

# How conflict expressions affect recipients' conflict management behaviors<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

We integrate theories of conflict expressions and conflict management to examine how the nature of a conflict expression (i.e., the level of entrenchment, subversiveness, ambiguity, and target-directness) influences receivers' willingness to respond with competitive, integrative, and nonconfrontational behaviors. Specifically, we conducted two policy-capturing experiments through which we examined the effects of distinct facets of a conflict expression on receivers' conflict management behaviors, while holding all other facets constant, thereby offering causal conclusions on the relative importance of each facet for predicting behavioral reactions. We find that receivers were more likely to respond with competitive (forcing) versus integrative (problem-solving, compromising) or nonconfrontational (yielding, avoiding) behaviors when conflict was expressed unambiguously with high entrenchment and subversiveness. Notably, entrenchment had the strongest influence of any facet on conflict reactions. Overall, we contribute to research by specifying behavioral outcomes of distinct conflict expressions, which likely have important implications for the initiation of conflict spirals.

## 1. Introduction

Conflict occurs frequently in organizations, and is likely inevitable as work teams tackle increasingly complex issues that require multiple specialized individuals to offer ideas and make decisions (O'Neill & Salas, 2018). Despite an enormous volume of literature on workplace conflict, several new and valuable insights have surfaced over the past few years. First, the level of analysis at which conflict exists has come under scrutiny, as several scholars have argued that conflict originates and exists primarily within dyads, rather than at the individual or team level (Humphrey et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2021). Second, the timescale at which conflict occurs has also been questioned. Conflict has historically been conceptualized and operationalized as a static team state (DeChurch et al., 2013); however, new perspectives have emphasized the dynamic process of conflict, which requires attention to the moves and events that collectively represent the micro-foundation of conflict states (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019). Finally, there is an acknowledgement that scholars must push beyond the typical focus on conflict types (e.g., task, relationship) to also consider how conflict is expressed (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015).

Conflict expressions theory (Weingart et al., 2015) integrates several

of these new developments by explicitly focusing on conflict communications at the move and dyadic level – the smallest temporal and relational units at which conflict occurs (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019). According to conflict expressions theory, how conflict is expressed affects receivers' perceptions of the conflict, emotions, and acquired information. This internal process is theorized to affect how the recipient expresses conflict back to the sender and, over repeated instances of these moves, a dynamic spiral of conflict escalation or de-escalation may ensue (Weingart et al., 2015). Consequently, unpacking the ways in which individuals express conflict may help us better predict the move-level consequences (e.g., competitive responses) of distinct conflict episodes, as well as how conflicts start and escalate (or de-escalate; Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015). However, while research in this area is progressing (e.g., Todorova et al., 2014; 2022; Tsai & Bendersky, 2015), several important theoretical and empirical issues remain.

First, there is a need to more explicitly integrate *conflict management behaviors* to clarify how receivers might respond to particular conflict expressions. Specifying behavioral reactions is vital because behaviors are central to our understanding of conflict outcomes (e.g., resolution, escalation; Deutsch, 1990; 1994; Van de Vliert, 1997), and conflict

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expressions would seem to have important implications for how receivers attempt to manage conflict (Weingart et al., 2015). Accordingly, we integrate rich models and theories of conflict management (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Deutsch, 1949; Rahim, 1983; Van de Vliert, 1997) to offer theoretical rationales linking distinct facets of conflict expressions to a range of potential move-level behaviors that stand to provoke or reconcile the conflict. That is, we propose that the nature of a conflict expression (e.g., the level of entrenchment) will influence receivers' willingness to respond with competitive, integrative, and nonconfrontational behaviors, which has significant ramifications for conflict outcomes (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Indeed, Weingart and colleagues (2015, p. 253) originally recommended such an integration in future research: "Our conceptual framework of conflict expression might serve well to link the conflict literature and conflict management literature because it is likely that the way in which a conflict is expressed will influence the choice of conflict management approach."

A second empirical question concerns whether the four facets of conflict expressions advanced by Weingart and colleagues (2015) hold predictive power and, if so, whether some have stronger effects on recipients' reactions than others. Weingart et al. (2015) described two overarching dimensions of a conflict expression (i.e., intensity and directness), each of which is comprised of two facets (or subdimensions) – entrenchment and subversiveness (for intensity), and ambiguity and target-directness (for directness). However, research has primarily focused on how the overarching dimensions combine to influence receivers' perceptions and reactions (e.g., high intensity with low directness), rather than consider the possibility of distinct facet-level effects. Each facet might produce unique effects on receivers' reactions, which should be investigated to develop a deeper understanding of how conflict expressions affect conflict outcomes. For example, entrenchment signals a high intensity refusal to budge on a conflict issue (Brett et al., 1998; Putnam & Jones, 1982), and thus may elicit a stronger effect on recipients' move-level reactions (e.g., competition), relative to the ambiguity of a conflict expression. Moreover, by isolating the independent effects of each facet, we can better understand how the overarching dimensions affect conflict outcomes, such as whether the effects of oppositional intensity are driven more so by entrenchment, subversiveness, or if both are equally impactful.

We address these questions by conducting two fully-crossed (i.e., orthogonal) policy-capturing experiments through which we examine the causal effects of an initial conflict expression on recipients' conflict management behaviors (i.e., forcing, problem-solving, compromising, yielding, and avoiding). Importantly, this novel methodology applied to conflict expressions and management research allowed us to examine the independent effects of each of the aforementioned facets, while controlling for all others (and other potential confounds, such as conflict type and frequency), because each one is presented in multiple scenarios with counter-balanced levels of all others, which is untenable with typical field-based research designs (cf. Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karen & Barringer, 2002). Thus, beyond integrating theories of conflict expressions and management, our research contributes uniquely to the conflict literature by offering causal and comparative inferences regarding the isolated effects of each facet of a conflict expression on receivers' conflict management behaviors.

## 2. Theoretical backdrop

### 2.1. Conflict expressions theory

Conflict expressions theory conceptualizes conflict based on how people express disagreements (Weingart et al., 2015). Specifically, Weingart et al. (2015) identified two overarching dimensions of a conflict expression – oppositional intensity and directness – each of which is

comprised of two subdimensions. *Intensity*, which is comprised of the subdimensions entrenchment and subversiveness, refers to "the degree of strength, force, or energy with which the sender conveys opposition during a given conflict event" (Weingart et al., 2015, p. 240). By contrast, *directness*, which is comprised of the subdimensions ambiguity and target-directness, refers to "the degree to which the sender explicitly versus implicitly conveys his or her opposition" (Weingart et al., 2015, p. 237).

When conflict is perceived, the recipient first appraises its implications for their well-being and goals to determine an appropriate reaction (see Elfenbein, 2007). Conflict expressions theory deepens our understanding of this process by proposing that the intensity and directness of a conflict expression affects receivers' perceptions of the conflict, which shapes their emotions and information processing, and, in turn, their reciprocating response, potentially setting the conflict into an escalatory or de-escalatory trajectory (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015). Emotions and acquired information are logical starting points to consider the outcomes of conflict expressions because they often precede and motivate behaviors (Pondy, 1967). However, it is important to also consider receivers' behavioral reactions because how a sender expresses conflict may affect the recipient's willingness to respond integratively, competitively, or nonconfrontationally. Thus, focusing on behaviors can help us better predict when and why conflict expressions are likely to result in a resolution, escalation, or stalemate (Deutsch, 1990; Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996; Pruitt & Kim, 2004). Indeed, Weingart and colleagues (2015, p. 253) implied that, "conflicts that are more direct and less oppositionally intense might be more likely to evoke collaborative/problem-solving approaches to resolving the conflict." However, they did not further unpack this possibility. Accordingly, in the following section, we integrate established theories and models on conflict management (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2001; Deutsch, 1949; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Van de Vliert, 1997) to both categorize conflict management behaviors and develop theoretically-informed hypotheses as to how conflict expressions of varying entrenchment, subversiveness, ambiguity, and target-directness relate to conflict behaviors that are distinctively competitive (forcing), integrative (problem-solving, compromising), and nonconfrontational (yielding, avoiding).

### 2.2. The conglomerated conflict management model

Scholars have proposed several conflict management theories and models consisting of detailed behavioral responses. Two of the most prominent models include the cooperation-competition dichotomy, which is advanced by social interdependence theory (Deutsch, 1949; 1990), and the five-part behavioral taxonomy (De Dreu et al., 2001), which is advanced by the dual-concerns model (Rahim, 1983; see Table 1 for a summary of conflict management taxonomies). These models form the basis of the conglomerated conflict management model (Van de Vliert, 1997), which is particularly useful for predicting behaviors, as described below.

According to social interdependence theory, people are oriented to respond cooperatively to conflict when they perceive that their goals are positively connected with the other party (i.e., positive goal interdependence) because satisfying the other party's goals also helps satisfy one's own goals, thereby promoting constructive controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, 2003; Tjosvold et al., 2014). By contrast, people are expected to respond competitively to conflict when they perceive an incongruence between both parties' goals (i.e., negative goal interdependence) because one party's gain comes at the expense of the other party's loss (i.e., zero-sum game, Deutsch, 1949; 1990).

The dual concerns model describes conflict management as a function of high and low concern for self and others, thereby addressing a significant drawback of social interdependence theory which always

**Table 1**  
Summary of Different Taxonomies of Conflict Management Behaviors.

Conglomerated Conflict Management Model (Van de Vliert, 1997)			Dual Concerns Model (Rahim, 1983) a,b		Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) c		Social Interdependence Theory (Deutsch, 1949)	
Category	Dimensions	Category	Dimensions	Category	Dimensions	Category	Dimensions	Category
Competition	Fighting (Indirect/Direct)	Active / Moderately Active	Concern for self: High Concern for other: Low	Forcing (Dominating)	Concern for self: High Concern for other: Low	Control (Moving Against)	Competition (Negative goal interdependence)	Competition (Negative goal interdependence)
Negotiation (i.e., Passive Cooperation)	Problem-Solving	Disagreeable	Concern for self: High Concern for other: High	Problem-Solving (Integrating)	Concern for self: High Concern for other: High	Solution Orientation (Moving Toward)	Cooperation (Positive goal interdependence)	Cooperation (Positive goal interdependence)
	Compromising	Active	Concern for self: Moderate Concern for other: Moderate	Compromising	Concern for self: Moderate Concern for other: Moderate			
	Accommodating	Agreeable (More)	Concern for self: Low Concern for other: High	Yielding (Obliging)	Concern for self: Low Concern for other: High	Non-Confrontation (Moving Away)	N/A (No self-goals; hence no interdependence)	N/A (No self-goals; hence no interdependence)
Nonconfrontation (i.e., Active Cooperation)	Avoiding	Passive	Concern for self: Low Concern for other: Low	Avoiding	Concern for self: Low Concern for other: Low			
		Agreeable (Less)						
		Agreeable (More)						
		Passive						
		Agreeable (Less)						

Note. <sup>a</sup>Derivatives of Rahim's (1983) model have also been presented. Most notably, Thomas and Kilmann (1978) used similar terminologies to categorize behaviors, which involve similar dimensions to Van de Vliert (1997); i.e., assertiveness, which mirrors activeness, and cooperativeness, which mirrors agreeableness.

<sup>b</sup>De Dreu et al.'s (2001) category labels are noted in brackets (i.e., DUTCH model).

<sup>c</sup>Horney's (1945) category labels are noted in brackets.

assumes a high concern for self (Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996). Several typologies and instruments, such as the DUTCH (i.e., Dutch Test for Conflict Handling; De Dreu et al., 2001), build on this framework by situating behavioral categories (e.g., forcing) by crossing the dual axes of concerns (see Table 1). Importantly, nominal category descriptions have typically guided such measurements (e.g., avoiding entails avoiding confrontation; De Dreu et al., 2001), even though the theoretical substance for predicting relationships is based on the activation of the dual concerns (Van de Vliert, 1997). Indeed, several empirical studies have raised questions about whether the categories perfectly reflect variations in concerns, as avoiding tends to correlate strongly with yielding, and compromising with problem-solving (Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990), suggesting that making predictions based on the behavioral category descriptions themselves may be problematic because they do not necessarily capture the spectrum of self and other concerns.

The conglomerated conflict management model (Fig. 1; see also Van de Vliert, 1997; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994) builds on these foundations, as it identifies distinct conflict behavior dimensions as composites of agreeableness and activeness, resulting in three overarching categories: (1) Competition (comprised of forcing), (2) Integration (comprised of problem-solving and compromising), and (3) Nonconfrontation (comprised of yielding and avoiding). Unlike the aforementioned models, the conglomerated model is particularly useful for predicting conflict management behaviors because it supposes the likelihood that an individual responds competitively, integratively, or nonconfrontationally based on the extent to which a conflict move motivates a more active or passive, and agreeable or disagreeable response, as informed both by goal interdependency and dual concerns. That is, the conglomerated model classifies expected behaviors (reflected in the DUTCH categories) based on the extent to which a conflict party is motivated to satisfy concerns for self or others, and sees their goals as aligned or in-competition, as described below (Van de Vliert, 1997; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994).

### 2.3. Classifying conflict behaviors as competitive, integrative, and nonconfrontational

**Competition.** Competitive behaviors (i.e., forcing) derive from a combination of the disagreeableness and activeness dimensions (Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). It involves one-sided attempts to overpower or “win” the conflict (i.e., “moving against”; Horney, 1945) and thus, often entails the use of contentious tactics to impose one’s views, such as by overpowering or intimidating others and advancing one’s agenda while ignoring others’ needs and preferences (Brett et al., 1998; Lovelace et al., 2001). In the dual concerns model, forcing is based on a high concern for self and low concern for others, and thus is motivated by the goal of winning at the expense of others (De Dreu et al., 2001; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Competitive behaviors are often invoked when disputants experience hostility and threat (Wall & Callister, 1995) and/or view the conflict as negatively interdependent, which encourages behaviors that maximize self-interests and to avoid a loss at the expense of another’s aggression (O'Neill et al., 2018a).

**Integration.** Integrative behaviors (i.e., problem-solving and compromising) derive from a combination of the agreeableness and activeness dimensions (i.e., active cooperation). It is akin to cooperative conflict management (Deutsch, 1949; 1990; Van de Vliert, 1997). Problem-solving is motivated by the goal of finding an optimal solution that benefits both parties via cooperation (e.g., information exchange and integration). Compromising is often regarded as a “lite” version of problem-solving, as it is motivated by the goal of finding a mutually acceptable solution (i.e., middle-of-the-road) through bargaining and concessions, rather than open discourse (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Van de Vliert, 1997). In the dual concerns model, problem-solving is based on a high concern for self and others, whereas compromising is based on a moderate concern for self and others (De Dreu et al., 2001; Rahim &

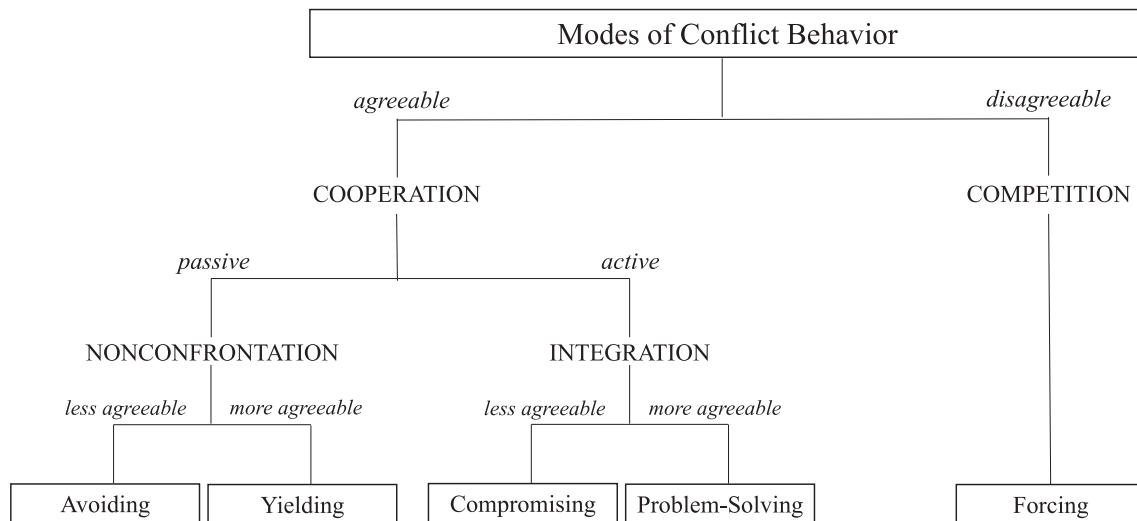


Fig. 1. Conglomerated Conflict Management Model (adapted from Van de Vliert (1997, p. 44; also see Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994, p. 678).

Bonoma, 1979). In other words, both behaviors focus on resolving issues by considering the other party's goals in addition to their own (i.e., "moving towards"; Horney, 1945), and thus are commonly invoked when disputants view the conflict as positively interdependent because striving to attain the other party's goals enhances the probability of attaining one's own goals.

**Nonconfrontation.** Nonconfrontational behaviors (i.e., yielding and avoiding) derive from a combination of agreeableness and passiveness (i.e., passive cooperation). In both cases, the goal is to avoid confrontation (i.e., "moving away;" Horney, 1945) with yielding focused on accepting, acquiescing, and/or incorporating the other party's ideas, and avoiding focused on withdrawing from, postponing, ignoring, or stalling the conflict (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Importantly, while the dual concerns model assumes that individuals yield or avoid due to a low concern for self (De Dreu et al., 2001), this categorization recognizes the plausibility that individuals may do so for collectivistic reasons, such as to maintain relational harmony (Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Some situations are difficult to resolve (Jehn, 1997; O'Neill & Allen, 2014), and integrative attempts may even exacerbate issues (Van de Vliert, 1997), in which case conforming with, or withdrawing from, the interaction might be the best strategy to reduce tensions (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Wall & Callister 1995). Indeed, in their qualitative investigation of conflict in British string quartets, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found that quartets often decided to abandon discussions when mired in a difficult conflict, which provided a "cooling-off period" that blocked the import of negative emotions. With this theoretical foundation in place, we turn to predicting conflict management behaviors based on how conflict is expressed.

### 3. Hypothesis development

#### 3.1. Entrenchment

*Entrenchment* denotes the extent to which a conflict expression focuses on protecting the sender's position (i.e., defensive). It ranges from an open and amenable position (i.e., low entrenchment), such as when a sender conveys openness and a willingness to consider and integrate other viewpoints (e.g., deliberating, debating), to a definitive and

inflexible position (i.e., high entrenchment), such as when a sender exclusively defends their position and rebukes other viewpoints (e.g., attacking, arguing), or simply refuses to make any concessions or consider other options (Weingart et al., 2015). In this regard, high entrenchment is typically viewed as a threat that entails potential loss to the recipient.

High entrenchment is theorized to provoke negative emotions, defensiveness, and rigidity because it signals that there is little common ground or willingness to engage in efforts to find common ground, and thus further discourse would be fruitless (Weingart et al., 2015). In effect, it forces the receiver's hand into an active and disagreeable, sink or swim response because it threatens their goals and demands a concession with little concern for their interests. Thus, high entrenchment gives the impression that conflict is win-lose, thereby signaling a negative goal-interdependence, or zero-sum game (Lu & Tjosvold, 2013), which involves a high concern for self and low concern for others. In this situation, the receiver is likely to choose a conflict move that helps them beat the other party, which should result in a stronger likelihood of forcing relative to low entrenchment. Indeed, related research shows that individuals tend to reciprocate contentious communications with further contentiousness (cf. Brett et al., 1998; Wall & Callister, 1995), and exploitative tactics in games such as the Prisoner's Dilemma leads receivers to respond with self-interested behaviors, even if they are suboptimal for joint outcomes (Axelrod, 1984; Schelling, 1980).

By contrast, low entrenchment conveys open-mindedness, trust, and a willingness to consider the recipient's perspective (Todorova et al., 2022; Weingart et al., 2015). It is a similar concept to collaborative communication (Lovelace et al., 2001), which tends to elicit cooperative reciprocation by signalling that the sender cares about the recipients' interests and is motivated to maximize joint outcome (Lu & Tjosvold, 2013). As such, we propose that low entrenchment signals positive goal-interdependence, which activates a high concern for self and others, and thus a stronger likelihood of an integrative response relative to high entrenchment. Furthermore, we expect low entrenchment to evoke more nonconfrontation than high entrenchment because this positive goal alignment implies that recipients can rely on the other party to make a decision that considers their best interests (Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). On the other hand, nonconfrontational responses to high entrenchment are

undesirable because they are likely to result in exploitation and harmful distributed outcomes. Indeed, [Todorova and colleagues' \(2022\)](#) recent study suggests that low intensity conflict expressions are more likely to lead to communal conflict management behaviors (problem-solving, compromising, yielding), as well as avoiding, whereas high intensity expressions are more likely to lead to forcing behaviors. Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 1.** *Entrenched conflict expressions affect receivers' conflict management behaviors, such that entrenchment is positively related to (a) forcing and negatively related to (b) problem-solving, (c) compromising, (d) yielding, and (e) avoiding.*

### 3.2. Subversiveness

*Subversiveness* reflects the extent to which the sender of a conflict expression overtly or covertly engages in "activities designed to overturn, overthrow, or undermine" the other party ([Weingart et al., 2015, p. 242](#)). It ranges from actions whereby the attempt to harm is unclear (i.e., low subversiveness), such as when a sender withholds information or fails to communicate what they really believe (e.g., teasing), to actions focused on advancing one's position "in a way that detracts from or threatens the resources of the receiver" (i.e., high subversiveness; [Weingart et al., 2015, p. 242](#)), such as by attempting to covertly undermine the other party's status (e.g., backstabbing), or overtly overpower their position (e.g., direct personal attacks).

By attempting to harm the other party, highly subversive conflict expressions are inherently nefarious and threatening, and thus more likely to provoke disagreeable, retaliatory responses relative to low subversiveness ([Todorova et al., 2014; Tsai & Bendersky, 2015](#)). High subversiveness conveys to the recipient the possibility of personal loss, which should activate a threat response that motivates self-oriented actions. With respect to the dual concerns model, [Weingart et al. \(2015, p. 243\)](#) argued that "subversive expressions advance one's own interests to the detriment of others" (i.e., high concern for self, low concern for others), and thus is likely to evoke a forcing response. Similarly, [Deutsch \(1990; 1994\)](#) argued that coercion, threats, and deception are likely to induce a competitive, win-lose mindset between disputants, which promotes the attack-defend approach. This line of reasoning suggests that high subversiveness, relative to low subversiveness, will lead to a reduced willingness to sacrifice one's self-interest through active or passive forms of cooperation, and a stronger desire to protect one's own interests by engaging in competitive, forcing behaviors (cf. [Todorova et al., 2022](#)).

Whereas high subversiveness conveys a malevolent attempt to block the disputant's goals, which reduces trust and the willingness to consider other perspectives ([Wall & Callister, 1995](#)), low subversiveness (e.g., passive aggressiveness) conveys an ambiguous intent to cause harm ([Weingart et al., 2015](#)). Low subversiveness is often masked by a sense of compliance or moodiness, which obscures whether the sender intended to harm the recipient. Thus, the perceived threat to the recipient is lower when subversiveness is low versus high, which should lead recipients to be more willing to use the obtained information constructively ([Staw et al., 1981](#)). Moreover, when conflict is expressed with low subversiveness, a nonconfrontational approach involving yielding or avoiding would be more optimal than when subversiveness is high and clearly communicates a threat. There is little sense in responding confrontationally to a low subversive conflict expression wherein the intention to cause harm is unclear, especially juxtaposed to a highly subversive expression that demands a confrontational, competitive response to protect self-interests ([O'Neill et al., 2018a](#)). Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Subversive conflict expressions affect receivers' conflict management behaviors, such that subversiveness is positively related to (a) forcing, and negatively related to (b) problem-solving, (c) compromising, (d) yielding, and (e) avoiding.*

### 3.3. Ambiguity

*Ambiguity* denotes the extent to which a conflict expression "explicitly identifies (rather than implies) one's position of opposition" ([Weingart et al., 2015, p. 237](#)). It ranges from an explicit expression of opposition (i.e., low ambiguity), such as when a sender clearly articulates, and makes the receiver aware of, their conflicting position (e.g., directly stating a disagreement), to a vague conflict expression (i.e., high ambiguity), such as when a sender does not clearly state an oppositional position (e.g., using sarcasm, asking questions).

Conflict is theorized to be dysfunctional when expressed ambiguously because clarity helps receivers understand the nature of the conflict ([Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015](#)). However, at the facet- and move-level, we expect unambiguous conflict expressions to elicit more competitive reactions than ambiguous expressions because they clearly communicate the existence of opposition, which is, at least initially, likely to evoke a threat-rigid response driven to preserve the self, consisting of close-mindedness, defensiveness, and contentiousness. According to threat-rigidity theory ([Staw et al., 1981](#)), feeling threatened induces negative emotions, reduces cognitive flexibility, and narrows reasoning ([O'Neill et al., 2017; Peterson & Behfar, 2003](#)), which promotes competitive behaviors ([Rahim & Bonoma, 1979](#)). Therefore, we expect high ambiguity to affect recipients' reactions via increased perceptions of threat and correspondingly lower capacity to process task-relevant information. Conflicts are generally stressful because they represent a potential threat to an individual's self-worth, identity, or goals ([Laurent et al., 2013; Van de Vliert, 1997](#)), and this potential threat is more definitive when the existence of conflict is unequivocal.

By contrast, when the existence of a conflict is unclear and equivocal due to sender ambiguity, a receiver's response that forcefully and unilaterally pushed their agenda would likely be viewed as a disproportionate response to a misunderstood situation. Given that people are generally conflict-averse due to the potential costs and stress ([Pruitt & Kim, 2004](#)), responding contentiously to an ambiguous conflict expression is maladaptive as it can exacerbate a relatively mild (or non-existent) issue. Rather, we expect high ambiguity to encourage recipients to seek information that clarifies whether and why conflict exists. In that sense, ambiguity provides room for integrative (e.g., questions) and nonconfrontational behaviors (e.g., acquiescing) motivated to better understand the conflict. Thus, relative to clear conflict expressions, we expect individuals to respond with more (a) integrative behaviors, which can help them identify and resolve the potential issue, and (b) nonconfrontational behaviors, which allow issues to surface naturally, when conflict is expressed with high ambiguity. For self- and relationship-preservation reasons, individuals are better off responding to ambiguous expressions by integratively working towards a resolution ([Van de Vliert, 1997; Wall & Callister, 1995](#)), acquiescing to the sender's wishes, and/or temporarily avoiding the conflict to buy time needed to acquire information and consider the next move ([Tjosvold & Sun, 2002](#)). Thus, we propose:

**Hypothesis 3.** *Ambiguous conflict expressions affect receivers' conflict management behaviors, such that ambiguity is negatively related to (a) forcing, and positively related to (b) problem-solving, (c) compromising, (d) yielding, and (e) avoiding.*

### 3.4. Target-Directness

*Target-directness* denotes the extent to which a conflict expression “occurs between the parties involved (rather than involving third parties)” (Weingart et al., 2015, p. 237). It ranges from an indirect expression (i.e., low target-directness), such as when conflict is directed to a third party not directly involved in the conflict (e.g., backchannel complaining), to a direct expression of the conflict to the target recipient (i.e., high target-directness).

According to Weingart and colleagues (2015), indirect expressions are dysfunctional because they increase the probability for the conflict issue to be filtered and distorted by the intervening party, leading to misinterpretations that exacerbate the conflict issue by impairing information integration. Indirectness can also increase the psychological distance between both parties (Weingart et al., 2015), leading to increased hostility and the impression that goals are also distant. