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Open communication is important for maintaining relationships when conflicts inevitably arise. Nevertheless, people may avoid constructive confrontation to the extent that they expect others to respond negatively. In experiments involving recalled (Experiment 1), imagined (Experiment 2), simulated (Experiment 3), and actual confrontations (Experiments 4a and 4b), we find that people's expectations are systematically miscalibrated such that they overestimate how negatively others respond to confrontation. These overly negative expectations stem, at least in part, from biased attention to potentially negative outcomes of a constructive confrontation (Experiment 5), and from failing to recognize the power of relationship-maintenance processes that are activated in direct conversations (Experiment 6). Underestimating how positively relationship partners will respond to an open, direct, and honest conversation about relationship concerns may create a misplaced barrier to confronting issues when they arise in relationships, thereby keeping people from confronting issues that would strengthen their relationships.

Public Significance Statement

We report a series of experiments indicating that people's interest in having constructive confrontations is based in part on their expectations of how the people they are confronting will respond, but these expectations are overly pessimistic, meaning people systematically underestimate how positively others will respond when being confronted. In recalled, hypothetical, and actual confrontations between roommates and romantic partners, people in the role of the confronter expected more negative reactions than those who were being confronted imagined, reported, and actually exhibited. Misunderstanding how positively others would respond to an honest conversation about a problematic relationship issue may leave people overly reluctant to have the kinds of difficult conversations that are important for their relationships to thrive.

Keywords: confrontation, conversation, interpersonal relationships, social cognition, well-being

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001528.supp

Conflict is an inevitable part of social life. Whether it is a roommate who does not respect your privacy, a coworker slacking-off on a project, or a romantic partner being emotionally distant, problems eventually arise in any relationship. Discussing these issues constructively in open and honest conversations can be critical for maintaining and strengthening relationships (Gottman, 1998; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2009). However, people may avoid constructive confrontations meant to repair relationships because they expect that their partner will respond poorly. We predict that these expectations are systematically miscalibrated such that people underestimate the positive outcomes of constructive confrontations, leading them to mistakenly avoid opportunities for addressing concerns that would improve the quality of their relationships.

Open communication is an important component of positive relationships. Longitudinal studies consistently demonstrate that directly confronting serious issues in conversation increases relationship longevity and satisfaction (Gottman, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009). More generally, expressing one's feelings in a relationship increases intimacy and

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James A. Dungan served as lead for data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and writing–original draft. Nicholas Epley served as lead for supervision and served in a supporting role for formal analysis, investigation, methodology, and writing–original draft. James A. Dungan and Nicholas Epley contributed equally to conceptualization and writing–review and editing.

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reduces stress compared to concealing one's feelings (Butler et al., 2003; Srivastava et al., 2009). Directly confronting serious issues can also have positive intrapersonal consequences, increasing feelings of empowerment, closure, and positive affect (Hyers, 2007). Talking through problems in a relationship can help to alleviate them.

Avoiding confrontation, in contrast, can harm both interpersonal relationships and personal well-being. In organizational settings, avoiding confrontation is associated with impairments in productivity and cooperation (Bies et al., 1997), increases in emotional exhaustion (Hershcovis et al., 2018), and declines in health and self-confidence (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). The mental effort required to hide or conceal information has also been found to diminish intellectual acuity, interpersonal restraint, physical stamina, and physical health (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Slepian et al., 2017). In romantic relationships, avoiding conversations about relationship concerns predicts lower relationship satisfaction and emotional closeness (Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Roloff & Ifert, 1998; Sargent, 2002), and is also a strong predictor of later divorce for married couples (Birditt et al., 2010; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Avoiding confrontation is not simply ineffective for conflict resolution, it can actually be harmful to one's relationships and well-being.

These conclusions are supported not only by cross-sectional studies conducted within single laboratory sessions but also by longitudinal field studies. For example, in a 3-week diary study of 73 heterosexual romantic couples, suppressing one's emotional displays during conflict led people to report handling their conflicts more poorly the following day (Experiment 2, Thomson et al., 2018). Similarly, in a study of 100 married couples who documented marital conflict during a 15-day period, withdrawing from conflict was associated with greater psychological distress (Papp et al., 2007). Moreover, although avoiding conflict may feel less aversive in the short-term, phone interviews with over 1,000 adults conducted over eight consecutive days indicated that avoiding conflict on 1 day predicted lower well-being the following day (Birditt et al., 2015). Compared to experiencing no conflict, people reported more negative affect and had higher cortisol levels the day after avoiding a confrontation, suggesting a significant cost to leaving issues unresolved. For those wanting to maintain rewarding relationships, directly confronting the inevitable challenges that arise seems more beneficial than avoiding them.

Despite the positive outcomes associated with constructive confrontation, people often seem reluctant to engage in it. A large-scale diary study collecting verbal accounts of 1,618 interpersonal tensions found that people actively addressed the tension (e.g., by having an open discussion about it or reaching a compromise) in only 23% of cases (Birditt et al., 2005). Similarly, when facing mistreatment at work, most employees attempt to ignore or avoid the issue rather than confront it directly (Cortina & Magley, 2009; Hyers, 2007; Salin et al., 2014). If most people prefer strong relationships, then why do they seem reluctant to engage in the constructive confrontations that appear important for creating them?

One clear reason people may choose to avoid confrontation is that they expect others to respond negatively to being confronted. According to the risk regulation model (Murray et al., 2006), interactions that pose threats to a relationship, such as confrontation, prompt people to assess how responsive their partner might be to their needs and emotions. When people expect their partner to respond negatively, they may avoid the confrontation to protect their relationship (Afifi & Afifi, 2020; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Indeed, people report avoiding difficult discussions with their partners when they are uncertain about the strength of their relationship and are afraid to threaten it (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). To further test the link between willingness to confront and expected reactions to being confronted, we conducted a pilot test ($N = 167$, see Experiment S1 in the online supplemental materials) in which participants imagined confronting a person in their life whom they have an unresolved issue with. Even when controlling for the severity of the issue and people's ability to effectively communicate their feelings, the more negatively they expected someone to respond, the less likely people reported being to confront them, $B = .457$, $SE = 0.149$, $t(161) = 3.073$, $p = .002$. These results suggest that expecting a negative reaction is a meaningful barrier to engaging in constructive confrontation.

Of course, considering another's reaction before having a difficult conversation makes great sense because it is a key determinant of whether confrontation may yield relatively positive or negative outcomes. Although constructive confrontation can improve relationships and increase well-being when well-intended behavior is reciprocated, confrontation could harm relationships and diminish well-being if a partner instead withdraws or avoids confrontation (Birditt et al., 2010). This "demand-withdraw" pattern of behavior where one partner who wishes to discuss an issue is met with a partner who would rather avoid or end the discussion is especially harmful to relationships (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Eldridge et al., 2007; Papp et al., 2009). Wisely choosing to confront or avoid therefore requires having well-calibrated expectations about another's reaction.

Here we propose that people's expectations about confrontation are, in fact, systematically miscalibrated in a way that could make people overly reluctant to engage in constructive confrontations. Specifically, we predict that people, on average, tend to overestimate how negatively another person will respond to a constructive confrontation because their expectations are inordinately focused on the negative content to be shared in the conversation, failing to appreciate how social forces present in the context in which the conversation could yield surprisingly positive outcomes. This miscalibration would be shown in a consistent mean difference between people's expectations about how another person will respond in a confrontation, and hence how positive the interaction will be, and either their own actual experience of that confrontation or in the experience reported by the person being confronted.

In existing relationships, threats typically trigger psychological processes meant to diminish the threat and thereby maintain the relationship. For example, people may change their behavior to accommodate another's concerns rather than retaliate or withdraw in a way that would further damage a desired relationship (Murray et al., 2015). Because people tend to reciprocate others' actions, approaching a conversation about an issue constructively out of concern for a relationship's well-being may create a mutually reinforcing cycle of increasing responsiveness to each other's needs (Clark & Mills, 2001; Reis et al., 2011). However, these relationship-maintenance mechanisms (Finkel et al., 2017)—such as reciprocity, compliance, accommodation, and rationalization—are dynamic social forces that tend to be systematically underestimated in people's expectations (Bohns, 2016; Gilbert et al., 2004; Joel et al., 2014; Mallett et al., 2008). In cases of constructive confrontation, the negative content of the conflict or issue being discussed is likely to be highly accessible in people's attention (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), whereas the

relationship-maintenance processes triggered by a constructive confrontation are more distal and uncertain, and hence less likely to be guiding people's expectations (Epley et al., 2022). This attentional bias could lead people to expect more negative reactions to a direct confrontation than they actually experience, leading people to avoid confrontation more often than might be ideal for both their relationships and their own well-being.

Our hypothesis builds on existing research suggesting that people tend to underestimate how positively others will respond to communication expressed with prosocial intent, including direct honesty (Gromet & Pronin, 2009; Levine & Cohen, 2018), expressions of social support (Dungan et al., 2022), gratitude (Kumar & Epley, 2018), requests for help (Zhao & Epley, 2022), and authentic compliments (Zhao & Epley, 2021a, 2021b). In the context of confrontation, romantic partners in one study tended to believe that positive indirect communication was a more successful strategy than direct communication for resolving their issues, even though only direct strategies predicted positive change over the next year (Overall et al., 2009). This result at least implies that people may also underestimate the positive consequences of constructive confrontation. No research, however, has examined whether people's expectations of others' reactions to confrontation are systematically miscalibrated in the way we predict. We believe our hypothesis matters because, if confirmed, it suggests that miscalibrated expectations keep people from approaching problems in their relationships in a way that would improve both their own and their relationship partner's well-being.

We test our hypothesis by focusing on constructive confrontations in which people attempt to address an issue with the goal of improving or strengthening a relationship. Given the diversity of contexts in which these confrontations can occur, and the difficulty of studying confrontations experimentally, we use a multimethod approach to capitalize on unique strengths, and address unique weaknesses, of any single paradigm. Using recalled (Experiment 1), imagined (Experiment 2), simulated (Experiment 3), and actual confrontations (Experiments 4a and 4b), we test the extent to which people's expectations of how others respond to confrontation are calibrated. We believe this multimethod approach provides the best test of our hypotheses, because each method has its own weakness, but the diverse methods do not share the same weakness. Support for our hypotheses therefore comes from the convergence of evidence across these methods.

