current theoretical limitations by examining the distinct patterns, psychological mechanisms, and consequences of misprediction in conflict events. Specifically, the project pursues four objectives: (1) to identify unique manifestations of misprediction in conflicts by comparing them with corresponding non-conflict events, thereby revealing a "bias-amplification effect" in conflict situations; (2) to explore the psychological origins of this bias-amplification effect from a motivated cognition perspective, uncovering a "negativity driving mechanism" ; (3) to examine the consequences of misprediction driven by this negativity mechanism; and (4) to design effective debiasing interventions. Ultimately, this project will construct a theoretical model of misprediction in conflicts, advancing comprehensive understanding of prediction biases, developing behavioral decision-making theory, and helping the public and policymakers accurately predict others' thoughts and reactions to enhance conflict management capabilities and improve decision quality.

Keywords: misprediction, conflict, negative bias, motivated cognition
Classification Code: B849:C91

1. Problem Statement

Humans live in a "world of conflicts" where conflicts are inevitable. Conflict events refer to situations where one party's actions may cause direct and obvious harm to another party, resulting in tense relationships—such as interpersonal offenses, competition between enterprises, or discrimination between groups. Conflicts themselves are neither inherently good nor bad. When managed effectively, conflicts can promote communication and innovation, reconcile contradictions, and maintain social vitality through the flourishing of diverse ideas. However, failed conflict management can have severe consequences, damaging interpersonal relationships, stifling new ideas, hindering organizational progress, and leading to social rigidity.

A major cause of failed conflict management is inaccurate prediction. For instance, when rumors spread on social media, overestimating the harm that debunking might cause to the target may prevent people from refuting false information, allowing rumors to proliferate and seriously endangering social order. Similarly, after rejecting someone' s request, overestimating the negative reaction of the rejected person may cause individuals to actively distance themselves from friends, leading to broken relationships. Evidently, inaccurate predictions prevent people from harnessing the constructive potential of conflicts while also failing to resolve them fundamentally. Accurately predicting others' thoughts is not only crucial for conflict management but also a prerequisite for good

decision-making (Lu & Shang, 2021): management consulting firms strive to accurately predict client preferences, product designers aim to accurately forecast consumer tastes, and national diplomatic negotiations seek to accurately anticipate other countries' bottom lines. Once predictions become inaccurate, the rationality of decisions becomes questionable.

Nevertheless, misprediction is widespread (Epley, 2008). People cannot accurately predict others' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, which severely impedes conflict management. Therefore, to solve the problem of conflict management, researchers must investigate misprediction in conflict events, understanding its manifestations, psychological mechanisms, and consequences, and develop an effective conflict management framework. However, existing research has primarily examined misprediction in non-conflict events, paying insufficient attention to misprediction in conflict situations and lacking corresponding theoretical explanations. Given practical needs and current theoretical limitations, researchers urgently need to explore misprediction in conflicts, construct new theories, achieve a comprehensive understanding of prediction biases, and help solve conflict management problems.

2.1 From Economic Prediction to Psychological Misprediction

Researchers have long been concerned with prediction. Economists recognized early on that predicting others' thoughts contributes to healthy macroeconomic development by balancing supply and demand (Keynes, 1937) and helps maximize individual benefits at the micro level—for example, by predicting others' strategies to minimize prison sentences in the "prisoner' s dilemma" (Axelrod, 1980), which is also central to game theory.

Following economists' emphasis on the importance of accurate prediction, psychologists examined the psychological processes underlying how people predict others and discovered misprediction, which refers to deviations between one' s predictions about others and their actual states. Misprediction takes two forms: overestimation and underestimation. Currently, psychologists have focused primarily on misprediction in non-conflict events and proposed corresponding theories to explain its psychological mechanisms.

2.2 Misprediction in Non-Conflict Events

First, people exhibit biases when predicting others with whom they are not in direct social interaction. Research has found that people overestimate others' preference for relatively superior options (Lu & Shang, 2021); underestimate how much observers will like them after they express fear and anxiety (Gromet & Pronin, 2009); overestimate how harshly observers will judge them after making mistakes (Savitsky et al., 2001); overestimate the richness of others' social lives (Deri et al., 2017); overestimate others' willingness to perform publicly for money (Van Boven et al., 2005); overestimate the likelihood that others will choose

common options (Reit & Critcher, 2020); overestimate others' spending amounts (Jung et al., 2020); overestimate others' desire to befriend high-status individuals (Garcia et al., 2019); and incorrectly predict others' risk-taking tendencies (Hsee & Weber, 1997).

Second, people also show biases when predicting others with whom they have substantive social interactions. For example, people underestimate the positive impact of compliments on others (Boothby & Bohns, 2021); expressers of gratitude underestimate recipients' positive feelings (Kumar & Epley, 2018); individuals sharing their achievements overestimate how proud others will feel for them (Scopelliti et al., 2015); conversationalists underestimate how much listeners like them (Boothby et al., 2018); storytellers predict that audiences prefer novel stories when in fact audiences prefer familiar ones (Cooney et al., 2017); message senders underestimate the positive feelings that voice messages bring to others (Kumar & Epley, 2021); helpers underestimate the embarrassment that help-seekers experience when asking for assistance (Bohns & Flynn, 2010) and incorrectly predict the rewards that recipients are willing to give them (Zhang & Epley, 2009); help-seekers underestimate the likelihood that others will agree to help (Flynn & Bohns, 2008); gift-givers incorrectly predict that recipients prefer expensive gifts (Flynn & Adams, 2009), complete but moderately attractive gifts (Kupor et al., 2017), and material gifts (Goodman & Lim, 2018), when in fact recipients care less about price, prefer attractive but incomplete gifts, and prefer experiential gifts.

These mispredictions in non-conflict events lead to a series of negative consequences. For predictors, misprediction undermines positive emotional experiences and well-being. For instance, overestimating how harshly others will judge one' s failures may trigger inferiority complexes and even self-doubt (Epley et al., 2002), causing unnecessary anxiety and worry (Savitsky et al., 2001). For prediction targets, misprediction also creates problems. Since people habitually predict others' preferences before selecting gifts for them, misprediction causes recipients to receive unwanted gifts, contributing to gift return rates as high as 40% in the United States (Kupor et al., 2017). In organizations, because managers incorrectly predict employee motivation, they fail to sufficiently encourage employee participation in organizational decision-making, dampening employee morale (Heath, 1999).

2.3 Psychological Mechanisms of Misprediction in Non-Conflict Events

Existing theories suggest that predictors, operating from their own roles, make predictions about others based on information accessible to them, finding it difficult to place themselves in the targets' roles and consider problems from the other' s perspective. This cognitive limitation is the primary cause of misprediction in non-conflict events and involves two components.

2.3.1 Predictors' Egocentrism

People exhibit egocentrism when judging others (Epley et al., 2004; Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999), projecting their own attitudes, beliefs, and emotions onto others, thereby generating misprediction. Anchoring and adjustment, the spotlight effect, false consensus, and empathy gaps all reflect egocentrism.

Anchoring and adjustment refers to the process where, when estimating others' thoughts, people first anchor on their own perspective and then adjust toward the other' s perspective. However, this adjustment is often insufficient, causing judgments about others to remain biased toward the self-perspective (Epley et al., 2004). This insufficient adjustment leads to misprediction, such as overestimating attitude consistency between self and others (Krueger & Clement, 1994).

The spotlight effect describes how people often feel that others' attention is focused on them, as if a spotlight were shining on them. In reality, no one pays as much attention to oneself as one does. Consequently, people generally overestimate how much others notice them (Gilovich et al., 2000), leading them to overestimate how harshly others will judge their mistakes (Savitsky et al., 2001).

