# Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Conflict: Autobiographical Narratives About Anger

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# Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Conflict: Autobiographical Narratives About Anger

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Subjects furnished autobiographical accounts of being angered (victim narratives) and of angering someone else (perpetrator narratives). The provoking behavior was generally portrayed by the perpetrator as meaningful and comprehensible, whereas the victim tended to depict it as arbitrary, gratuitous, or incomprehensible. Victim accounts portrayed the incident in a long-term context that carried lasting implications, especially of continuing harm, loss, and grievance. Perpetrator accounts tended to cast the incident as a closed, isolated incident that did not have lasting implications. Several findings fit a hypothesis that interpersonal conflicts may arise when a victim initially stifles anger and then finally responds to an accumulated series of provocations, whereas the perpetrator perceives only the single incident and regards the angry response as an unjustified overreaction. Victim and perpetrator roles are associated with different subjective interpretations.

Public interest tends to focus on major conflicts and victimizations, such as large-scale crimes, wars, and oppression, but everyday life also contains its share of victimizations and conflicts. Perhaps the most common form that these conflicts take involves interpersonal anger. Anger is a widely familiar occurrence yet has not been extensively studied in laboratory research (Averill, 1982). Indeed, apart from Averill's (1982) seminal work and a conceptually provocative review by Tavris (1982), anger has not been the central focus of many studies, although it has often been included as a supplementary variable (such as in aggression research).

One reason for the paucity of data on anger is the difficulty of studying it under controlled conditions. Ethical constraints limit the extent to which researchers can make volunteer subjects angry, and it is even more difficult to study the conditions under which naive subjects provoke anger in others. The present research used a new approach to the study of anger, namely autobiographical narratives. In simple terms, we had people tell important stories from their lives in which they were angered or in which they angered someone else. We hoped to use these autobiographical narratives to learn about the discrepant psychologies of victims and perpetrators.

The study of autobiographical narratives has expanded in recent years. Various authors have suggested that people organize information about themselves, their social worlds, and their lives in narrative rather than propositional terms (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Ross, 1988; Ross & Holmberg, in press). The study of people's stories thus may be desirable to supplement more traditional approaches that emphasize abstract generalizations (such as trait inferences). Some authors have examined entire life stories (Kaufman, 1986; McAdams, 1985; Rosenberg, 1988). Others have focused more narrowly on stories about specific events (Gonzales, 1989; Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1988; Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Huszti, & Garnick, 1986; Ross, 1988; Ross & Holmberg, in press; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987). These have been termed *micronarratives* (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Micronarratives can be considered a promising research tool for exploring subjective interpretations.

Micronarratives are an especially useful technique for approaching the problem of anger. This is because anger, and perhaps interpersonal conflict generally, may often involve substantial discrepancies between the subjective perceptions and interpretations of the conflicting participants. These discrepancies may be illuminated in retrospective narratives. In many episodes involving anger, the central theme conforms to a pattern in which one person (the perpetrator) offends, provokes, or otherwise angers a second person (the victim). The basic idea behind the present investigation was to obtain first-person accounts of such incidents and to compare victim and perpetrator perspectives.

## Anger

Personality and social psychologists have mainly studied anger in connection with aggression. Berkowitz (1962) defined anger in terms of the tendency to become aggressive following frustration. Averill (1982) concluded, however, that such a defi-

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nition is theoretically inadequate in that it avoids central issues such as the relation between frustration and subjective responses, and he pointed out that frustration does not invariably lead to anger. Tavris (1982) concluded forcefully from a literature review that anger is neither necessary nor sufficient to cause aggression.

Empirically, however, researchers have mainly used anger to provoke aggressive responses in laboratory studies (see Baron, 1977, for a review). Anger has thus been used as a supplementary manipulation rather than a variable of interest in its own right. Indeed, alternative explanations for these manipulations (e.g., self-presentational factors; see Baumeister, 1982) were often glossed over. In these studies, typically, people were subjected to an arbitrary frustration or a gratuitous insult in order to provoke them (e.g., Berkowitz & Geen, 1966). Although such manipulations were clearly quite effective in increasing aggressive responses, one should perhaps be cautious about generalizing from them to everyday episodes involving anger (see Averill, 1982, for a similar argument). It seems unlikely that many people often decide to insult or frustrate another person for no particular reason. Although a gratuitous insult or arbitrary frustration might indeed make the victim angry, one may question how often such things actually happen.

Anger is perhaps especially suited for a technique such as autobiographical narratives for at least two reasons. First, there are several norm conflicts regarding anger (see Averill, 1982). People may feel guilty or at least uncertain when they make others angry, and they may also feel guilty or ambivalent about becoming angry themselves. In reviewing past philosophical and other writings about anger, Averill (1982) concluded that various, partly contradictory norms hold that it is sometimes justifiable to be angry, sometimes obligatory to feel and express anger, and sometimes wholly inappropriate to be angry. Autobiographical accounts hold special power and interest in connection with subjective motivations for justifying past behavior (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). In plainer terms, it seems useful to know how people describe (in their own words) events about which they may have some ambivalence or inner conflict.

Second, anger depends heavily on interpretation and judgment; references to anger in other species or in human infants are correct only in a "derivational or metaphorical sense" (Averill, 1982, p. 95). If anger is indeed heavily based on subjective interpretations and evaluations, then it may well be valuable to examine it with a technique that is maximally sensitive to such subjective processes (see also Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987).

## Autobiographical Narratives

A secondary goal of the present study was to explore and develop the autobiographical narrative as a potentially useful methodology. Autobiographical narratives are of interest both in their own right and as clues about behavioral processes. They constitute the individual's own subjective perspective on his or her personality and social life. Indeed, it is plausible that much of people's information about themselves is organized in terms of stories rather than as lists of trait adjectives (see Kilhstrom et al., 1988, for a discussion). Insofar as these stories are selectively constructed, selectively retrieved, and distorted, they shed light on subjective biases, perhaps most especially people's motivations to reconcile events with their desired self-concepts. Furthermore, by examining systematic discrepancies between different stories told from different perspectives, it may become possible to understand how participants in various interactions may misperceive each other and misunderstand each other's actions.