Experiment 5 then tests our hypothesis that people's expectations are systematically biased by attention to negative outcomes and also tests our hypothesis that overly negative expectations could act as a psychological barrier to constructive confrontation. Finally, we test one factor that our theorizing suggests should moderate the extent to which people's expectations are miscalibrated: The extent to which a situation enables the social forces of relationship maintenance. Specifically, we use simulated confrontations to manipulate whether people engage in a live dyadic conversation with another person, enabling the relationship-maintenance processes that occur in constructive confrontations, or simply exchange their views in a series of monologues (Experiment 6). We predict that people's expectations will be relatively insensitive to the context in which a confrontation occurs, but that their experience of confrontations will be significantly more positive in live dyadic exchanges, yielding significantly greater miscalibration in the contexts of a conversation when social forces are relatively strong than in contexts where those forces are relatively weak.

Transparency and Openness

All experiments were approved by The University of Chicago Institutional Review Board and all participants provided informed consent. Preregistrations, experimental data, and materials for all experiments have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at: https://osf.io/zt9se/?view_only=e0bb7ff1fbd549988d04030334708562 (Dungan & Epley, 2022). Across experiments, we included different items to measure positive versus negative responses to confrontation. In some cases, we preregistered specific predictions for these individual items. Because it does not change our conclusions in any way, we report results for composite measures of highly correlated items in the main text to ease presentation. We report the full preregistered analyses in Table S2 in the online supplemental materials.

Experiment 1—Recalled Confrontations

People confront each other in daily life for a wide variety of different reasons that cannot be easily replicated in experimental settings. To test our hypotheses across this wide variety of situations, we asked one group of participants to recall a time when they were confronted by someone else, to describe what they were confronted about, and then to report how they responded in the confrontation. We then recruited another group of participants to read one description of a recalled confrontation, imagine confronting the person in this situation, and then report how they expected the person they were confronting would actually respond to the situation. We predicted that those who were imagining confronting someone would expect more negative responses and experiences than those who were reporting how they actually responded to being confronted.

Although people's memory for events is imperfect, it is difficult to know a priori how this might affect our hypotheses. Perhaps people recall especially negative confrontations that ended poorly, and hence are especially memorable, thereby leading those who were confronted to remember especially negative experiences (potentially in contrast to our hypotheses)? Or, people might recall especially positive confrontations that ended well, and hence are especially memorable, thereby leading those who were confronted to remember especially positive experiences (potentially in line with our hypotheses)? Or, perhaps memory recall is not systematically biased in a way that might be related to our hypotheses? To limit any potential systematic biases in the retelling of the events recalled from memory, we simply asked people to provide brief descriptions of the events and to identify who confronted them, and we utilized only those descriptions that described actual concrete events that could be easily presented to another participant who was imagining confronting this person. To address concerns about memory biases altogether, we use all of the examples collected in Experiment 1 as stimuli for Experiment 2 in which participants imagine confronting another person rather than recalling a confrontation, therefore removing concerns about memory biases creating differences in perspective entirely.

Method

Participants

We first recruited 160 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for the confronted condition where participants described a

time when someone confronted them for doing something that was unethical or wrong. Of these participants, 114 described a specific, identifiable situation that could be presented as stimuli to other participants. We then recruited a separate group of 114 participants for the confronter condition, in which they imagined confronting someone in one of the situations described by a participant in the confronted condition. This yielded a final sample of 228 participants for the following analyses (94 female, 133 male, one other identity; age: $M = 34.15$, $SD = 11.01$).

Procedure

Participants in the confronted condition were first asked to think about a time they were "doing something that was unethical or wrong and somebody confronted [them] about [their] behavior," and then asked to write down the unethical behavior they were engaging in without using names. Participants wrote short descriptions of their action, such as "at work I was handling patient information the incorrect way I was not keeping it safe," "Cheating on my significant other," or "Eating my roommates' food." Participants then indicated who confronted them: a family member, a friend, a coworker, my boss, my employee, an acquaintance, a stranger, or other (please explain). We then used these descriptions of the event and the identity of the confronter to create scenarios for participants in the confronted condition to evaluate. The examples above, for instance, were edited to, "Imagine you confronted a co-worker about handling patient information the incorrect way and not keeping it safe," "Imagine you confronted your significant other for cheating on you," and "Imagine you confronted your roommate about eating your food."

Participants in the confronted condition then rated a series of items measuring their general emotional and behavioral response to being confronted. We generated these items based on our belief that participants would generally be confronting another person about a negative interpersonal issue, and therefore presumed that anger and hostility would be expected during the interaction and that the person being confronted might be expected to feel guilty and upset about the unethical behavior. To measure these possible emotions, participants first rated the extent to which a series of emotion words (presented in a random order) described the way they felt when they were confronted (5-point scale from *not at all* to *extremely*). Four words were averaged into an anger composite (angry, aggressive, hostile, and irritable; $\alpha = .90$), another four into a guilt composite (guilty, remorseful, distressed, and ashamed; $\alpha = .86$). Another four positive filler words were not analyzed according to our preregistration, because we did not expect that participants would anticipate or experience positive emotions from this experience (happy, excited, enthusiastic, proud). We report non-preregistered analyses of a composite of these positive filler words in a footnote in the "Results" section at the request of an anonymous reviewer.

As our primary measure, we also wanted to assess more general aspects of the confrontation and its outcomes, assessing how positive the overall response was to the confrontation. To do so, participants rated five items using 7-point scale that we averaged together to form a "positive response" composite ($\alpha = .85$): how positively or negatively they responded (*extremely negatively* to *extremely positively*), their overall impression of the confronter (*extremely negative* to *extremely positive*), how their relationship with the confronter changed (*become more distant* to *become closer*), how much they felt like retaliating against the confronter (*not at all* to *very much*), and how much they liked the person confronting them (*not at all* to *very much*). Finally, participants reported if they retaliated against the confronter in some way (yes/no).

Each participant in the confronter condition was shown one of the behaviors described by a participant in the confronted condition and told to imagine confronting someone in that situation. Confronters then indicated how they expected someone would respond to being confronted on the same questions used in the confronted condition. For example, instead of being asked, "What was your overall impression of the person confronting you?" the confronters were asked, "If you confronted this person, what do you think his/her overall impression of you would be?"

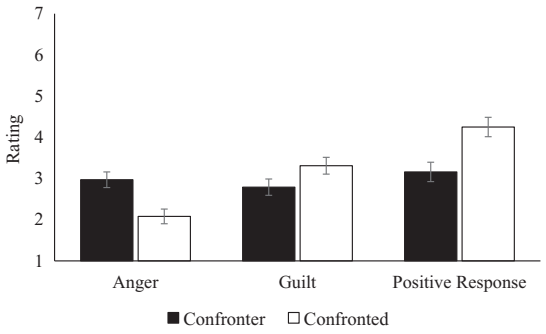
Results

Participants who imagined confronting someone (confronters) consistently overestimated how negative the confrontation would be compared to the recalled response of the people who had actually been confronted (see Figure 1). Confronters believed that the people being confronted would feel more anger, paired $t(113) = -6.48$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.61$, and less guilt, paired $t(113) = 3.57$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.34$, than the participants who were confronted reported actually feeling. Confronters also believed that the confronted would respond less positively than participants who were confronted reported actually responding, paired $t(113) = 6.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.61$. Finally, 43 confronters (38%) expected that the person they imagined confronting would retaliate, whereas only one of the 114 participants in the confronted condition (1%) reported actually retaliating, $\chi^2(1, N = 228) = 49.7$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .47$.[1]

These results are consistent with our hypothesis that people systematically underestimate how positively others will respond to constructive confrontation. Although asking participants to recall previous confrontations in their lives allowed us to assess confrontations across a wide variety of naturally occurring and ecologically valid situations, any procedure relying on memory recall could theoretically be explained by some biased process of recalling experiences. It is also possible that those recalling a confrontation may have described their confrontation in a way that made it sound more negative than it actually appeared to them, even though we attempted to avoid this by only using short and concrete descriptions of the events themselves. Finally, it is possible that the confrontations people have in daily life are uniquely tailored to the person being confronted, in a way that might make it a more positive experience for the person

[1] Analyses of a composite of the four positive emotion filler words ($\alpha = .90$) indicated that participants did not anticipate consistent positive emotions in their confrontation, with 73.3% of those who reported being confronted providing the lowest possible score of 1 (yielding a median of 1) on this composite measure and 49.2% of those who imagined confronting doing the same (yielding a median of 1.25). Ratings on these filler items are therefore highly skewed, especially in the confronted condition. Nevertheless, analyses following the same method as the guilt and anger composites indicates, interestingly, that confronters expected significantly stronger positive emotions ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.14$) than did those who imagined being confronted ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 0.57$), paired $t(113) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$. Because so many participants in the confronted condition provide responses at the floor of the scale, a log transformation does not yield a more normal distribution of responses in this condition. We report the same analysis of these items for Experiment 2 as well.

Figure 1
Expected Versus Recalled Reactions to Confrontation (Experiment 1)



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

being confronted than would be true of the average person that the confronters in Experiment 1 might have imagined.

To address any concerns about either recalling or describing a past experience and to isolate the role of perspective more directly, we transformed the experiences described in Experiment 1 into hypothetical scenarios and asked participants in Experiment 2 to imagine either being the confronter or the person being confronted. This enabled us to examine expected reactions to the same controlled events from both perspectives—those confronting and those being confronted. If any of the alternative interpretations mentioned in the preceding paragraph explain why people underestimate how positively others respond to constructive confrontation in a recalled experience, then we would not observe similar results when people imagine either confronting or being confronted in these situations in Experiment 2.

Experiment 2—Imagined Confrontations

Method

Participants

We recruited 200 MTurk participants (85 female, 114 male, one other identity; age: $M = 33.77$, $SD = 10.17$).

Procedure

The 114 unique experiences we obtained in Experiment 1 represented a smaller number of recognizable confrontation situations that we transformed into 32 hypothetical scenarios (word count: $M = 30.66$, $SD = 11.34$) involving a variety of different relational contexts (e.g., coworker, friend, romantic partner, family). We then randomly assigned participants to imagine either confronting, or being confronted by, someone in eight randomly selected scenarios out of the possible 32. These participants first rated the problem's seriousness (*not at all* to *extremely*) and the extent to which they thought both sides could agree on a solution (*no*, *definitely not* to *yes*, *definitely*) on a 5-point scale. Participants in the confronter condition then reported how they expected the person being confronted would respond in the scenario. We measured anger and guilt using composites of four emotion words as in Experiment 1 (anger: $\alpha = .95$; guilt: $\alpha = .94$), and also included four filler words that we did not analyze according to our preregistration but that we report in a footnote. Four additional items measured how confronters expected the person being confronted to respond (as in Experiment 1; $\alpha = .79$): How positively or negatively they would respond, their overall impression of the confronter, how their relationship with the confronter would change, and their likelihood of retaliating against the confronter (*extremely unlikely* to *extremely likely*; reverse coded). Participants in the being confronted condition answered the same questions as confronters to report how they would respond in the scenario.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we averaged participants' evaluations across the eight scenarios they evaluated and analyzed them at the level of the participant. Confronters and those being confronted did not differ significantly in the perceived seriousness of the scenarios, $t(198) < 1$, $d = 0.07$ (Figure 2), meaning that any differences in expected reactions to the confrontation are not fully explained by perceiving the issue itself differently. In contrast, confronters thought there was a smaller chance that both sides could agree on a solution to the problem compared to those being confronted, $t(198) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.58$. Confronters also expected the person being confronted to feel more anger, $t(198) = -4.12$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.58$, and respond less positively, $t(198) = 4.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$, than those who imagined being confronted. Unlike in Experiment 1, we observed a nonsignificant difference in expected guilt, $t(198) < 1$, $d = 0.03$.[2]

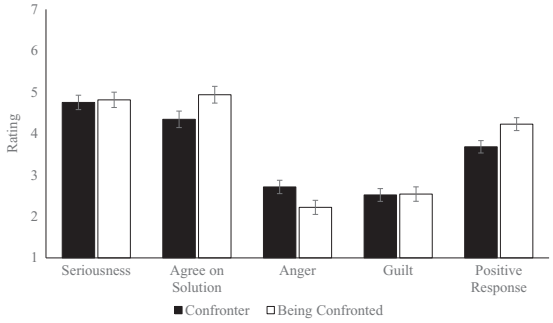
In addition to this preregistered analysis plan, we also conducted two additional post hoc analyses, at the recommendation of an anonymous reviewer, to account for the dependency in evaluations across the eight scenarios participants evaluated that we describe fully in the online supplemental materials. Analyzing only the first scenario participants evaluated, and conducting a 2 (role: confronter vs. confronted) × 8 (scenario order: first, second, … eighth) analysis of variance (ANOVA), both yield results consistent with our primary analysis plan reported above. Overall, these results suggest that even though both perspectives perceived the issue to be similarly serious, those who imagined confronting someone anticipated a more negative response overall than those who imagined actually being confronted.

To test the robustness of this effect further, we conducted a follow-up experiment in which we manipulated whether participants were told that both sides agreed or disagreed about the seriousness of the issue (reported in Experiment S2 in the online supplemental materials). This experiment replicated the primary effects of Experiment 2. Although both roles expected a more negative reaction overall when the two parties disagreed (vs. agreed) about the issue at hand, those who imagined confronting the target anticipated a more negative reaction across all conditions than those who imagined being confronted.

The results of Experiment 1, Experiment 2, and Experiment S2 in the online supplemental materials are consistent with our hypotheses that confronters overestimate how negatively those being confronted

[2] As in Experiment 1, we again analyzed the four filler words that described positive emotions as a composite measure ($\alpha = .92$) at the suggestion of an anonymous review. Participants again did not believe they would expect or experience very strong positive emotions, but the distributions were not as skewed as in Experiment 1. We observed a nonsignificant difference between participants who imagined confronting ($M = 1.679$, $SD = .948$) or being confronted ($M = 1.613$, $SD = 0.908$), $t < 0.51$, $p = .62$.

Figure 2
Ratings of Confrontations Made From the Perspective of Confronter Versus Being Confronted (Experiment 2)



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

will respond, but they rest on a presumption that those being confronted are accurately reporting how they would respond in a live confrontation. Recalled and imagined confrontations could, theoretically, differ from actual responses to confrontation. To test if people being confronted do indeed respond more positively than confronters expect, Experiments 3–5 examine expectations and experiences in live confrontations. Although creating opportunities for actual confrontations in this way somewhat limits ecological validity in that participants are not choosing when to confront someone about an issue, creating a confrontation allows us to carefully measure how expectations of the impending conversation compare to the actual experiences of both parties. We again predicted that confronters will expect the person they are confronting to respond more negatively than those being confronted actually do.

In Experiment 3, we created an opportunity for confrontation by having people simulate a situation that we felt our participants would find easy to identify with: Working on a group project in which a group leader is concerned about another group member shirking their responsibilities. Simulated confrontations provide the opportunity to carefully control the context in which a live confrontation happens and provide a means of ethically altering that context to investigate the mechanisms that might be responsible for miscalibrated expectations (which we do in Experiment 5). We provided precise details about the situation to increase the psychological realism of the simulation (Mook, 1983), activating psychological processes that we expected would be similar to those that would arise in actual confront. Finding convergent evidence consistent with Experiments 1 and 2, and with actual confrontations that we examine in Experiments 4a and 4b, would suggest that this approach provides valid tests of our hypotheses.

Experiment 3—Simulated Confrontations

Method

Participants

Two hundred thirty-eight people from around the world attending an International Executive Master of Business Administration (MBA) Program orientation event served as participants in this experiment. We excluded six participants from all analyses because they did not consent to their data being used for research purposes and another six participants because they did not complete the experiment, leaving 226 participants (70 female, 156 male; age: $M = 36.97$, $SD = 5.42$) in the following analyses.

Procedure

Participants engaged in a simulated confrontation between two MBA students working on a group project and were randomly assigned one of two roles: Alex or Jordan. Participants read a one-page description about the scenario and background information describing their role's perspective in detail. In summary, Alex believes that Jordan is not taking the group project seriously enough and is disrupting the group, whereas Jordan believes that Alex is too competitive and controlling in a way that harms the group's morale. The descriptions concluded by saying that the two group members "would be meeting today for coffee to talk about their issues with the group project." The roles stated that this talk is meant to be constructive and should be viewed as an opportunity to address any concerns between the group members.

After reading about their role, participants completed an online survey reporting their expectations about the conversation they were about to have with another participant. All survey items were measured on 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*. Participants first rated how serious they considered the problems they are having with the other group member to be and how uncertain they were about how their conversation will go. Participants then rated how they expected the other group member would respond emotionally and behaviorally during their conversation. Specifically, participants rated how angry and how guilty the group member would feel on individual items rather than the four-item composites used in Experiments 1 and 2. Six additional items measured their general expectations of how positively the group member would respond during their conversation ($\alpha = .79$): how positive their response would be, how willing they would be to change their behavior, how likely it is that the conversation would lead to an improvement in the group, how negative their response would be, how uncomfortable the conversation will be, and the extent to which they would behave defensively (these last three items were reverse coded).

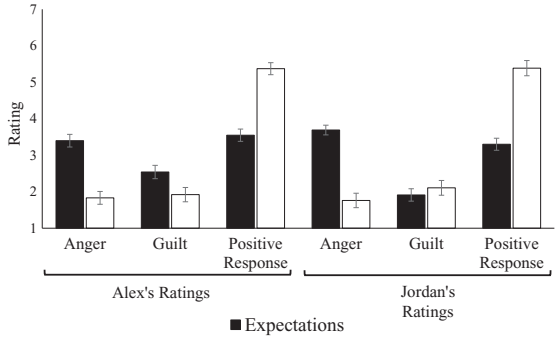
After reporting their expectations, participants were randomly paired with someone from the opposite role to have a real conversation for approximately 10 min about their issues. When the conversation was over, the pairs returned to their seats and completed the online survey to report their experience using the same measures as before, only phrased in the past tense (e.g., "how negative *was* Jordan's/Alex's response to this conversation?"). Note that, unlike in the preceding experiments, participants are not reporting on their own behavior in the confrontation (or how they would imagine responding in Experiment 2), but rather are reporting on how they perceived their partner to respond in the conversation. Our key comparison then is between how people expected their partner would respond to the confrontation and their own report of how their partner actually responded in the confrontation.

Results

As shown in Figure 3, participants in both roles experienced the confrontation as significantly more positive than they expected.

Figure 3

Comparison of Expectations Versus Experiences of a Simulated Confrontation (Experiment 3)



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

Separate 2 (measure: expectation vs. experiences) × 2 (role: Alex vs. Jordan) mixed-model ANOVAs on anger and positive response revealed significant main effects for the measure, Fs(1, 224) = −513.45 and 543.57, respectively, ps < .001. As predicted, participants rated their group member as being less angry, paired $t(225) = -22.43$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.49$, and responding more positively, paired $t(225) = 23.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.55$, in the actual conversation than they had expected before the conversation. We observed an Unpredicted Role × Measure interaction only for anticipated anger, $F(1, 224) = -5.53$, $p = .02$, with participants in the Jordan role predicting that their partner would feel more anger than participants in the Alex role, paired $t(224) = 2.60$, $p = .010$, $d = 0.35$, even though the roles did not report different experiences of anger during the actual confrontation, paired $t(224) < 1$, $d = 0.07$.