False consensus refers to people' s tendency to exaggerate the commonality of their own views and positions, erroneously believing that others' views and positions align with their own (Ross et al., 1977). False consensus also triggers misprediction—for example, people who like Italian food tend to believe that everyone likes Italian food, and extroverts believe that others are also sociable.

The empathy gap means that when people are in a "cold" non-emotional state, they have difficulty accurately predicting how they would feel in a "hot" emotional state (Loewenstein, 2005). Due to empathy gaps, predictors often cannot accurately estimate how they would react in others' emotional states, and combined with their inability to accurately judge differences between themselves and others, this produces misprediction (Van Boven et al., 2013). For instance, people overestimate others' willingness to participate in embarrassing public performances because empathy gaps cause them to overestimate their own tolerance for embarrassment in the same situation (Van Boven et al., 2005).

2.3.2 Predictors' Limited Accessibility to Information About Targets

Predictors often cannot obtain complete information about others, leading to misprediction. This limited accessibility manifests in two ways.

First, predictors cannot comprehensively observe others' behaviors. Predictors base their predictions on the behaviors of others they can observe. However, many of others' behaviors are difficult to observe (Malle & Pearce, 2001), resulting in misprediction. For example, people rarely catch others observing them, so they incorrectly predict that others observe them less frequently than they observe others (Boothby et al., 2017).

Second, predictors cannot access others' internal experiences. People know their own feelings and intentions but cannot access others' inner thoughts. Therefore, when judging themselves, people focus more on their internal experiences, whereas when judging others, they rely more on external behaviors—a phenomenon called introspection illusion that leads to misprediction (Pronin, 2008). For instance, when people want to talk to others but feel too shy to initiate conversation, they find it difficult to imagine that others also want to chat but feel shy, instead inferring from others' silence that they are unwilling to talk (Epley & Schroeder, 2014).

In summary, because predictors cannot fully understand others' information, they cannot accurately predict others.

2.4 Shortcomings of Existing Research: Neglecting Misprediction in Conflicts

Existing research has primarily focused on non-conflict events, with limited exploration of misprediction in conflict events. Two exceptions exist: First, Levine and Cohen (2018) examined truth-telling, a potentially conflict-inducing interpersonal event, and found that people overestimate others' negative reactions after speaking potentially offensive truths. Second, Shang et al. (2021) examined well-intentioned actions that cause harm, another potentially conflict-inducing event, and found that actors overestimate the negative impact of their harmful assistance.

Notably, conflict events have unique characteristics. Theoretically, focusing on conflict events and comparing them with non-conflict events will help researchers achieve a comprehensive understanding of misprediction.

2.4.1 From Cognitive Limitations to Motivated Cognition as Causes of Misprediction

The vast majority of existing research has focused exclusively on bottom-up processing, adopting an information-driven perspective to examine misprediction in non-conflict contexts and attributing it primarily to passive cognitive limitations, such as lack of information about others and anchoring on one' s own perspective (Epley et al., 2004). However, human cognitive processing is not only bottom-up. Perceptual set theory indicates that subjective factors such as expectations, motivations, and reasoning can top-down regulate information processing, which is equally crucial for cognition (Allport, 1955). Therefore, existing research has failed to analyze the causes of misprediction from a top-down processing perspective.

In fact, misprediction can be top-down driven by motivation. According to motivated thinking theory, the way people understand things is influenced by their own desires, and they actively construct and adjust their cognition of things according to their needs to satisfy their motivations (Kunda, 1990). For exam-

ple, people believe that dreams consistent with their existing beliefs are more meaningful than inconsistent ones (Morewedge & Norton, 2009) and believe that desired outcomes are more likely to occur (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). Therefore, under motivational influence, people may also actively alter their cognition to make biased predictions.