The study of autobiographical narratives has both strengths and weaknesses as a psychological methodology. In comparison with laboratory studies, for example, the autobiographical method has lower internal validity but higher external validity. It is quite difficult to know with certainty whether systematic biases in autobiographical stories arise from biased encoding, biased selection of what story to tell, distorted recall of particular facts, or outright fabrication and even deliberate lying. The *cognitive* processes that produce the stories are therefore difficult to fathom. On the other hand, the *motivations* are presumably the same whether they operate on encoding, recall, or selection, and so autobiographical accounts may be a valuable technique for examining these motivations.

Thus, perhaps ironically, the study of autobiographical narratives may have greater value as a technique for studying motivation than for studying cognition. In recent years, psychology has developed multiple tools and procedures for studying cognitive processes, whereas the technology for studying motivation has lagged behind. Presumably, the study of motivation will advance when new methods become available; it may be worth exploring autobiographical narratives as one potentially helpful method.

Recent research on masochism illustrates the potential value of personal narratives. Sexual masochism has been a difficult puzzle for psychological theory, partly because of the difficulty of obtaining data (i.e., masochists are reluctant to be interviewed, and laboratory studies are impractical if not unethical) and partly because of the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon (i.e., it is hard to imagine why people would want to be tied up, whipped, embarrassed and humiliated, and so forth). By examining autobiographical narratives of masochistic experiences, however, it was possible to gain some insight into the subjective processes and motivations of masochists (Baumeister, 1988a, 1989), as well as into the differences between male and female masochism (Baumeister, 1988b). Although such first-person accounts cannot be regarded as reliable guides to the typical behaviors of masochists, they are important clues about masochistic motivations, for the biases in selection and recall that went into creating the stories presumably were motivated by the desire to render a story that fit the author's preferred fantasy or ideal script for a satisfying masochistic experience. Thus, although these stories do not provide reliable evidence about masochistic behaviors, they shed valuable light on the motivations—and it is the masochistic motivations that are the central feature of the puzzle of masochism.

A further important advantage of autobiographical methods is the unusually high external validity. These narratives are people's actual accounts of genuine events from their everyday lives. As such, they provide a valuable complement to laboratory methods that are based on controlled simulation of experiences in artificial environments. In view of the greater precision and control available in laboratory work, the ideal empiri-

cal strategy for the field as a whole may be a combination of laboratory simulation and autobiographical narrative approaches.

Autobiographical narratives can be understood as attempts by individuals to make their own experiences intelligible (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). In particular, these stories can be considered as the product of negotiation between actual events and desired self-concepts. It is quite clear that people can be induced to act in ways that at least mildly contradict their preferred beliefs about themselves (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Rather than regarding these incidents as proof that they are immoral, weak, gullible, or otherwise lacking in virtue, people may rationalize the events by constructing stories that are more compatible with their preferred views of themselves. When events are problematic or require justification (as with anger), the construction of stories becomes especially important and motivations are especially powerful (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

## Present Research Approach

The present research proceeded by assembling two sets of autobiographical narratives regarding episodes involving anger. One set of stories was told from the perspective of the victim, that is, the person who was angered; the other set was told from the perspective of the perpetrator, that is, the person who angered someone else. These narratives refer to single, well-defined incidents rather than encompassing entire life stories, so they should be considered micronarratives.

Obviously, it would be desirable to obtain accounts from both roles pertaining to the same incident, but this was not possible. To get both sides of the same story, it would have been necessary to locate the person who had angered the subject and to induce him or her to furnish his or her account of the episode. Indeed, even when the other person is readily identifiable and available, it is often difficult to obtain his or her side of the story. For example, Vaughan (1986) interviewed subjects in depth about their divorces or recent romantic breakups, obtaining detailed narrative accounts. She then asked people for permission to interview their ex-partners. To her surprise, her subjects almost unanimously refused to let her speak to the former spouse or partner. In view of these difficulties, the present research asked each subject to furnish both a perpetrator and a victim narrative. The two sets of stories are thus drawn from the same individuals, but they are not the same events.

Our use of the same subjects to furnish both victim and perpetrator narratives is important for understanding the findings, for it rules out explanations that treat victims and perpetrators as different kinds of people. Our procedures indicate how ordinary people define themselves as victims or as perpetrators—that is, how they construct narratives to make sense of their experiences in each of those roles.

The topic of anger was selected in the context of a broader interest in interpersonal conflict, harm, and wrongdoing. The broad context is an effort to understand how people hurt and offend each other, and this understanding presumably requires insight into the subjective experience both of victim and of perpetrator. Anger may be the most common and widespread experience of that sort. Thus, most people experience anger at least once per week, and nearly everyone experiences it at least once per month (Averill, 1982). It was felt that subjects would more readily describe incidents involving anger than incidents involving more exceptional types of interpersonal transgressions.

### *Derivation of Hypotheses*

*Arbitrariness.* The first issue concerns the random, arbitrary, or gratuitous nature of the provocation. Aggression research has often used such arbitrary offenses and frustrations to provoke anger. If that does indeed correspond to the common interpersonal genesis of anger, then both victim and perpetrator accounts should present the perpetrators' intentions as arbitrary, or at least incoherent and incomprehensible. As suggested earlier, however, there is reason to doubt whether perpetrators see their own actions that way. If perpetrators do see their actions as meaningful, though, victims may still be unable to see them that way, and so one may predict that victims will tend to present perpetrator intentions as arbitrary and incomprehensible but perpetrators will not.

Indeed, it is plausible that victims may be *motivated* to present perpetrators' intentions as incomprehensible. Anger is sometimes regarded as an appropriate and even obligatory response to arbitrary, unjustified wrongdoing (Averill, 1982; Shaver et al., 1987), and so victims can best justify their anger by presenting the perpetrator's acts as arbitrary and unjustified. In contrast, perpetrators may be motivated to see their actions as either legitimate or unavoidable, either of which frees them from much of the blame.

*Motivational basis.* Autobiographical narratives must be considered as performances constructed in the present (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1988), so it is useful to consider the possible current implications of past transgressions in order to understand the motivations that may bias and structure the accounts. Perpetrators recognize that someone found their behavior objectionable, as signified by the anger they elicited. Thus, the incident has possible implications that define the perpetrator's self as having undesirable qualities, such as being obnoxious or dishonest, and people presumably desire to avoid such implications. Further, if the offense was serious, it may imply that the perpetrator still owes the victim some compensation or restitution, perhaps in proportion to the lasting harm that the perpetrator caused. Perpetrators should therefore be inclined to deny their culpability and minimize the lasting negative consequences of the event and to justify their actions.

Victims may be free from the self-justifying motivations that attend perpetrators, but it would be unwarranted to assume that victim accounts have no biasing motivations and can be safely accepted at face value. An illustration of this danger is provided in recent work on deviant religious cults. In the late 1970s, a variety of firsthand accounts by victims portrayed these religious cults in sensationalized terms as networks of brainwashing and exploitation. The cults were seen as a national crisis and a threat to normal social life (e.g., Bromley, 1988; Bromley & Shupe, 1981; Robbins, 1988). Subsequently, however, systematic research into cults found that most of them are relatively harmless and modest ventures, that most people enter and leave them within a fairly short period of time, and

that very few people report lasting harmful effects (e.g., Barker, 1988; Robbins, 1988; Rothbaum, 1988; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Wright, 1988). Researchers concluded that the preliminary, highly publicized victim accounts were exceptional and possibly exaggerated accounts. Further, there is evidence that some victims are motivated to emphasize and perhaps exaggerate their victimization as a way of justifying their own actions, including both joining and leaving the cult (e.g., Hall, 1988). In short, the lesson from cult narratives is that victim accounts cannot automatically be accepted as the unbiased, accurate version of the truth, against which the presumably distorted accounts of perpetrators can be compared.

One possible set of motivations that could affect victim accounts is the desire to furnish a basis for some sense of deservingness. If the victim has suffered lasting harm, then he or she may feel entitled to sympathy, support, and possibly material compensation. Many lawsuits, for example, are concerned with establishing the extent of harm inflicted in order to decide the amount of material compensation owed by the perpetrator to the victim. Not surprisingly, in such cases perpetrator (or defendant) accounts tend to minimize the incident and its consequences, whereas victim (plaintiff) accounts tend to maximize them.

One may therefore suggest a broad motivational difference between victim and perpetrator perspectives. In simple terms, the perpetrator wants to see the incident as closed, whereas the victim wants to keep it open. More precisely, the perpetrator may be motivated to present the matter as an isolated incident that is now over and done, that was not typical of his or her behavior, that had no lasting negative consequences, and that has no implications for the present. In other words, the perpetrator may be motivated to deconstruct the incident. The victim, in contrast, may be motivated to connect the incident to broader time frames and ongoing patterns of events and to describe it as having lasting negative consequences, lacking closure and resolution, and therefore having potential implications for the present.

*Apology.* An apology (or other attempt to make amends) by the perpetrator is of special interest, because one could make contrary predictions about whether victims or perpetrators will feature it in their narratives. An apology is an admission of wrongdoing, and so it might be especially salient to victims (who presumably are trying to establish that they were, in fact, wronged). If perpetrators are simply trying to deny their wrongdoing and justify their actions, they should tend to avoid references to having apologized. On that basis, one might predict that perpetrators' apologies should be more common in victim accounts than in perpetrator accounts.

On the other hand, an apology or restitution marks a kind of closure to the incident, for it is often considered inappropriate to remain angry at someone who has apologized. Indeed, if the perpetrator did make amends in some way, then the victim's potential claim on current sympathy or restitution is diminished. Therefore, one may make a prediction opposite to the preceding one. If perpetrators want to close the issue, they should be prone to feature their apologies and amends, whereas victims should be more likely to neglect or omit such references.

*Different perspectives and accumulated provocations.* We have suggested that victims construct events in terms of broader time frames, whereas perpetrators deconstruct them as isolated incidents. This argument furnishes a basis for predicting how such interpersonal conflicts can arise from differential understandings, especially if combined with the suggestion that victims do not invariably communicate their anger to the perpetrator (Averill, 1982). It is possible that initial, possibly minor offenses produce anger that is not expressed overtly until a series of accumulated grievances provokes an explosion. Thus, from the victim's perspective, an angry outburst may represent a response to a series of provocations, and indeed the victim may feel that he or she has exercised great self-control and restraint in not showing anger until this point.

In contrast, the perpetrator may see only the immediate provocation, which may seem quite similar to previous actions that elicited no such angry outburst, and so the perpetrator may regard the anger as an inappropriate overreaction. This scenario can be tested by comparing victim and perpetrator accounts on whether single versus multiple, accumulated grievances are presented as the provocation, how often the anger is overtly communicated to the perpetrator, and whether the anger is regarded as an appropriate response or an overreaction.

## Method

Subjects were 63 undergraduate students enrolled in various psychology classes. They participated in group sessions and were assured of anonymity. The procedure consisted of written instructions (reviewed orally by the experimenter), requests to write two stories, and two personality measures.

The instructions for the "victim" story were as follows: "Describe an incident in which someone angered you, that is, an occurrence in which someone provoked you or made you really angry or mad. Nearly everyone has experienced such things more than once; please choose an especially important and memorable event." Further instructions asked subjects to be thorough and to provide "the full story." The perpetrator instructions substituted the phrase "you angered someone else" for "someone angered you" and was identical in other respects. (The designations "victim" and "perpetrator" were not used.) By random assignment, half of the subjects wrote the victim story first, whereas half wrote the perpetrator story first. In between the two stories, subjects filled out the Social Desirability Inventory (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964) and a measure of anxiety (from Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). This combination of measures was included as an exploratory measure designed to identify subjects who hold repressive personality styles (Weinberger, Schwartz, & Davidson, 1979); however, the quantity of stories was not adequate to provide statistically powerful comparisons between the stories of repressors and nonrepressors. For practical purposes, these intervening personality measures functioned merely as a distracting interlude between writing the two stories.

Some subjects failed to complete the second story or otherwise failed to follow instructions. In two cases, the roles of perpetrator and victim were sufficiently garbled to make coding impossible. The final sample consisted of 58 perpetrator stories and 55 victim stories.

Content analysis proceeded by coding the presence versus absence of various features (detailed in the Results section). Three raters independently coded all of the stories. Reliability of codings was computed on the basis of percentage agreement among the reviewers. Average interrater agreement was .76. Four dimensions required recoding to improve low reliabilities. After all ratings had been completed, the judges compared their ratings and created a final set of codings based on majority vote for each story on each dimension. These codings form

the basis for the results reported in the next section. Some stories could not be coded on all dimensions, and so the sample size varies slightly from one analysis to another. For example, when coding for relationship damage, we restricted the analysis to stories that referred to ongoing relationships; hence, all narratives about anger between strangers were excluded.

The decision to use dichotomous codings was an effort to increase the objectivity of the ratings. Rather than rating impressions on a continuum, the coder's task was conceptualized as recording the presence or absence of some feature. Thus, for example, stories either mentioned an apology or did not mention an apology; such a judgment should be clearer and more objective for the coder than inferring the degree to which a perpetrator may have felt apologetic or intended to apologize, or the degree to which the victim regarded the perpetrator as expressive of contrition. The time span was coded on whether the story contained long-term past events prior to the incident or contained some reference to present circumstances, rather than rating the time span on some continuum or estimating the degree to which the story still maintained some impact on the present. Likewise, we coded whether there was any indication of a happy ending, rather than trying to judge the degree to which the participants or the story's author may have regarded the outcome as happy or estimating the amount of happiness.

To investigate the degree of overlap versus independence of our coding dimensions, we computed the intercorrelations among our 26 variables. We set a priori criteria that correlations exceeding a magnitude of .8 would be regarded as duplication, .6 would indicate substantial overlap, and .4 would indicate some noteworthy degree of relationship. Of the 351 correlations, none exceeded .8, 3 (1%) exceeded .6, and 16 (4.5%) exceeded .4. The average of the signed correlations was .02, and the average absolute value of the 351 correlations was .15. It seems reasonable to conclude that there were generally very weak or minimal relationships among our coding dimensions.

Table 1
*Results of Content Coding*

| Item | Perpetrators (%) | Victims (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Long-term past events preceding incident | 45 | 64 |
| Positive consequences | 8 | 4 |
| Happy endings | 52 | 29 |
| Negative consequences | 39 | 73 |
| Denial of negative consequences | 16 | 0 |
| Perpetrator apologizes or makes amends | 22 | 4 |
| Damage to relationship | 31 | 55 |
| Victim still angry | 14 | 36 |
| Perpetrator's intentions | | |
| Described as incoherent, incomprehensible | 10 | 44 |
| Portrayed as arbitrary, contradictory, incoherent, or senseless | 12 | 55 |
| External or mitigating circumstances | 68 | 20 |
| Impulsive | 47 | 22 |
| Could not be helped | 29 | 0 |
| Justified or justifiable | 52 | 2 |
| Inconsistent | 18 | 47 |
| Immoral | 7 | 25 |
| Deliberately hurtful or malicious | 7 | 31 |
| Victim's response | | |
| Portrayed as overreaction | 49 | 16 |
| Anger justified (rater's judgment) | 54 | 94 |
| Anger justified (explicit indication) | 24 | 64 |
| No overt expression | 19 | 44 |
| Victim provoked incident (thus shares blame) | 33 | 4 |
| Cause of incident includes victim | 53 | 35 |
| Perpetrator regrets incident | 37 | 4 |
| Self-blame | 38 | 10 |
| Multiple or accumulated provocations | 32 | 53 |

*Note.* Percentages represent the proportion of stories codable on that dimension that were coded as having the specified feature.

## Results

The results are based on comparison of the two main sets of stories, that is, those told from the victim's perspective and those told from the perpetrator's perspective. The results for the main coding dimensions are summarized in Table 1.

### *Description of Stories*

The incidents were quite similar in the two sets of stories. Both perpetrator and victim accounts involved broken promises and commitments; violated rules, obligations, or expectations; betrayal of secrets; unfair treatment; lies; conflicts over money; and similar incidents.

No tendency was apparent for the type of incidents themselves to be more severe or offensive in one set as opposed to the other set; that is, it did not appear that perpetrators were choosing especially trivial incidents. Possibly, this was due to the instructions, which specified choosing especially severe incidents. Still, as will be seen in the following sections, there were differences in how the incidents were presented, and these differences certainly did affect how severe the offense or provocation appeared.

### *Time Span and Consequences*

A first hypothesis was that perpetrators would deconstruct the incident by bracketing it off as an isolated incident, whereas victims would place it in the context of a longer time frame. One way to examine this was simply to examine the time span covered in the story. We coded whether the narrative referred to circumstances that substantially preceded the focal incident. There was a tendency for victim accounts to be more likely than perpetrator accounts to include these long-term past circumstances, but it narrowly missed significance, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 3.81$, $p = .051$. Next, we coded whether the story contained reference to present circumstances (typically, finishing the story with some reference to the writer's current life or relationship), but no difference was found between the two sets. Simple coding of the time span thus failed to yield clear conclusions. It was therefore necessary to examine the description of consequences and implications more closely.

Stories were coded for whether they portrayed positive, desirable consequences of the incident. Less than 7% of the stories contained positive consequences, and there was no difference between perpetrator and victim narratives on this. Thus, it appears that narratives of episodes involving anger rarely include positive, desirable consequences, even though many people assert that anger can have positive social value (cf. Averill, 1982; Tavris, 1982).

Stories were then coded for happy endings, such as an assertion that victim and perpetrator are now good friends. Happy endings, of course, do not necessarily entail positive consequences, for they may occur in spite of the provocation and the

anger. Happy endings were significantly more common among perpetrator stories than among victim stories, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 5.99$, $p < .02$.

Negative consequences were widely evident across the entire sample, but they were more common in victim accounts, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 12.90$, $p < .001$. Indeed, perpetrator accounts sometimes contained statements *denying* that there were any lasting negative consequences, such as by stating that the conflict has been forgiven and forgotten and the individuals involved in it now are on good terms. Denial of negative consequences was significantly more common among perpetrator than among victim narratives, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 9.63$, $p < .01$. Thus, many perpetrator accounts ended in the present, but the reference to the present was a way of denying implications or aftereffects of the incident.

Stories were coded for reference to relationship damage, such as loss of friendship or inability to trust each other after the event. Victim stories were significantly more likely than perpetrator stories to contain reference to relationship damage, $\chi^2(1, N = 91) = 5.42$, $p < .02$. We also coded for any sign that the victim was still angry about the event. Victim accounts were significantly more likely to indicate continuing anger, $\chi^2(1, N = 93) = 6.07$, $p < .02$.

The last issue in this category referred to whether victims or perpetrators would be more likely to record an apology (or other attempt at making amends) to the victim. A substantial minority of the perpetrator accounts contained reference to an apology, but almost no victim accounts did, $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 7.55$, $p < .01$.

Thus, although victim and perpetrator accounts were almost equally likely to contain a time span continuing to the present, there were substantial differences in how the incident was contextualized. Victim accounts referred to lasting negative consequences, continuing anger, and long-term relationship damage, whereas perpetrator accounts tended to suppress or even explicitly deny such negative aftereffects. Perpetrators helped provide closure to the incident by featuring apologies and happy endings, unlike victim accounts. Perpetrator accounts thus tended to bracket the incident off as an isolated event without lasting negative consequences, whereas victim accounts maintained an ongoing sense of loss and grievance.

### *Perpetrator Motives and Intentions*

Two sets of codings examined whether perpetrators' actions were presented as arbitrary and gratuitous. First, we coded any statement that the perpetrator's actions were incoherent or incomprehensible, such as saying that there was no apparent reason for acting that way. Only a few perpetrators referred to not understanding their own motives, but a substantial number of victim accounts explicitly referred to the incomprehensibility of the perpetrator's motives and actions, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 16.61$, $p < .001$. Second, the raters judged each story on whether the perpetrator's actions appeared arbitrary, incoherent, contradictory, or senseless. Again, victim accounts were significantly more likely to cast the perpetrator's acts in that light, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 23.51$, $p < .001$.

Thus, it appears that in many cases perpetrators' actions are unintelligible and incomprehensible (even senseless) to the victims, but they are rarely experienced that way by perpetrators. The behaviors themselves are capable of supporting meaningful interpretation and plausible intention, but the victims fail to understand these. The gap between actions perceived as meaningful on one side and senseless on the other side may be an important factor in the genesis of interpersonal conflict and anger.

When victims did show more understanding of perpetrator intentions, these were not typically presented in an acceptable fashion. Victims were more likely to portray perpetrator motives as unjustified, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 33.97$, $p < .001$; as inconsistent, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 10.87$, $p < .001$; as immoral, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 7.26$, $p < .01$; and as deliberately cruel and harmful, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 10.22$, $p < .01$.

How did the perpetrators construct their own motives? They were more likely than victims to portray their own (perpetrator) motives as impulsive, $\chi^2(1, N = 108) = 7.86$, $p < .01$; as something they could not help or control, $\chi^2(1, N = 113) = 18.98$, $p < .001$; or as due to external or mitigating causes, $\chi^2(1, N = 107) = 25.16$, $p < .001$. Additionally, a few perpetrators' accounts presented their actions as simply following a legitimate personal preference and doing things they were entitled to do (which therefore cast the angry response as wholly unreasonable).

Thus, victims tended to portray the perpetrators' actions as objectionable, whereas many perpetrators tended to excuse them. It is noteworthy, however, that a substantial number of perpetrator stories did present the teller's own actions as objectionable. Indeed, almost half of the perpetrator narratives contained some indication that the perpetrator's acts were not fully justified. Almost all of the victim narratives did so. Thus, as a group, the victim stories adopted a more morally homogeneous stance.

By the same token, a substantial number of perpetrator narratives contained some expression of regret for the perpetrator's actions, whereas almost none of the victim stories acknowledged that the perpetrator may have regretted his or her actions, $\chi^2(1, N = 112) = 18.91$, $p < .001$.

### *Genesis Through Discrepant Perception of Cause*

The hypothesized scenario was that sometimes perpetrators provoke victims without realizing it, because victims fail to express anger. Eventually, the victim responds to the series of offenses or provocations, whereas the perpetrator sees only an overreaction to a single incident.

The expression of anger differed systematically in the two sets of stories. Perpetrator accounts were more likely to portray some verbal or aggressive expression of anger, whereas victim accounts were more likely to mention anger that was not expressed overtly, $\chi^2(1, N = 88) = 8.25$, $p < .01$. Thus, although some perpetrators realize their victims are angry without overt display, many other victims apparently are quite successful at concealing their anger from the perpetrator.

The portrayal of the victim's anger (including possible behavioral expression) as an overreaction was coded in two ways. First, we examined explicit statements to the effect that the anger was inappropriate, uncalled for, or otherwise excessive; these statements were rare in both sets of stories and did not differ systematically. Second, the raters judged whether the vic-

tim's anger (or behavioral response, or both) was portrayed as inappropriate, uncalled for, or otherwise excessive. Perpetrator accounts were significantly more likely to portray the anger as an overreaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 7.72$, $p < .01$. Thus, perpetrators often seemed to feel that their victims were inappropriately or excessively angry, and even when they acknowledged some fault of their own they still often regarded the angry response as excessive. Victims rarely seemed to regard their own response as excessive.

A related question is whether or not the anger was portrayed as justified. Perpetrators were significantly less likely than victims to depict the angry response as justified, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 21.43$, $p < .001$. When the coding was restricted to explicit indications that the anger was justified, the same pattern obtained, $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 16.86$, $p < .001$. The distribution of responses was noteworthy. As reported earlier, perpetrators sometimes portrayed their own actions as justified and sometimes as unjustified, and they were equally evenhanded with regard to whether the anger was justified. In contrast, victims very rarely portrayed the perpetrators' actions as justified, and they correspondingly nearly always depicted their own anger as justified. (There was a substantial correlation between portraying the provocation as unjustified and portraying the anger as justified.) Thus, again, the victim narratives were more morally homogeneous than the perpetrator narratives.

Finally, we coded whether the provocation was described as a single incident or as an accumulation of incidents. For example, some stories contained several incidents, and others included statements such as "My anger towards them was built up slowly over the course of the summer." Victim accounts were significantly more likely than perpetrator accounts to refer to multiple, accumulating provocations, $\chi^2(1, N = 110) = 4.84$, $p < .05$.

### *Supplementary Analyses*

We rated all of the stories for clarity. A slight tendency emerged for perpetrator stories to be more garbled, but it was far from significant. Keeping the story confused, fragmented, or hard to understand did not appear to be a common defense in these stories.

We coded for evidence of positive behavior change brought about by the incident (especially by the expression of anger); relatively few stories included this, and there was no difference between victim and perpetrator perspectives on this dimension. We coded for any suggestion that the anger had positive value; less than 20% of the stories suggested such value, and again there was no difference by role.

Because our research was based on the assumption that perpetrators and victims understand events quite differently, we coded for any references to misunderstandings. There was no difference between perpetrators and victims in the frequency of references to misunderstandings; indeed, there were hardly any such references at all. Victims and perpetrators may understand things differently, but they do not seem to acknowledge that they understand them differently.

In view of the centrality of issues of blame, we coded the stories according to whether the author indicated any self-blame. Self-blame was more common among perpetrators than among victims, $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 11.41$, $p < .001$. Further analyses suggest that perpetrators were also more likely to blame the victim. We coded (separately) whether the victim provoked the offense and whether the victim caused it. On causation—which included things for which the victim was not immediately responsible, such as being fat, which led to teasing about obesity, which led to anger—there was no difference, although a trend suggested that perpetrators were more prone to attribute a causal role to the victim, $\chi^2(1, N = 109) = 3.58$, $p < .07$. A clear difference emerged with respect to victim provocation: Perpetrators often portrayed the victim as doing something to provoke the incident, whereas victim accounts almost never included this aspect, $\chi^2(1, N = 111) = 15.87$, $p < .001$.

## Discussion

The results of this investigation suggest substantial differences between the narrative accounts of victims and perpetrators. The subjective interpretations of victims and perpetrators may well reflect substantially different motivations. Indeed, it seems quite plausible that the discrepancies between the two perspectives are partly responsible for the interpersonal conflicts.

Although we have presented and discussed our results in terms of differences between victims and perpetrators, it is important to keep in mind that these are not different people. Each subject was asked to furnish both a victim and a perpetrator story. The motivations and biases thus may be considered inherent in the roles. In other words, our results do not indicate that victims and perpetrators are different kinds of people; rather, the same people see things differently depending on whether they participate as victims or perpetrators. The biases are in the roles.

It is also noteworthy that there was almost no recognition of misunderstandings or discrepant perspectives in these accounts. Our results indicate that perpetrators and victims construct events quite differently, but they do not appear to be aware of these discrepancies. It is plausible that unrecognized discrepancies in interpretation are an important fact in the genesis of interpersonal conflict and anger. Perhaps if people were more able to realize the interpretive discrepancies, they would be less prone to become angry.

The limitations of our methodology must be acknowledged. Rather than starting from a standardized, uniform experience, as is possible in laboratory research, our data refer to a wide variety of experiences that were selected to fit a few clear criteria. There is thus less precise control in the present study than is available in controlled laboratory settings. Further, despite our efforts to equate the instructions for the perpetrator and victim stories, it is plausible that the task of choosing a story to tell is not fully identical. The task of recalling an incident based on the severity of anger may differ depending on whether it is one's own anger or someone else's anger. Victims may choose their story on the basis of how angry they felt, regardless of what they said or did; perpetrators may be obliged to choose on the basis of what the victim said or did, regardless of how angry the victim felt. In addition, our results do not compare both perspectives on the same incident; hence, it is impossible to establish the cognitive processes that account for our results. It is not clear whether our differences arose because victims and perpe-

trators notice and encode events differently, choose different stories to tell, recall them in a distorted fashion, selectively forget or fabricate events, and so forth. We have argued that autobiographical narratives are of interest in their own right and as evidence about subjective processes (including motivation), but in the present form these narratives are not effective means of learning about cognitive processes. Finally, our instructions specifically asked for stories involving severe anger, and so the results should not be generalized to more trivial offenses or annoyances (cf. Averill, 1982, on the distinction between anger and annoyance).

It may be generally true that people are more likely to notice, understand, and recall their own actions and feelings than those of someone else. Several of our findings confirm this pattern; indeed, that discrepancy is central to our argument. Interpersonal conflict, and especially anger, may often arise because of the discrepancies between the subjective understandings of the parties involved. For example, a perpetrator may not know he or she has given offense if the victim conceals the anger, and so the perpetrator may be likely to repeat the act. It was noteworthy that very few of the accounts acknowledged any misunderstandings or discrepant interpretations, whereas our results showed many such discrepancies. Unrecognized discrepancies in interpretations of events may be a central factor in interpersonal conflicts involving anger.

The main conclusions can be reviewed and discussed as follows.

### *Context, Consequences, and Closure*

These results fit the view that perpetrator and victim accounts differ with respect to the long-term context in which the incident is placed. Apparently, perpetrators tended to bracket the event off in time. Their accounts minimized lasting negative consequences or damage to interpersonal relationships (sometimes explicitly denying any such consequences). They included happy endings, and they helped close the incident by recording apologies or amends. Thus, in the perpetrator's view, the incident occurred but is now over and done.

In contrast, victim accounts tended to place the incident in a longer time frame. Their narratives invoked lasting negative consequences and damage to relationships, such as loss of trust or continued hostility. Happy endings were far rarer, and instead their references to the present often indicated that they still felt angry or otherwise victimized. They almost never noted that the perpetrator apologized or tried to make amends.

Interpersonal transgressions may thus be recalled quite differently depending on the participant's role. Perpetrators apparently see the incident as a brief, uncharacteristic episode that has little or no relation to present circumstances, whereas victims apparently continue to see harmful consequences and to feel lasting grievances. This is consistent with the view that the perpetrator wishes to deconstruct the incident so as to deny any lasting implications of guilt or shame, whereas victims may be inclined to maintain the incident in an ongoing context that validates further claims for sympathy, support, and perhaps even tangible restitution.

These findings are consistent with other studies of victims, who often appear to ruminate about their past sufferings for years afterward (e.g., Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Tait & Silver, 1989). These ruminations may well be accompanied by emotional pain that continues to sensitize them to further consequences of the incident. In contrast, perpetrators may be disinclined to ruminate about the event and may be reluctant to notice any lasting consequences (e.g., Lifton, 1986; Sichrovsky, 1988).

These results also correspond to other observations about the psychologies of victims and perpetrators. For example, in today's United States, a child growing up in the northern states learns about the Civil War as a matter of ancient history, in which the northern troops helped persuade the South to abandon the evil institution of slavery, which was accomplished long ago and is now only remembered in history textbooks. In contrast, the South today maintains an acute sense of grievance about the Civil War, and children grow up learning that the greedy, rapacious northerners destroyed the traditional southern culture and way of life.

Another illustration comes in accounts of the Crusades. Western histories of the Crusades (e.g., Runciman, 1951–1954) present them as events that occurred and were resolved many centuries ago. They emphasize the medieval idealism and the religious fervor of the desire to *re*capture the Holy Land. They acknowledge some atrocities (e.g., razing villages, massacring innocent noncombatants and hostages, and roasting and eating Moslem babies) but dismiss these as unfortunate excesses typical of the barbaric past. The lasting consequences of the Crusades are described mainly in positive terms, such as cultural exchange and cross-fertilization. In contrast, a recent history of the Crusades from the Arab perspective (Maalouf, 1987) ends with a forceful statement that the Arabs still have an acute sense of harm and grievance from the Crusades, and that current Arab policies from oil embargoes to terrorism must be understood in the context of that sense of victimization. Their view of Western society is still centrally determined by their memory of unprovoked invasion and atrocity, and Arabs consider the Crusades to have had many harmful consequences for their culture that persist to the present.

In view of these converging lines of evidence, one may hypothesize that there is an important and broad difference between perpetrator and victim perceptions of transgressions. Even if both sides agree that a wrong was committed, the perpetrator will be inclined to close the incident and forget about it long before the victim is ready to do so. Indeed, the victim's efforts to sustain the memory may be regarded by the perpetrators as excessively vindictive.

### *Accumulating Provocations*

We found that victim narratives were more likely than perpetrator ones to describe a series of provocations or grievances. Further, we found that victims sometimes reported stifling the expression of anger, and that when anger was expressed, perpetrators were often inclined to perceive it as an overreaction that was out of proportion to the provocation.

This combination of results suggests one process by which interpersonal conflict can arise from discrepant perspectives. One person offends or harms another, but the victim fails to express anger overtly. The perpetrator may repeat the action,

not realizing that it is harming and angering the victim. Eventually the victim responds to the series of provocations by expressing the accumulated anger, which to the victim seems entirely appropriate to the multiple offenses.

The perpetrator, however, fails to recognize the multiplicity of the offenses and sees the anger as a response only to the single, most recent and immediate act. Indeed, from the perpetrator's perspective, his or her most recent action may be quite similar to past actions that elicited no objection (perhaps because the victim concealed his or her anger). The perpetrator is thus inclined to see the response as an overreaction. The perpetrator may even come to feel like a victim of unjust persecution, to the extent that the anger was perceived as disproportionate or unjustified.

These results are also consistent with the tendencies noted in the previous section. Victims tend to see the incident in a broader temporal context than perpetrators. They may be quick to notice patterns of repeated offenses and provocations, unlike perpetrators, who tend to bracket off each offense as an isolated incident.

### *Incomprehensibility of Perpetrator's Motives*

We noted that laboratory studies have used gratuitous insults and arbitrary frustrations to create anger. These manipulations suggest a theory of anger as something that arises when a perpetrator inflicts harm for no apparent reason. In other words, the perpetrator's actions have no comprehensible or meaningful motive. Our results suggest that this theory of anger is half right: It corresponds well to the view of many victims but does not fit the perpetrator's subjective experience.

In our sample, only a few perpetrators made reference to actions that lacked comprehensible meanings (e.g., "I don't know why I did it"). In the overwhelming majority of cases, perpetrators were able to make sense of their actions, at least in retrospect. Victims, however, were often unable to make sense of the perpetrators' actions, even long afterward. These results are consistent with other studies of victimization. Incest victims, for example, often continue to wonder painfully for many years why the adult took advantage of them and continue to find that behavior incomprehensible (Silver et al., 1983).

The present results shed light on how interpersonal conflict may be generated. The transgression is often an act that can be understood as a meaningful one, in many cases reasonable and even legitimate, and in other cases regrettable but understandable. The victim, however, fails to see the transgression in that light. To the victim, the transgression tends to appear as a random, inexplicable provocation, done for no apparent reason or out of sheer malice.

Our data cannot establish whether the differences in perpetrator comprehensibility were due to differential interpretation of similar events or to selection of different events to describe. Confronted with our questionnaire, victims may have chosen incidents on the basis of the incomprehensibility of the provocation, whereas perpetrators may have preferred to describe incidents in which their actions made sense. If so, this difference would still reflect an important difference between the psychological construction of the victim and perpetrator roles. It would mean that people understand the victim's role as that of suffering wrongs that are inflicted for no reason. To qualify for the victim's role (and its potential benefits, such as rights to sympathy and restitution), therefore, people may feel it necessary to describe events in which the perpetrator had no apparent, acceptable reason for his or her actions. Future research may uncover whether these descriptions are created by choosing which events to relate or by altering how one describes those events. Either way, the incomprehensibility of the perpetrator's motive appears to be an important part of how people define themselves as victims.

### *Morality and Justification*

The moral implications were portrayed quite differently in the two sets of stories. Victims tended to see perpetrators' actions as immoral, as inconsistent or contradictory (such as breaking promises), as unjustified, or as deliberately cruel and harmful. As already noted, they also tended to see the perpetrator's actions as senseless and usually portrayed the perpetrators as unrepentant afterward.

In contrast, in their narratives perpetrators used a variety of techniques to mute the moral culpability of their actions. They were far more likely than victims to refer to external or mitigating circumstances, or to portray the victim as partly responsible. They often portrayed their acts as something that could not be helped. In other cases, they portrayed their action as impulsive. On the whole, they were more likely than victims to regard their initial act as justifiable, and in some cases they were quite insistent about this.

Perpetrators were far from uniformly defensive or self-aggrandizing. They portrayed their own actions as justifiable in only about half of the cases. In many other cases, they expressed regret over the incident or noted that they had apologized to the victim. It is noteworthy that perpetrators were far more likely to depict the victim's anger as justified than victims were willing to portray the perpetrator's actions as justified. Statements of self-blame were also more common in perpetrator accounts than in victim accounts. As a group, victims held a more extreme and uniform moral stance.

Two implications follow from the stronger moral stance of the victim role. First, the fact that victim accounts were more consistent and uniform can be interpreted to mean that motivations and biases in the victim role are stronger than those in the perpetrator role (i.e., these biases are more effective at fitting all events into a consistent script), or it may simply mean that the experience of victim is in fact more constant and uniform than the experience of perpetrator. Although we suspect that the latter explanation is correct, the former cannot be ruled out. The notion that the victim role carries important motivational biases remains for further investigation. For the present, we reiterate that it is not safe to accept victim accounts as the unbiased truth or to assume that all discrepancies between victim and perpetrator stories reflect falsehoods and errors on the latter's part.

Second, the greater moral extremity of victim stories may be derived from an underlying moral superiority of the victim's role. The standard scripts and schemas may well portray the victim as innocent and as deserving sympathy and restitution, whereas the perpetrator is guilty and deserves punishment.