Ratings of guilt showed a different pattern that we did not predict, which varied by role. A 2 (measure: predicted vs. actual) × 2 (role: Alex vs. Jordan) mixed-model ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the measure, $F(1, 224) = -6.13$, $p = .014$, qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 224) = 22.53$, $p < .001$. Participants in the Alex role reported that the participant in the Jordan role felt less guilty than they expected, paired $t(112) = -5.02$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$, whereas participants in the Jordan role reported a nonsignificant effect in the opposite direction, paired $t(112) = 1.63$, $p = .105$, $d = 0.15$. Interestingly, evaluations of guilt seem inconsistent across scenarios, an outcome we will discuss further in the "General Discussion."

To test the robustness of these results further while also examining additional hypotheses, we replicated this simulation with another 96 participants (see Experiment S3 in the online supplemental materials for full details and results). In addition to reporting how they expected their partner to respond to the constructive confrontation, participants also reported their expectations of their own response to the confrontation. This simulation therefore tests whether people primarily misunderstand others' reactions to confrontation, misunderstand their own reaction to confrontation, or both. Results indicated that participants again significantly underestimated how positively their partner would respond to the confrontation. Participants also significantly underestimated how positively they would personally respond, but to a significantly smaller extent. Perhaps not surprisingly, people misunderstood other people's reactions to constructive confrontation more than they misunderstood their own reactions.

Although testing our hypotheses using a simulation has clear strengths, including tight experimental control over the context of a live interaction, it comes with obvious weaknesses as well, including sampling only a single situation that could yield idiosyncratic results and also examining simulated confrontations rather than "real" confrontations. To address both of these issues, along with providing additional tests of our basic hypotheses, Experiments 4a and 4b examine actual confrontations between roommates and romantic partners, respectively, about some genuine issues in their relationship. In both experiments, participants came with another person to the experiment (either with a roommate or romantic partner), but only knew from the study advertisement that they would be having "an open conversation" with their partner as part of an experiment on interpersonal communication. To enable natural conversations without participants feeling like their interactions were observed, we did not record any of the interactions and hence are unable to say anything about the precise contents of participants' conversations. Participants in Experiment 4a completed the experiment as part of a large group session, where participants had their dyadic conversations while spread out in large lecture halls. Participants in Experiment 4b completed the experiment one pair at a time and had their conversations in a private room. We again predicted that people would expect a more negative reaction from their partner in the confrontation than they actually experience.

Experiment 4a—Actual Confrontation Between Roommates

Method

Participants

Participants were the total number of roommate pairs ($N = 23$) who attended a scheduled evening testing session near the end of the Spring Quarter of the academic year (34 female, 12 male; age: $M = 21.20$, $SD = 5.52$). This number was fewer than we had hoped but was nevertheless a sample we felt was worth analyzing in the context of follow-up experiments that obtained larger sample sizes. These roommates had known each other for a minimum of 9 months and a maximum of 4 years ($M = 2.04$ years, $SD = 1.03$). Thirteen of the 23 pairs planned on living together for at least another year.

Procedure

Participants signed up for an experiment about interpersonal communication involving an open and honest conversation with their roommate in which they would share some things they like and some things they dislike in their relationship. Roommate pairs were separated into neighboring large lecture halls to complete an online survey on their phones in private. To begin, both participants wrote about something they liked and something they disliked about their roommate's behavior to avoid confounding the information participants generated about their relationship with the role that they would be randomly assigned to (confronter or confronted). To make sure the disliked attribute was something that participants could confront their partners about, the survey asked the following:

> Please write a few sentences describing a problem or issue you have with your roommate's behavior that you feel isn't fully resolved. This should

be a specific thing he/she does that bothers you in some way and that you wish he/she would stop or do differently.

Participants were then told that they would be having a conversation with their roommate in a few minutes about the problem they described. Participants then reported how they expected their roommate would respond. Using the same items as in our previous experiments on 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*, participants reported how angry and guilty they expected their partner would feel during the conversation. Participants also reported how positively they expected their roommate to respond across six items ($\alpha = .71$): The extent to which their roommate will be defensive (reverse coded), work cooperatively with them to improve the problem, how positively they will respond, how their relationship will change, the extent to which the conversation will improve the problem, and how uncomfortable the conversation will be (reverse coded). Participants finally rated how serious they considered the issue to be.

After reporting their expectations, roommates approached an experimenter who randomly assigned them to the role of either "S" and "L," neutral labels we used to designate the role of confronter and confronted. Once all roommates were assigned a role, the experimenters explained that people with an "S" on their card (confronters) would begin a conversation with their roommate by telling them about the problem or issue they wrote about. People with an "L" on their card (confronted) were instructed to simply respond to their roommate, however, they naturally would. Experimenters emphasized that participants were free to conduct the conversation in any way they liked, although we asked that the conversation focus on the issue that the first roommate raised. We asked that the conversations wrap up after approximately 15 min.

When finished, roommates were again separated to privately complete the online survey. Confronters reported how their partner actually responded to the conversation on the same measures as before (e.g., "To what extent *did* your roommate behave defensively?" rather than "To what extent *will* your roommate behave defensively?"). Those being confronted reported their own experience of the conversation (e.g., "To what extent *did you* behave defensively?"). To check that participants actually discussed the problems they reported their expectations about, confronters reported how honest they were when talking with their partner about their problem (7-point scale from *not at all* to *extremely*) and those being confronted completed a free response question asking them to describe the problem that the confronter raised.

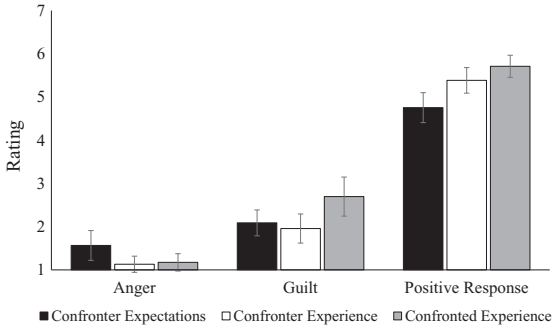
Results

Roommates discussed issues that were moderately serious, on average, but varied along the entire range of the scale across dyads ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.46$, range = 1–5). Confronters reported being extremely honest with their roommate ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 0.665$; minimum = 5). Participants being confronted were all able to correctly describe the problem that confronters said they would raise when making their predictions, confirming that the intended topic was actually discussed.

Confronters experienced their roommate as being less angry, paired $t(22) = -2.65$, $p = .015$, $d = -0.55$, and responding more positively, paired $t(22) = 3.17$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.66$, than they expected before the conversation (see Figure 4). These positive

Figure 4

Confronters' Expectations Compared to the Actual Experience of Both Confronters and Confronted in Experiment 4a



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

experiences matched the reported experiences of those who were confronted, anger: paired $t(22) = 0.57$, $p = .575$, $d = 0.12$; positive response: paired $t(22) = 2.12$, $p = .046$, $d = 0.44$, which was similarly more positive than the confronters expected, $ps < .001$. Confronters' expectations about how much guilt their partner would feel did not differ significantly from their experience, paired $t(22) = -0.55$, $p = .589$, $d = -0.11$, but those who were confronted reported actually experiencing more guilt than the confronters initially expected, paired $t(22) = 2.18$, $p = .040$, $d = 0.45$, and more than the confronters believed their partner experienced after the conversation, paired $t(22) = 3.51$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.73$.

Although confronters overestimated how negatively roommates would respond to confrontation on average, it is still possible that each confronter had some unique insight into how their particular roommate would respond to confrontation. Such insight would be revealed by significant correlations between confronters' expectations and their roommates' reported experiences, indicating that confronters' expectations are at least somewhat aligned with their own roommates' actual experiences. These correlational measures of accuracy are sometimes referred to as resolution or discrimination, whereas the mean-level differences are referred to as miscalibration or bias (Epley & Dunning, 2006; Liberman & Tversky, 1993). However, we observed nonsignificant correlations for ratings of anger, $r(21) = -.03$, $p = .897$; guilt, $r(21) = -.02$, $p = .921$; and positive response, $r(21) = -.01$, $p = .947$, suggesting that confronters had little unique insight into how their roommates would actually respond to confrontation. Confronters' expectations were also only weakly correlated with their own ratings of their roommate's experience after their conversation on measures of anger, $r(21) = .39$, $p = .067$; guilt, $r(21) = -.07$, $p = .756$; and positive response, $r(21) = .27$, $p = .212$. In contrast, we observed larger correlations between confronters' ratings of their roommate's experience of confrontation and their roommate's ratings of their experience; anger, $r(21) = .70$, $p < .001$; guilt, $r(21) = .48$, $p = .019$; response, $r(21) = .41$, $p = .053$, indicating a reasonably high degree of shared experience in the confrontation itself.

The results of Experiment 4a indicate that both confronters and those being confronted experienced a constructive confrontation more positively than confronters initially predicted, supporting our

key hypothesis. Given that these results are based on a smaller sample size than we desired, we report a conceptual replication in Experiment 4b involving romantic partners. We recruited a larger sample of participants and added several additional measures, including a follow-up survey 2 weeks after the experimental session to measure longer-term consequences of their confrontation.

Experiment 4b—Actual Confrontation Between Romantic Partners

Method

Participants

Based on the effects we observed for ratings of anger and positive response in the smaller sample in Experiment 4a, we conducted an a priori power analysis to determine the minimum sample size needed to detect a medium-sized effect ($d = 0.45$) with adequate power (0.80). This analysis indicated that we would need a sample of at least 41 pairs. To be conservative, we recruited 50 pairs of romantic partners (49 female, 48 male, three other identity; age: $M = 21.52$, $SD = 3.04$) from the Chicago area for an advertised experiment about interpersonal communication. We excluded two additional pairs: one for not being able to think of a problem to discuss and another for answering questions from the wrong experimental condition due to a procedural error. These romantic partners had known each other for an average of 2.88 years ($SD = 2.68$) and had been dating for an average of 2.20 years ($SD = 1.96$). Out of 50 couples, 28 were living together at the time of the experiment.

Procedure

Partners were first separated into individual testing rooms in a campus-based laboratory where they began an online survey. The survey started by asking basic information about their relationship: how long they have known their partner (years and months), how long they have been dating (years and months), if they live together (yes/no), how close they feel to their partner, and how honest they feel they can be with their partner (7-point scale from *not at all* to *extremely*).

As in Experiment 4a, participants typed a brief description of a specific problem or issue they have with their partner that is not fully resolved and rated how serious they consider the problem to be. Participants were then told that they would shortly be having a conversation with their partner about the problem they described and were asked to report how they expected this conversation was likely to go. Using the same measures as in our previous experiments, participants reported how angry and guilty they expected their partner would feel, and how clearly they would be able to communicate their true feelings to their partner. Seven items measured how positively participants expected their partner would respond to the conversation ($\alpha = .78$): how sympathetic or understanding they will be, how defensive they will be (reverse coded), the extent to which they will work cooperatively to improve the problem, how positively or negatively they will respond, their overall impression, how their relationship will change, and the extent to which the conversation will improve the problem. Participants also rated how uncertain they were about how the conversation will go, and the extent to which they would rather avoid the conversation. All measures were rated on a 7-point scale from *not at all* to *extremely*.

The experiment then followed the same procedure used in Experiment 4a. We brought partners together in the same room where they were randomly assigned roles according to which letter was on the back of a card they received from the experimenter. Confronters were asked to raise the issue they reported having with their partner, who was asked to respond as they naturally would. Participants were again free to respond to the conversation in any way they liked—we only asked that the conversation focus on the issue that the confronter raised. We asked that the conversations wrap up after approximately 15 min. When finished, partners returned to their private testing rooms to complete the online survey in private. As in Experiment 4a, confronters reported their experience of how their partner responded to the conversation and the partners who were confronted reported their own experience of the conversation. To check that participants actually discussed the issue they wrote about, confronters reported how honest they were when talking with their partner about their issue on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at* all to *extremely*. Those being confronted completed a free response question asking them to describe the issue that the confronter raised.

After completing this primary portion of the experiment, we repeated the basic procedure for a conversation about something the confronter appreciates about their partner but had not yet fully expressed their gratitude for. We did this for ethical reasons to ensure that our participants ended the experiment with a positive experience. Because these conversations occurred in the context of the preceding conversation, and because we did not make any predictions about these contexts, we did not analyze results from this portion of the experiment.

We also measured the longer-term consequences of the laboratory confrontation by emailing participants a brief online follow-up survey 2 weeks after their experimental session. The survey asked if participants had discussed the issue they brought up in the lab since the experimental session (yes/no). Using 7-point scale, participants also reported the extent to which they regretted having the conversation, how happy they are that they had the conversation, to what extent their discussion led to an improvement in the problem (all from *not at all* to *extremely*), and how their relationship had changed since the conversation (*became more distant* to *became closer*). Finally, to measure potential behavioral consequences, participants were asked, "After having this conversation, are you more or less likely to have a direct conversation with your partner about issues that have come up in your relationship?" (7-point scale from *much less likely* to *much more likely*).

Results

Romantic partners discussed issues that were moderately serious ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.36$, range = 1–6) and covered a wide range of topics from sleeping habits and miscommunications to feeling disconnected or lacking a sense of intimacy. Confronters reported being very honest in the conversation ($M = 6.82$, $SD = 0.39$, minimum = 6). All participants in the confronted role correctly described the problem that confronters wrote about, indicating that confronters followed task instructions to discuss the issue they reported their expectations about.

Because we asked partners in this experiment to report their interest in avoiding the conversation, we could also test how participants' expectations could serve as a barrier to engaging in constructive confrontation. To do so, we regressed participants' reported desire to

avoid the conversation onto ratings of seriousness, uncertainty, expected ability to communicate clearly, and expectations of their partner's anger, guilt, and positive response, $R^2 = .43$, $F(6, 43) = 5.48$, $p < .001$. Only expectations of their partners' positive response significantly predicted avoidance, $B = -.81$, $SE = 0.26$, $t = -3.15$, $p = .003$, all other ps $> .111$, again suggesting that concerns about a partner's negative response can create a barrier to constructive confrontations (see full regression results in Table S3 in the online supplemental materials).

As in Experiment 4a, participants again expected their conversation to be less positive than it actually was (see Figure 5). Confronters experienced their partner as responding to the confrontation with less anger, paired $t(49) = -5.60$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.79$, and with more positivity, paired $t(49) = 8.21$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$, than they initially expected. The reported experience of the people being confronted matched their partners' positive evaluations (anger: $p = .462$; positive response: $p = .558$), and were again more positive than the confronters expected, ps $< .001$. Confronters experienced less guilt from their partners than they expected, paired $t(49) = 2.64$, $p = .011$, $d = 0.37$, but the partners who were confronted reported experiencing more guilt than the confronters perceived after the conversation, paired $t(49) = 2.97$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.42$. Finally, although the conversation did not change how close participants in either role reported feeling to each other, ps $> .50$, participants in both roles reported feeling like they could be more honest with their partner after their conversation than they did before their conversation, confronter: paired $t(49) = 2.42$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.34$; confronted: paired $t(49) = 2.65$, $p = .011$, $d = 0.37$. These results replicate Experiment 4a, again demonstrating that people respond to constructive confrontation more positively than those who are confronting expect.

We again examined the correlations between expectations and experiences to test if participants had unique insight into how their particular partner would respond to confrontation. Although romantic partners presumably had more intimate relationships than the roommates in Experiment 4a, we still observed relatively small correlations between participants' expectations of their partner's response and their partner's actual self-reported response for ratings of anger, $r(48) = .31$, $p = .027$; guilt, $r(48) = .16$, $p = .265$; and positive response, $r(48) = .22$, $p = .123$. Confronters' expectations were more strongly and consistently correlated with their own experience of their partner's response, for anger, $r(48) = .38$, $p = .007$; guilt, $r(48) = .52$, $p < .001$; and positive response, $r(48) = .54$, $p < .001$. However, confronters' ratings of their partner's response were more modestly correlated with their partners' self-ratings of their response for anger, $r(48) = .11$, $p = .454$; guilt, $r(48) = .37$, $p = .008$; and positive response, $r(48) = .32$, $p = .022$. At the very least, these results indicate that confronters have imperfect perfect insight into how their partners would actually respond to constructive confrontation.

Seventy-six participants responded to the follow-up survey 2 weeks after the experimental session, including at least one participant from all but four couples (92%). Participants reported very little regret over having the conversation ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.85$), with 85% responding with the lowest scale rating (1—*not at all*) to this question. All other measures were significantly above the scale midpoint (one sample t tests, all ps $< .001$), indicating generally positive reactions 2 weeks after the conversation. Participants reported being happy they had the conversation ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.38$; $d = 0.96$), that the discussion led to an improvement in the problem ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.51$; $d = 0.46$), that their relationship became closer ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.17$; $d = 0.84$), and that they would be more likely to have direct conversations about future issues that come up in their relationship ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.19$; $d = 0.86$). Responses between confronters and those being confronted did not differ significantly on any of these items, all ps $> .11$. The unexpectedly positive reactions confronters experienced therefore seemed to persist beyond the initial experimental session, with virtually no regrets about having their conversation, consistent with existing research on the positive consequences of open and honest communication in relationships.

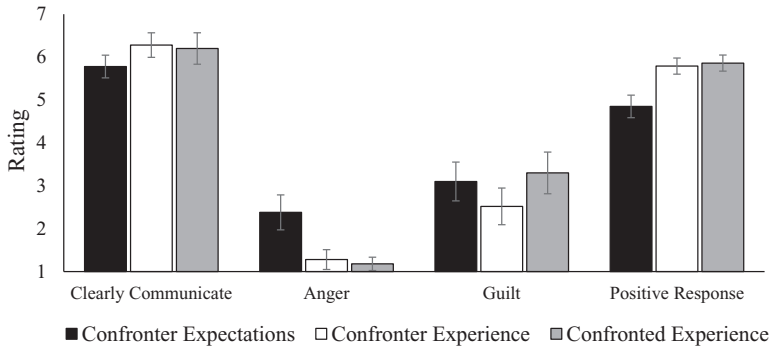
Discussion

Explaining Miscalibration

The results of Experiments 1–4b suggest that miscalibrated expectations about a partner's negative response may keep people from confronting issues that could potentially strengthen—or at least not significantly harm—their relationships. We propose that these

Figure 5

Confronters' Expectations Compared to the Experience of Both Confronters and Those Being Confronted in Experiment 4b



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

miscalibrated expectations stem, at least in part, from focusing too narrowly on the negative content of information to be shared in the conversation, with insufficient consideration of the social context in which conversation occurs that could lead to a more positive experience or outcome. This predicts that participants' default expectations will be based on a correspondent reaction to the information conveyed in a confrontation (e.g., "people feel hurt and get angry when confronted about something negative") rather than on the social context in which the confrontation might occur ("but then we'll talk it out and figure how to make things better going forward").

This mechanism makes two unique predictions. First, it predicts that people's attention is unduly drawn to the plausible negative outcomes of the conversation, consistent with the negative content of the confrontation itself, rather than a more balanced perspective that considers the entire range of plausible outcomes that could be recognized and anticipated. If so, then participants who imagine confronting another person in conversation should report expectations that are more similar to the expectations of those who imagine having a negative conversation than to those who imagine having a positive conversation. That is, those who simply imagine having a constructive confrontation should imagine reactions that are more consistent with a "worst-case scenario" than with a "best-case scenario." Although worst-case scenarios are possible, they are not especially probable, helping to explain why the confrontations people actually experience are more positive than the confrontations they anticipate. We test this directly in Experiment 5.

Second, if expectations are inordinately focused on the content to be shared in conversation compared to the context in which it occurs, then people's expectations about the outcome of a constructive confrontation should be relatively insensitive to whether the context of a conversation enables responsiveness and reciprocity (as in a live dialogue) or not (as in a serial monologue). Just as people can make dispositional inferences about others' actions that are relatively insensitive to the context in which those actions occur (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), those considering confronting another person may fail to appreciate the extent to which the context of their conversation can impact another person's response. We test this directly in Experiment 6.

Experiment 5—Mechanism of Miscalibration

Participants in Experiment 5 imagined confronting someone they knew about a genuine unresolved issue they were having in their relationship. Participants in the positive condition were first asked to imagine that the person they confronted responded positively, writing short descriptions of how the person might respond over the course of the conversation. In contrast, participants in the negative condition were asked to imagine that the person they confronted responded negatively, whereas participants in the default condition were simply asked to imagine how the person would respond. Participants in all conditions then reported their expectations about the confrontation on scale measures used in the preceding experiments. If people's attention tends to be drawn inordinately to potential negative outcomes of the confrontation, rather than to the full range of plausible outcomes they could consider, then participants' expectations in the default condition should be more similar to participants' expectations in the negative condition than in the positive condition. This would suggest that participants' expectations in the default condition are not based on a consideration of the entire range of plausible experiences and outcomes on a confrontation, but rather tend to be focused more on the potential negative outcomes. If the plausible range of outcomes that people could consider includes the more typical outcomes, but default expectations are based on more of a worst-case scenario, then this could help to explain why participants' default expectations, on average, tend to be more negative than their actual experience.

In addition to testing this proposed mechanism, Experiment 5 also tested the extent to which people's expectations are likely to guide their interest in actually confronting another person in conversation. We predicted that people would be more interested in actually confronting another person about an issue in their relationship when they anticipated a more positive response from them. This finding would suggest that miscalibrated expectations may matter in everyday life because they could lead people to be overly avoidant in their relationships, discouraging people from having conversations that would otherwise strengthen their relationships and thereby increase their own (and likely their relationship partner's) well-being.

Finally, at the encouragement of a reviewer, we also tested the extent to which people expected that a confrontation would elicit a more negative response than another conversation they might have with this same person. To examine this issue, we asked participants in a supplemental experiment to think of an issue they are having with another person following the same procedure described below, and then to imagine having a conversation and either confronting this person or avoiding the issue and just having whatever conversation they might otherwise have (see Experiment S4 in the online supplemental materials for full details). Participants expected a significantly more negative response when they imagined confronting the person about the issue they were having than when they had a conversation but avoided the issue. Descriptively, participants expected that their conversation would be slightly (albeit significantly) positive when they avoided the confrontation, but that it would be moderately negative when they actively confronted the other person. As expected, people do indeed expect that confronting another person about an issue they are having will be a more negative conversation than if they simply avoided the issue.

Method

Participants

We recruited 422 participants (280 female, 126 male, 15 other identity; age: $M = 29.62$, $SD = 11.74$) through a university-based participant pool. Due to an error in how timeslots were posted for the experiment, we collected data from a larger sample than we preregistered (360 participants). We excluded one participant for failing an attention check at the end of the survey asking them to recall one of their previous answers.

Procedure

Participants described an unresolved issue they had with a person they knew, identified their relationship to this person (e.g., family, friend, stranger), and reported this person's gender (male, female, other) and initials. Participants also rated how close they were to the person and how serious their issue was on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Participants then imagined confronting this person in one of three conditions (default, negative, positive). In all conditions, participants

answered short essay questions describing how they imagined the person would respond to being confronted based on their experimental condition: their initial reaction (what emotions they might feel when they initially hear about the issue), their response during the confrontation (what things they might say or do), and how this interaction might end (what consequences it might have on their relationship, how might things change). Participants were either asked to imagine that the person responded positively to the confrontation (positive condition), responded negatively to the confrontation (negative condition), or were simply told to imagine the person's response (default condition).

After writing these descriptions, participants then imagined actually confronting this person, and that they responded exactly in the way they described in their written description. Using the same items as in our previous studies, participants reported how angry and guilty they expected the person being confronted would feel, as well as seven items measuring expectations of how positively this person would respond ($\alpha = .91$): how sympathetic they would be, how defensive (reverse coded), how cooperative, how positively or negatively they would respond, what this person's overall impression of them would be, how their relationship would change, and how likely it is that this person's behavior would improve. Finally, participants rated how likely it is that they would confront this person if they responded in exactly the way they described. All ratings were made using 7-point scale from *not at all* to *extremely*. Finally, participants reported their age and gender.

Results

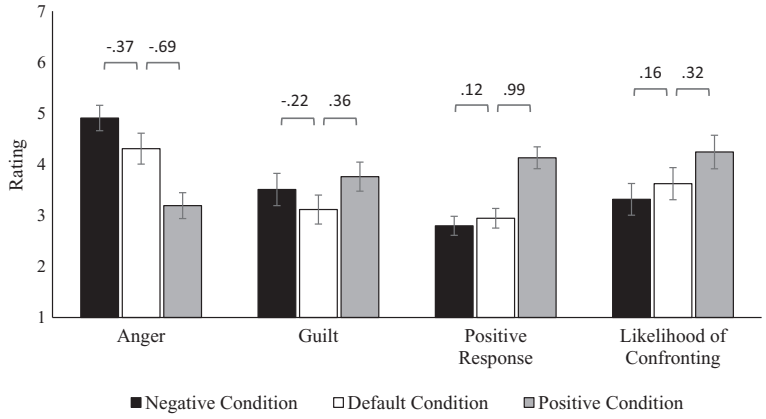
Participants described problems that were moderately serious ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.45$), usually arising in a close relationship ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.91$; romantic partner or friend, 56%; family member, 24%; boss, coworker, or employee, 16%; acquaintance or stranger, 4%), with someone of the same gender (58%).

We predicted that overly pessimistic expectations are produced at least in part because the negative content of the confrontation leads people to focus too narrowly on the more negative possible reactions their partner could have to the confrontation, rather than considering a broad range of both more positive and negative reactions. If so, then participants' expectations in the default response condition should be more similar to expectations in the negative condition than in the positive condition suggesting that they were attending primarily to the negative side of the plausible range of outcomes. As can be seen in Figure 6, the results are consistent with this hypothesis.

One-way ANOVAs yielded nonsignificant effects of condition on the issue's severity, $F(2, 418) = 0.370$, $p = .691$, and how close the confronter felt to the target, $F(2, 418) = 0.437$, $p = .647$, indicating participants were not considering issues that differed systematically in severity or in the relationship they affected across conditions. However, one-way ANOVAs did yield significant between-condition differences in expected anger, $F(2, 418) = 40.225$, $p < .001$; expected guilt, $F(2, 418) = 4.661$, $p = .010$; expected positive response, $F(2, 418) = 52.457$, $p < .001$; and the likelihood of confronting, $F(2, 418) = 8.490$, $p < .001$.

As intended, planned contrasts showed a large difference between positive and negative expectation conditions for most of our measures, indicating that our key manipulation of expected outcomes was successful. Compared to imagining a negative response, participants who imagined a positive response from the person they confronted expected less anger, $t(418) = -8.84$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.05$, and a more positive overall response, $t(418) = 9.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$, but did not expect significantly stronger feelings of guilt, $t(418) = 1.18$, $p = .464$, $d = 0.14$. Consistent with our prediction that people's expectations would guide their interest in engaging in a constructive confrontation, participants in the positive condition also reported being significantly more likely to confront their target compared to participants in the negative condition, $t(418) = 4.04$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$.

Figure 6
Expected Reactions and the Likelihood of Confronting in the Negative, Default, and Positive Conditions in Study 5



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means. Effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) are shown above bars indicating the difference between negative and default conditions and between default and positive conditions.

More important for our hypotheses, participants in the default condition reported expectations that were consistently more similar to those in the negative condition than in the positive condition. Specifically, participants in the default condition anticipated significantly more negative reactions than participants in the positive condition for anger, $t(418) = -5.75$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.69$; guilt, $t(418) = 3.03$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.36$; and the overall positive response, $t(418) = 8.30$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.99$. Participants in the default condition also reported being less likely to confront their targets than did participants in the positive condition, $t(418) = 2.70$, $p = .020$, $d = 0.32$. In contrast, participants in the default and negative conditions did not differ significantly in their expectations of the target's guilt, $t(418) = -1.84$, $p = .157$, $d = -0.22$; or overall positive response, $t(418) = 1.04$, $p = .555$, $d = 0.12$. Ratings of anger were significantly lower in the default condition than in the negative condition, $t(418) = -3.08$, $p = .006$, $d = -0.37$. Notably, participants in the default condition did not differ significantly from the negative condition in their likelihood of confronting their targets, $t(418) = 1.34$, $p = .375$, $d = 0.16$.

These results are consistent with our theory that overly pessimistic expectations may stem at least in part from biased attention to the negative content conveyed in a constructive confrontation, as participants' expectations in the default condition were consistently more similar to the expectations of those we explicitly instructed to imagine a negative response than they were to those we explicitly instructed to imagine a positive response. However, it is also consistent with an alternative interpretation that people anticipating the outcomes of a confrontation do consider the full range of plausible outcomes, including both positive and negative outcomes, but ultimately decide that the negative outcome is simply the mostly likely outcome. Although we think this is unlikely given that people's judgments tend to be guided by the most accessible information that comes to mind rather than an exhaustive search of information that could be brought to mind (e.g., Schwarz, 1998; Wyer, 2008), we nevertheless note that this experiment does not rule out this alternative interpretation. Additional research would be necessary to test this alternative interpretation directly.

If our broader hypothesis is correct that people are primarily attending to the content conveyed in a confrontation, rather than to the social forces present in the context in which a confrontation unfolds, then they should also be relatively insensitive to the power of the context in which the confrontation occurs to affect its outcomes (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Kruger et al., 2005; Kumar & Epley, 2021). In particular, dyadic conversation enables powerful social forces that likely encourage positive outcomes in constructive confrontation, especially the immediate responsiveness enabled by back-and-forth dialogue. This opportunity for responsiveness enables the expression of empathy and understanding, allows people to respond in real time to others' emotional experiences, increases mutual self-disclosure, increases the sense of knowing one's partner and feeling known, and increases liking (Reis et al., 2004, 2011). If people are inordinately focused on the content of the conversation and thereby relatively insensitive to the context in which a confrontation occurs, then their expectations should be relatively insensitive to the extent to which a context entails these forces. This would mean that the magnitude of miscalibration between expectations and experience in confrontation would be moderated by the context in which the confrontation occurs, with people being especially miscalibrated in contexts that enable clear expressions of empathy and responsiveness compared to contexts that do not.