In conflicts, people have unique motivations not present in non-conflict events, and these motivations may cause misprediction to emerge top-down and determine its special manifestations and consequences. Analyzing people' s motivations in conflict events is crucial for explaining misprediction in conflicts. Specifically, conflict events trigger two types of motivations:

First, self-protection motivation—the motivation to protect oneself from or minimize negative outcomes in conflicts. The hedonic principle states that people have two basic motivations: approaching benefits and avoiding harm (Higgins, 1998). From an evolutionary perspective, the motivation to avoid negative outcomes has stronger adaptive value than the motivation to obtain positive outcomes, helping individuals survive. This leads to negative bias, where people are more sensitive to negative than positive stimuli (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Compared with non-conflict events, conflict events have more and more severe negative consequences. Therefore, when facing conflicts, people develop strong self-protection motivation and strive to avoid negative outcomes (Norem & Cantor, 1986). Amplifying the negative consequences of conflict events on oneself can help people prepare mentally or take preemptive action, thereby satisfying self-protection motivation.

Second, motivation to avoid causing interpersonal harm. In addition to affecting the predictor, the negative consequences of conflict events also impact others, creating interpersonal effects. According to the "principle of preventing interpersonal harm," which holds high priority in social interaction (Schein & Gray, 2018), people are highly sensitive to potential losses others may suffer. Compared with non-conflict events, people in conflict situations need to be more vigilant about potential interpersonal harm and try their best not to hurt others. For instance, refuting others' viewpoints may harm the refuted party, and rejecting others' requests may harm the requester—interpersonal harms that people wish to avoid in conflict situations. Amplifying the negative consequences of conflict events on others can help people avoid conflicts, thereby satisfying the motivation to avoid interpersonal harm.

From a motivated cognition perspective, these two motivations affect the entire cognitive process in conflict events (Kunda, 1990). According to information processing theory, the information processing process can be divided into three stages: attention and information search, perception and information processing, and thinking and decision-making based on information. In all three stages, people are top-down influenced by unique motivations in conflict events. For example, in conflict events, people pay more attention to potential negative outcomes in attention, overestimate the severity of negative consequences in perception, and worry about bad outcomes in thinking.

In summary, objective cognitive limitations cause misprediction in both conflict and non-conflict events. However, in conflict events, misprediction can also be driven by motivation—a mechanism absent in non-conflict events and a crucial missing link in existing research. Therefore, to fully understand how misprediction arises, it is necessary to incorporate a motivated cognition perspective into the research framework and construct a theoretical model of misprediction that includes both top-down and bottom-up pathways.

2.4.2 Understanding Misprediction: From Error to Adaptive Significance

Because existing research has primarily analyzed the causes of misprediction from the perspective of cognitive limitations, researchers have tended to view misprediction as an error, focusing mainly on its negative effects (Epley et al., 2002; Savitsky et al., 2001) while failing to fully recognize its adaptive functions. Analyzing the psychological mechanisms of misprediction from a motivated cognition perspective can help reveal its adaptive significance.

Recently, researchers in behavioral decision-making have proposed the concept of ecological rationality, advancing our understanding of rationality. This perspective argues that as long as people's decision-making processes can coordinate with the real environment and meet their survival and development needs, even biases in the sense of economic rationality can be utilized and possess adaptive value (Gigerenzer, 2008). From an ecological rationality perspective, misprediction has certain adaptive functions and is not entirely erroneous. For example, overestimating others' emotional reactions can make others perceive the predictor as more empathetic, creating a better impression (Klein, 2019). Individuals can also prepare themselves by anticipating worse negative outcomes, thereby achieving self-protection (Dai & Hsee, 2013).

In conflict events, we should view misprediction dialectically. Given the severity and negativity of conflict outcomes, individuals need to protect themselves and reduce harm to others in conflict situations. Motivation-driven misprediction in conflicts can help individuals satisfy their needs to some extent; therefore, misprediction in conflicts has adaptive significance. Researchers need to adopt an ecological rationality perspective to comprehensively understand both the positive and negative aspects of misprediction in conflict events.

3. Research Proposal

Based on a summary and reflection of existing research, this project focuses on misprediction in conflict events, using corresponding non-conflict events as controls to explore the unique manifestations, psychological mechanisms, and consequences of misprediction in conflicts, thereby breaking through current theoretical limitations. The project proposes the "bias-amplification effect" of conflict events, where misprediction is greater in conflicts than in corresponding non-conflict situations. This effect has a "negativity driving mechanism,"

whereby conflicts cause people to focus more on negative information during cognitive processing stages such as attention, perception, and thinking.

3.1 Study 1: The Bias-Amplification Effect in Conflict Events

Misprediction exists widely in both conflict and non-conflict events. Although existing research has explored misprediction in non-conflict contexts, it has not revealed the unique manifestations of misprediction in conflict events. We propose that the degree of misprediction is amplified in conflict events—that is, a "bias-amplification effect" exists. For example, people who refute others' viewpoints make larger prediction errors about others' experiences, whereas those who agree with others can predict others' experiences more accurately.

The bias-amplification effect originates from the unique nature of conflict events. On the one hand, conflict events have the attributes of negative events. According to negative bias theory, negative events elicit much stronger psychological reactions than neutral or positive events (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Therefore, conflicts may produce intense negative experiences. On the other hand, conflict events cause interpersonal harm, and in social interactions, people prioritize the "principle of preventing interpersonal harm" (Schein & Gray, 2018). Consequently, individuals strive to avoid initiating conflicts that cause interpersonal harm while being highly sensitive to relational consequences in conflicts. In short, compared with non-conflict situations, people face more and more severe negative consequences in conflicts.

Sensitivity to negative consequences leads people, when initiating conflicts (such as rejecting requests or refuting viewpoints), to imagine the worst possible outcomes and prepare thoroughly, thereby affecting their predictions in conflict events. Faced with potential negative consequences of conflicts, people develop self-protection motivation and strive to protect themselves from harm (Norem & Cantor, 1986), which in turn drives them to regulate cognition (Kunda, 1990). These processes do not exist in non-conflict events, which have few negative consequences; the source of misprediction in non-conflict events is merely objective cognitive limitations, without motivational amplification. Therefore, we propose Hypothesis 1: People exhibit greater misprediction in conflict events than in corresponding non-conflict events.

3.2 Study 2: The Negativity Driving Mechanism of the Bias-Amplification Effect

Misprediction in conflict events has not only unique manifestations but also unique mechanisms. Previous research from a cognitive limitations perspective has suggested that misprediction in non-conflict events mainly stems from predictors using only information they can access—that is, objective cognitive deficits. While some theories about non-conflict events may partially apply to conflict events, conflict events may affect people' s motivations, thereby changing their active information processing and top-down generating misprediction.

We term this unique mechanism in conflict events the "negativity driving mechanism."

The root of the negativity driving mechanism lies in fear of negative outcomes. According to motivated cognition theory, the way people understand things is often influenced by their own desires. Therefore, predictors actively construct their cognition of things according to their needs. Conflict events have negative attributes and cause interpersonal harm. For self-protection purposes, people need to negatively frame the potential outcomes of conflict events at all stages of cognitive processing (including attention, perception, and thinking), preparing for the worst to cope with conflicts (Norem & Cantor, 1986). These unique psychological processes related to negative factors form the "negativity driving mechanism," whose influence runs through the entire cognitive processing sequence.

According to information processing theory, information processing can be divided into three stages: attention and information search, perception and information processing, and thinking and decision-making based on information. The negativity driving mechanism top-down influences all three stages. First, in the attention stage, people tend to focus on potential negative rather than positive outcomes of conflict events. Conflict events have both negative implications (such as causing interpersonal discord) and positive implications (such as motivating organizational development). However, from an evolutionary perspective, to ensure survival, individuals must detect and avoid negative stimuli. Therefore, in conflicts, people direct their attention to negative outcomes, meaning the negativity driving mechanism takes effect at the earliest stage of cognitive processing. Second, in the perception stage, people tend to perceive negative information as more severe. Driven by self-protection motivation, individuals need to attach great importance to negative stimuli they notice (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Conflict events have both positive and negative aspects, but the perceptual pathway of the negativity driving mechanism causes people to amplify the negative impact of conflict events in perception, making their negative consequences seem more severe. Third, in the thinking and decision-making stage, people exhibit worrisome thinking, achieving self-protection by anticipating worse negative outcomes to prepare themselves (Dai & Hsee, 2013).

In summary, we propose Hypothesis 2: In conflict events, the negativity driving mechanism causes people to pay more attention to negative stimuli, amplify their perception of consequence severity, adopt worrisome thinking, and rely on biased cognition to make predictions, thereby leading to misprediction.

3.3 Study 3: Consequences of Misprediction Under the Negativity Driving Mechanism

Because conflict events have potential negative consequences, under the negativity driving mechanism, people may adopt avoidance behaviors due to fear of

negative consequences and excessive attempts at self-protection. These behaviors are somewhat adaptive, helping individuals satisfy their needs—for example, avoiding interpersonal conflicts. However, some of these behaviors only treat symptoms rather than root causes, failing to resolve conflicts at their source.

Avoidance behaviors manifest differently across contexts. Specifically, toward conflict targets, avoidance may manifest as interpersonal withdrawal. For example, after rejecting someone' s request, overestimating the rejected person' s negative reaction may cause individuals to actively distance themselves from friends. Toward conflict events, avoidance may manifest as inaction strategies, such as not debunking rumors or avoiding expressing different viewpoints. When rumors spread on social media, using social media to publish and disseminate debunking information is the most effective way to combat misinformation (Tripathy et al., 2013). However, overestimating the harm that debunking might cause to the target may prevent people from refuting false information, allowing rumors to proliferate and endanger social order. Additionally, people may remain silent when holding different viewpoints to avoid expressing dissent, hindering constructive communication (Morrison, 2014). It is necessary to investigate avoidance behaviors in different contexts separately.

In summary, we propose Hypothesis 3: Misprediction in conflict events will cause people to adopt avoidance behaviors due to concerns about negative consequences.

3.4 Study 4: Debiasing Interventions

To improve decision quality, existing research has attempted to eliminate misprediction by targeting the psychological mechanisms underlying it in non-conflict events (Hsee et al., 2021; Zhang & Epley, 2009). Regarding misprediction in conflict events, it sometimes has adaptive value, helping individuals avoid some negative outcomes, but it also carries costs. For misprediction with negative consequences, researchers should implement debiasing interventions. Given the unique manifestations and psychological mechanisms of misprediction in conflict events, it is necessary to develop novel debiasing approaches that target the unique negativity driving mechanism in conflicts.

The key to the negativity driving mechanism is that individuals' cognitive processing is influenced by motivation when facing conflict events. Therefore, prediction bias can be reduced by altering individuals' cognitive processing. There are two specific approaches: On the one hand, we can directly change predictors' cognitive processing styles in attention, perception, and thinking—for example, by directly reducing their attention to negative information. On the other hand, we can indirectly change their cognitive processing by altering their external environment to reduce their self-protection motivation. For instance, creating a safe environment for predictors can reduce their need for self-protection, thereby changing their cognitive processing style and achieving debiasing. This can further test the psychological mechanisms of misprediction in conflict events and

help people maximize benefits while minimizing harm to make accurate predictions. Thus, we propose Hypothesis 4: By directly or indirectly changing predictors' cognitive processing styles when facing conflict events, we can reduce or eliminate misprediction.

4. Theoretical Construction

This project focuses on conflict events, using corresponding non-conflict events as controls, to reveal the unique manifestations and psychological mechanisms of misprediction in conflicts—the "bias-amplification effect" and its "negativity driving mechanism" —thereby contributing to theoretical development regarding misprediction phenomena and mechanisms and constructing a theoretical model of misprediction in conflict events (Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

This theoretical model offers two innovations. First, grounded in a motivated cognition perspective, this project explains the negativity driving mechanism of misprediction and its resulting bias-amplification effect, thereby compensating for previous research' s neglect of motivational influences on misprediction and integrating misprediction with theories of negative bias and motivated cognition to form a more complete theoretical framework.

Phenomenologically, this project reveals that people exhibit greater misprediction in conflict events than in non-conflict events. This also extends the negative bias theory in behavioral decision-making. Previous research has primarily focused on how negative bias affects decision-makers themselves (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). This project extends negative bias to interpersonal processes, arguing that individuals also exhibit negative bias when predicting others—that is, stronger misprediction occurs in negative events such as conflicts compared with non-conflict events. This expands the applicability of negative bias theory, suggesting that researchers should also consider the influence of negative bias when examining interpersonal processes such as prediction.

Mechanistically, from the information-driven perspective of previous research, people face the same objective cognitive limitations regardless of event type, which cannot explain why misprediction is greater in conflict events than in non-conflict events. This project breaks through this perspective' s limitations by proposing, from a motivation-driven perspective, that the negative attributes and potential consequences of conflict events trigger people's self-protection and interpersonal harm avoidance motivations, thereby summarizing the "negativity driving mechanism" of misprediction in conflicts. This mechanism emphasizes the importance of motivation in cognitive processing and advances motivated cognition theory. Existing motivated cognition theories have focused mainly on how motivation affects individuals' internal cognitive processes—for example, how the motivation to obtain good outcomes leads individuals to believe that positive emotions last longer than negative emotions (Mata et al., 2019). This project extends motivated cognition theory to interpersonal interactions. Conflict events often occur in interpersonal interactions, where individuals are not

passive information recipients but actively construct their cognition of external information, such as predicting others' emotional experiences. In interpersonal conflicts, self-protection motivation runs through all stages of cognitive processing, causing predictors to focus on negative information, use it to predict others, and consequently lead to avoidance behaviors. Interpersonal interaction is more complex than internal cognition, requiring individuals to think about what others think, and this project demonstrates that motivated cognition can similarly guide people' s actions in such complex social processes.

Second, this project transcends traditional understanding of rationality by providing a dialectical analysis of misprediction from an ecological rationality perspective. Previous research focused only on objective cognitive limitations, viewing them as causing misprediction with negative consequences (Epley et al., 2002; Savitsky et al., 2001), while neglecting that under active cognitive regulation, misprediction can serve individuals' motivations and needs. This project reveals the adaptive function of the negativity driving mechanism of misprediction, prompting researchers to re-examine "what constitutes rationality" and enhancing the influence of the ecological rationality perspective.

Finally, this project contributes to conflict management. Revealing the patterns and psychological mechanisms of misprediction in conflicts can effectively improve conflict management capabilities and efficiency for individuals, enterprises, and governments, providing scientific foundations for conflict management. Designing debiasing interventions to reduce misprediction with negative consequences can help people remain rational and objective, benefiting both themselves and others, and facilitate efficient conflict resolution and contradiction reconciliation, ultimately preventing decision errors and improving decision quality. For individuals, understanding the causes of misprediction in conflicts helps accurately predict others, adopt rational approaches to resolve interpersonal contradictions, and make reasonable decisions. For enterprises, accurately predicting consumers' , client companies' , or competitors' preferences, thoughts, and reactions in conflict events can enhance conflict management capabilities and efficiency, provide targeted services based on others' ideas, adopt effective public relations strategies, respond to conflicts purposefully, and achieve mutual benefit and win-win outcomes. For governments and social governance actors, understanding the manifestations and psychological mechanisms of misprediction in conflicts can enable precise understanding of social conflicts, grasp the focal points of social contradictions from their sources, and facilitate guidance and control of social event development. Mastering debiasing interventions can help eliminate biases among social members and improve social atmosphere. In short, research findings on misprediction in conflict events will provide scientific foundations for precise social governance.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.