During transgressions, of course, the victim gets the worst of it, but in the aftermath the victim may often have the upper hand in a moral sense. For this reason, ex-perpetrators may envy their former victims and seek to identify with the victim role themselves.

A variety of evidence is consistent with the view that ex-perpetrators may sometimes seek to embrace the victim's role themselves. Sichrovsky's (1988) interviews with children of former Nazi war criminals revealed that a surprising number of these children had been taught to regard their parents as victims. After the Civil War, some ex-slaveowners saw themselves as martyrs for a noble way of life and victims of ungrateful treatment (e.g., desertion) by their ex-slaves (Genovese, 1976). Several of our findings fit the idea that perpetrators may design their narratives to portray themselves as victims. Many perpetrators tended to regard the victim's anger as an overreaction or as unjustified, and they portrayed their own behavior as something that could not be helped or as due to external, mitigating circumstances. Thus, they may cast themselves as unjustly persecuted for a minor, unavoidable, or nonexistent offense.

These comments, although speculative, underscore the hypothesized motivations associated with the victim role. Victims are accorded a legitimate claim to sympathy, support, and possibly material compensation, and their narratives are typically consistent with such claims. Others may be motivated to embrace the victim role because of the appeal of those same claims. Such tendencies may occur mainly when the perpetrators later find themselves at a disadvantage.

### *Future Research*

Further work is desirable to corroborate and extend these findings. We have suggested that arbitrary, incomprehensible offenses do resemble the victim's view but not the perpetrator's; it may be worth using laboratory techniques to explore the genesis of anger from the perpetrator's side, although ethical constraints may limit such work. Another promising area concerns personality differences in anger and in autobiographical accounts. Our results suggested a variety of possible differences between repressors and nondefensive/nonanxious individuals, but a substantially larger sample will be necessary in order to conduct such comparisons with adequate statistical power.

The present results generally confirm and extend Averill's (1982) findings. One discrepancy concerns the positive value or desirable consequences of anger. Averill found that most subjects endorse such a belief, but the present narratives contained little evidence of such value. Perhaps such consequences exist but are not part of the story for most people; that is, they may recognize the positive value if asked, but their own story does not include this value. Alternatively, perhaps the assertion of positive value is a way of rationalizing and justifying the expression of anger in a socially desirable manner (cf. Tavris, 1982).

Further study of victim and perpetrator perspectives appears desirable. Probably, few theorists would dispute that perpetrator accounts may contain self-serving distortions and rationalizations. Whether victim accounts are biased and distorted by motivational influences remains an important question. It may be worth exerting substantial efforts to ascertain whether victim accounts deviate in systematic, motivated ways from accurate recountings, although this will require a procedure that has infallible criteria for judging accuracy. Another important issue for further study is the notion that ex-perpetrators may sometimes seek to embrace the victim's role for themselves.

The present results seem encouraging with respect to the autobiographical methodology. Narratives may be a useful way to explore the motivations that shape how people interpret events.

Some comments about the autobiographical methodology seem appropriate, in view of the technique's novelty. First, it was surprisingly easy to obtain the data; subjects were ready and willing to recount stories. (But, of course, this pragmatic advantage was more than offset by the difficult and time-consuming process of content coding.) Second, dichotomous codings proved much more effective and helpful than our efforts with multiple-category codings or scale ratings. Third, some of our initial (unpublished) research efforts with autobiographical narratives suffered from heterogeneity of responses; it is apparently vital to make the instructions quite narrow and explicit, so that all stories do, in fact, address the same theme. Fourth, although we worried that subjects would refuse to write perpetrator stories or would exhibit sequence effects (such as furnishing a second story much shorter than their first), neither of these problems materialized. Fifth, it seems necessary to have a sample of over 100 stories in order for the analyses to have adequate statistical power, because dichotomous coding variables are not highly sensitive. Finally, although some researchers favor spoken accounts (e.g., Ross & Holmberg, in press), we found it quite feasible to rely on written accounts, at least when working with a university sample.

If external validity is to be one of the positive values of the autobiographical technique, then some attention to issues of sampling is desirable. To increase generality, some attempt should be made to recruit nonuniversity populations when feasible. If a broad spectrum of the population is to be sampled, however, it may become impractical to obtain stories by having subjects write them in response to printed instructions, because wide variations in writing skills may contribute substantial error variance.

Another important issue is the investigation of relationship contexts for stories. It would be desirable to obtain stories from intimate partners about the same events. One should not expect all the present results to generalize to stories told by married couples about each other, however, because the maintenance of the relationship may generate strong pressures to negotiate a story version that is acceptable to both parties. Happily married individuals may be motivated to render accounts that portray their partners in a positive light and their marriages as well adjusted, so some of the discrepancies we found between victim and perpetrator accounts may be reduced, eliminated, or even reversed (cf. Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987). In short, stories from within marriages may be a special case that is subject to unusual sources of motivated bias, and so they deserve separate investigation.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Victims and perpetrators exhibit important differences in their accounts of conflict and anger. It appears that neither

group is inclined to take note of these differences, and so unrecognized discrepancies in interpretation may be an important factor in the genesis of anger. In particular, victims may often stifle their anger initially, then later express strong anger in response to the series of provocations, whereas perpetrators see only an overreaction to a single incident. Later, there appears to be a broad tendency for perpetrators to regard the incident as a closed, isolated episode, whereas victims tend to describe lasting consequences and implications.

Whether these discrepancies arise from distorting the events or from choosing which events to describe is impossible to determine from our data. Either way, however, these discrepancies reflect how roles determine the structure of personal narratives. McAdams (1985) has emphasized the intimate link between personal, narrative recollections and identity, and his perspective provides a valuable context in which the present findings may be placed. People define themselves in the stories from their lives, and the stories they tell differ systematically depending on their roles as victims and perpetrators. Identity is made from roles, and it is the roles that contain the biases that accounted for our findings, because our data were based on the same people in both roles.

Autobiographical narratives may therefore be a useful method for exploring how people define their identities. The notion that autobiography defines the self has long been accepted in literary circles, but psychologists may have viewed autobiographies with distrust because of the likelihood of biases and distortions. Yet those biases shed light into the motivations associated with self-definition. By focusing on how different roles furnish different accounts of similar events, further research may shed additional light on the subjective processes involved in self-construction. Having people describe their own experiences in their own words can provide insight into how people construct these experiences.

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