We tested this directly in Experiment 6 by asking people to report their expectations of a confrontation that would occur either through a back-and-forth conversation (i.e., a dialogue) or through an exchange of monologues in which one person shares their perspective and then the other responds. Constraining the extent to which people can interact during a confrontation, we predict, will inhibit the reciprocal relationship-maintenance mechanisms that are difficult to anticipate, yet essential for creating positive responses to constructive confrontations. We therefore predict that people's expectations will be relatively insensitive to this manipulation, but that experiences will be more positive in dialogue than in monologue, meaning that people's expectations will be significantly more miscalibrated in the dialogue condition than in the monologue condition.

Experiment 6—Moderating Miscalibration

We asked participants in Experiment 6 to report their expectations and actual experiences of the simulated confrontation procedure we used in Experiment 3. We tested our hypotheses using a simulated confrontation, instead of an actual confrontation as we did in Experiments 4a and 4b, for two reasons. First, because we predicted that having a constructive confrontation through monologues would yield more negative experiences and outcomes than in dialogue, we were reluctant to test our hypotheses using confrontations in real relationships for ethical reasons. Second, because the three additional simulations we report in this article (see Experiment 3 and Experiments S3 and S6 in the online supplemental materials) yielded miscalibrated expectations consistent with what we observed using recalled, imagined, and real confrontations, we believe it provides a good test of whether the miscalibrated expectations we observed in the simulation reported in Experiment 3 would be moderated by the social context in which it occurred.

Method

Participants

One hundred eight pairs of people recruited through a university-based participant pool served as participants in a "virtual laboratory" via the Zoom video conferencing platform. All participants passed a verbal comprehension check in which they had to explain their task instructions to a research assistant. We excluded nine pairs who could not finish the survey due to technical difficulties, leaving 198 participants (156 female, 58 male, two other identity; age: $M = 22.16$, $SD = 4.03$) in the following analyses.

Procedure

Participants completed the simulated confrontation used in Experiment 3, but with random assignment both to role (Alex or Jordan) and to context condition (monologue or dialogue). As participants signed on to Zoom, an experimenter randomly assigned them to a role and context condition and sent them to separate breakout rooms to begin the experiment. Participants read about their role information and the details of their upcoming conversation describing either the dialogue or monologue procedure. The experimenter then asked participants to describe their upcoming task to ensure comprehension.

Participants in the dialogue condition followed the same procedure used in Experiment 3 in which participants assigned to the two roles reported their expectations of the upcoming conversation

and then had an actual live conversation. In contrast, the monologue condition started by having the participant assigned to Alex's role record a video message to Jordan explaining their perspective in whatever way they wanted. This message was then sent to participants in the Jordan role to watch, who in response recorded their own video and sent it back to their partner to watch.

Participants reported how they expected their interaction would go, engaged in either a dialogue or monologue, and then reported their experience. Participants reported their expectations and experiences on a series of 7-point scale as in our previous experiments. Participants rated how serious the problem was, how uncertain they were about the upcoming conversation, how clearly they would be able to communicate their feelings, how interested they were in having the conversation, as well as how interested they were in avoiding the conversation. Participants reported their expectations of how the conversation would go by first rating how angry and guilty their partner will feel. Participants then reported how they expected their partner to respond on five items that we averaged into a positive response composite ($\alpha = .78$): how sympathetic or understanding they will be, how defensive they will be (reverse coded), how positively or negatively they will respond, how willing to change their behavior they are, and the extent to which the conversation will improve their behavior. We added two additional measures to the experience survey using 1–7 scale that we thought might differ between dialogue and monologue: How much new information was learned in the interaction (*no new information at all* to *a lot of new information*) and how responsive their partner was to their thoughts, feelings, and perspective (*not responsive at all* to *extremely responsive*).

Results

We predicted that participants would be relatively insensitive to the impact of social context on their experience, expecting relatively similar outcomes in the monologue and dialogue conditions, but also predicted that participants would have a significantly more positive experience in the dialogue condition than in the monologue condition. This pattern would then lead people to underestimate the positive outcomes of constructive confrontation more in dialogue than in monologue.

Consistent with our hypotheses, as shown in Figure 7, we observed nonsignificant differences between dialogue and monologue conditions in how serious the issue was, $t(196) = 1.37$, $p = .173$; how uncertain they were, $t(196) = 1.67$, $p = .097$, $d = 0.24$; how clearly they could communicate their feelings, $t(196) = .407$, $p = .684$; how interested they were in having the conversation, $t(196) = -0.04$, $p = .969$; and how interested they were in avoiding the conversation, $t(196) = 1.07$, $p = .287$.

Replicating Experiment 3, participants again significantly underestimated how positive their experience would be, but did so to a greater extent in the dialogue condition than in the monologue condition (see Figure 6). Separate 2 (role: Alex vs. Jordan) × 2 (measure: expected vs. experienced) × 2 (condition: dialogue vs. monologue) mixed-model ANOVAs on anger and positive response revealed only significant main effects of measure, Fs(1, 194) = −397.05 and 323.58, respectively, ps < .001, η_p^2s = .67 and .63; qualified by the predicted Measure × Condition interactions, Fs(1, 194) = 3.88 and 46.96, respectively, ps = .05 and <.001, η_p^2s = .02 and .19.

Planned comparisons revealed nonsignificant differences in expectations of dialogue and monologue in terms of anger, $t(196) = -.869$, $p = .386$, and positive response, $t(196) = .683$, $p = .496$. In contrast, participants in the dialogue condition actually experienced less anger, $t(196) = -3.29$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.47$, and more positive response, $t(196) = 8.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.19$, than in the monologue condition. When asked to directly compare their experience against their expectations, participants in the dialogue condition reported a more positive deviation from expectations than did participants in the monologue condition, $t(196) = 5.59$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$. Finally, consistent with our prediction that dialogue would entail stronger relationship-maintenance processes than monologue, participants in the dialogue condition reported learning more new information, $t(196) = 3.79$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.54$, and that their partner was more responsive, $t(196) = 6.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.92$, than did participants in the monologue condition.

For ratings of guilt, we observed a significant main effect of measure, $F(1, 194) = 26.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, qualified by a significant Measure × Role interaction, $F(1, 194) = 11.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$; and a significant Measure × Condition interaction, $F(1, 194) = 5.56$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. The unpredicted measure by role interaction indicated that those in the Alex role expected their partners to feel more guilt than vice versa. A significant Measure × Condition interaction indicated that participants' expectations of guilt did not differ between dialogue and monologue conditions, $t(196) = -.643$, $p = .521$, but participants experienced their partner as feeling more guilt in the dialogue condition than in the monologue condition, $t(196) = 2.16$, $p = .032$, $d = 0.31$.

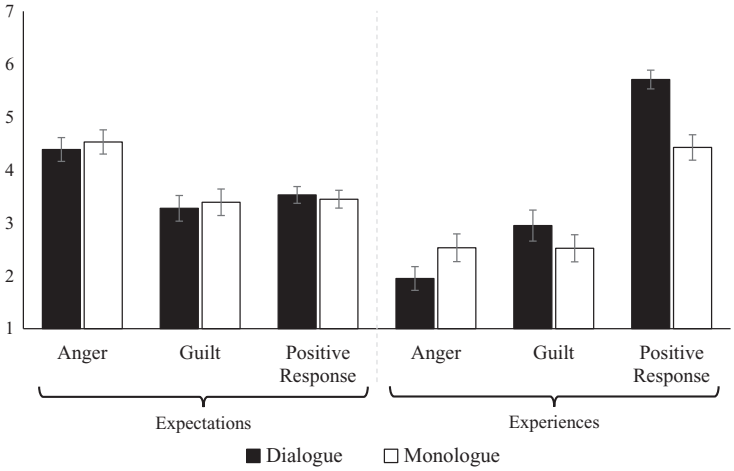
The results of Experiment 6 suggest that the context in which a confrontation occurs can have a significant but underappreciated impact on the outcomes of a constructive confrontation. Conversations enable social forces that tend to draw people closer together and mitigate unpleasant conflict, including reciprocity, expressions of support and empathy, and the capacity to learn through more direct feedback. Participants in Experiment 6 did not, however, seem to appreciate the power of these social forces before the confrontation took place, thereby yielding more miscalibrated expectations in the context that enabled the most positive outcomes: a direct conversation.

General Discussion

Addressing conflicts openly and honestly is critical for maintaining relationships, whereas avoiding conflicts can lead to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution. Here, we documented that people's expectations about how others would respond to constructive confrontation guide people's interest in having a confrontation, but that these expectations are systematically miscalibrated. Research consistently confirms that avoiding these difficult conversations diminishes the quality of people's relationships, and harms their own well-being (e.g., Bies et al., 1997; Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Hershcovis et al., 2018; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006; Roloff & Ifert, 1998; Sargent, 2002; Slepian et al., 2017). Our research suggests that these conversations may, at times, be needlessly avoided because people are overly pessimistic about how positively these conversations will turn out. Across a diverse set of methodologies including recalled (Experiment 1), imagined (Experiments 2 and 5), simulated (Experiments 3 and 6), and actual confrontations between roommates and romantic partners (Experiments 4a and 4b), people consistently expect their partner to respond less positively to a constructive confrontation than their partner expected to respond or actually responded. The

Figure 7

Expectations Compared to Experiences of Confrontation Through Dialogue Versus Monologue in Experiment 6



Note. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals around the means.

psychological barriers that lead people to avoid having at least some conversations appear to be systematically misplaced.

We believe these miscalibrated expectations stem, at least in part, from an attentional bias that focuses too heavily on potential negative outcomes of the confrontation (consistent with the content to be discussed), without recognizing the power that the context of a conversation may have to yield more positive relational outcomes. Participants in Experiment 5 who simply anticipated their partner's reaction to a constructive confrontation tended to report expectations that were more closely aligned to the expectations of those who were explicitly instructed to imagine a negative response, compared to those who explicitly instructed to imagine a positive response. The range of possible reactions to confronting another person, from relatively negative to positive, may be quite large, but people's expectations about a confrontation seemed to be biased more in the direction of worst-case scenarios than in the direction of best-case scenarios. If the range of possible outcomes that people can imagine at least somewhat captures the actual range of outcomes, then a biased tendency to focus on the negative side of this range is likely to leave people underestimating how positively actual confrontations are going to turn out.

Experiment 6 further suggested that people are insensitive to how the context of a confrontation may meaningfully impact its outcomes. In this experiment, participants about to engage in a simulated confrontation did not anticipate significantly different reactions when confronting in the context of a dialogue or simply exchanging views in a monologue, even though experiences were significantly more positive when the confrontation occurred in a dialogue than in a monologue. Focusing inordinately on the negative content to be shared in a constructive confrontation, while overlooking how social forces in a conversation can create positive outcomes even in the midst of discussing a potentially negative issue, can lead people to expect significantly more negative outcomes than they actually experience.

Several of the experiments included in this article suggest that these miscalibrated expectations matter because they are likely to guide people's interest in engaging in the confrontation, creating an unwarranted psychological barrier that keeps people from effectively managing important relationship issues. This possibility is demonstrated most clearly in Experiment 5, where participants who were led to anticipate more positive reactions reported being significantly more likely to actually confront their relationship partner about an unresolved issue than were participants who were led to anticipate more negative reactions, or than people who simply reported their default expectations. Underestimating the positive outcomes of open and honest conversation could keep people in relationships from experiencing these positive outcomes more often (Epley et al., 2022; Levine & Cohen, 2018).

Although each method used in our experiments contains certain limitations, the methodological diversity employed across experiments also enabled us to capture the strengths, and unshared weaknesses, of each approach to provide convergent tests of our hypotheses. Recalled confrontations (Experiment 1) assess a wide variety of naturally occurring experiences in daily life but rely on memory rather than immediate experience. Imagined confrontations (Experiments 2 and 5) assess expectations in contexts that cannot be easily replicated in the laboratory, but measure hypothetical reactions rather than actual reactions. Actual confrontations (Experiments 4a and 4b) measure expectations and experiences in a live interaction but focus on a narrower range of contexts than recalled or imagined confrontations. Studying confrontations in a controlled laboratory setting also allows us to reliably measure the experience of both sides of the confrontation immediately after it occurs, but it might constrain how participants behave compared to everyday life. Finally, simulated confrontations (Experiments 3 and 6) allow us an ethical means of experimentally manipulating the context in which a confrontation occurs, but involves simulated

conflicts between strangers rather than actual conflicts within established relationships. Consistent evidence across these methodologies provides more robust support for our hypotheses than any single methodological approach would, and suggests that the results obtained in experimental contexts are likely to generalize across many real-world contexts.

One limitation of our experiments that cannot be addressed across our methodologies is the absence of any details about how participants actually conducted their simulated or live confrontations. Because we were concerned that people might behave differently if their conversations were recorded, participants correctly understood that their live interactions in Experiments 4–6 were not being recorded so that they could interact in whatever way they wanted without feeling observed by researchers. One way to address both the concern of behaving differently when observed, while also recording the live interactions for later analysis, would be to randomly assign pairs to either be recorded or not. Such a design would allow researchers to analyze the actual conversations from half of the participants in their experiment, while also being able to assess whether being recorded actually affected participants' expectations or experiences in the experiment or not. We hope interested researchers will utilize such designs in future experiments.

Although people consistently overestimated how negatively others would respond to being confronted, including how angry and defensive their partner would be, we observed inconsistent effects for experiences of guilt. This inconsistency could arise because guilt is an emotion that comes from an awareness of having caused wrongdoing or harm in a given situation (Schmader & Lickel, 2006), not necessarily from being confronted about that wrongdoing. Our hypotheses predict systematic misunderstanding of responses to confrontation, such as anger or defensiveness, rather than misunderstanding others' emotional responses entirely. Future work could test this distinction more directly by separating evaluations of the issue underlying a confrontation from reactions to being confronted about the issue more specifically.

One novel contribution that we believe warrants further study is people's insensitivity to the power of social context to impact the outcome of a conversation; in this case, insensitivity to the relationship-maintenance processes in the face of a threat to a valued relationship. In Experiment 6, people who were about to engage in very different contexts for their confrontation did not anticipate experiencing different outcomes, even though one involved the minimal opportunity for responsiveness, feedback, or learning (namely, monologue), whereas the other context enabled significant opportunities (namely, dialogue in live conversation). Nevertheless, actual experiences differed substantially between these two contexts. When we removed the ability for people to respond to their partners as effectively as they might in a typical dialogue by having them exchange their ideas in a serial monologue, the experience of the conversation was markedly worse than when people could talk using their voices in a live dialogue. Underestimating the power of these social forces, including responsiveness, reciprocity, and accommodation, additionally predicts that confronters' expectations will be more miscalibrated in strong relationships than in weak relationships due to differences in the motivation to maintain the relationship. This mechanism also predicts that the confronter's expectations will be more miscalibrated in dyadic confrontations than in intergroup confrontations because the social forces that bind a confronter to the target being confronted are meaningfully stronger in the former than in the latter.

Removing partners' ability to engage in direct conversation decreased the positive outcomes of a constructive confrontation in Experiment 6, but experiences in the monologue condition were still more positive than expected. This suggests that before engaging in a constructive confrontation, people are missing more than just the social context in which it occurs. Although we believe the negativity bias mechanism we have described and tested substantially explains the systematically miscalibrated expectations we observed in our experiments, additional mechanisms may also be at work that create a divergence in perspective between those confronting another person and those being confronted in a relationship.

One possibility worthy of future study is that people's expectations of another's response are guided by their beliefs about how the other person understands the issue at hand. In the context of confrontations, several well-documented psychological biases could lead people to expect a more intense conflict than they are actually likely to experience: People may assume others' behavior is more intentional than it actually is (Gilbert & Malone, 1995), that their own negative thoughts and concerns are clearer to the other party than they actually are (Gilovich et al., 1998), and that the other person shares their construal of the situation more than the other person actually does (Epley et al., 2004). Without direct access to another person's perspective, people may be cynical about this person's beliefs (cf. Kruger & Gilovich, 1999), assuming they are more self-interested (Miller, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998) and more opposed to their position (Thompson, 1991; Thompson & Hastie, 1990) than they actually are. In cases of constructive confrontation, these psychological biases could lead people to be somewhat surprised to learn in a constructive confrontation that the other person is actually more reasonable in their thinking, more moderate in their views, and potentially less solely responsible for the negative action than might have been expected before the conversation. This might make constructive confrontations less negative than expected. This also suggests that giving people access to another person's beliefs about the situation—access to a perspective that is typically lacking in everyday life—should yield more calibrated expectations about the outcome of a constructive confrontation (Eyal et al., 2018).

As an initial test of this hypothesis, we replicated the simulation from Experiments 3 and 6 but provided some participants with the role information given to the other party in the conversation (reported in Experiment S5 in the online supplemental materials). As predicted, we found that getting their partner's perspective before engaging in the conversation led people to anticipate a more positive outcome that was more consistent with their actual experience. Importantly, participants experienced confrontation more positively than they initially expected to a similar extent whether or not they first received their partner's perspective. In other words, in contrast to the manipulation in Experiment 6, getting their partner's perspective led to more calibrated expectations by changing people's expectations rather than by changing their actual experience of constructive confrontation. Although additional research is necessary to identify precisely which psychological biases create overly pessimistic expectations of confrontation, these results at the very least indicate an additional possible way to moderate miscalibrated expectations than changing the social context of the interaction: altering people's understanding of their partner's perspective on the issue at hand. Examining these mechanisms further by testing moderating variables in real confrontations is a critical issue for future research.

Finally, the differences we observed in experience between dialogue and monologue in Experiment 6 also make it clear that our findings should not be taken to imply that all confrontations strengthen interpersonal relationships. Existing research in organizational (De Wit et al., 2012), romantic (McNulty, 2016; Overall & McNulty, 2017), and interpersonal contexts (Keysar et al., 2008; Vandermeer et al., 2019) reveals that negative confrontations can escalate conflict and increase division. Our theorizing predicts that confrontations inspired by destructive intent, with little or no motivation to maintain a relationship, carried out in contexts devoid of responsiveness or relationship-maintenance processes, may well be experienced just as badly as people expect and may even escalate over repeated exchanges (Vandermeer et al., 2019). However, people's expectations about the outcomes of a confrontation are also unlikely to serve as a barrier to confrontation in these cases because people are not motivated to maintain the relationship.

Human beings are a deeply social species. The social forces that draw people together in relationships and maintain cooperative ties are essential for human reproduction and long-term survival and are therefore deeply rooted in human evolutionary history (von Hippel, 2018). The experiments reported here are consistent with other research suggesting that these social forces may also be routinely underestimated in daily life. People may avoid confronting acquaintances, colleagues, friends, and family members about concerns in their relationships, partly because they are worried about how negatively the other person will respond, but these concerns appear to be systematically miscalibrated. Underestimating how positively others will respond may leave people needlessly avoiding conversations that not going to be as difficult as expected, resulting in weaker relationships than would be optimal for both their own and their relationship partner's well-being.

Constraints on Generality

Studying constructive confrontations experimentally is challenging because they are relatively rare experiences in relationships (compared to nonconfrontational interactions), are usually conducted in private, and are highly variable in their precise content. We therefore tested our hypotheses across multiple methods including memory recall of real confrontations in daily life, hypothetical scenarios, and live experiments. We did not, however, have specific hypotheses about how the precise content of a constructive confrontation might affect the gap between confronters' expectations and the experience of those being confronted. We hypothesized that people would expect constructive confrontations to produce a threat response in those being confronted, but this may not be the case for all constructive confrontations. We believe our results are generalizable to contexts in which a confronter does expect the person being confronted to experience the interaction as a threat. Factors that alter the extent to which a confronter expects their interaction to be perceived as threatening, such as stable differences between people, contexts, or cultures, should alter the gap between people's expectations and actual experiences of constructive confrontation.

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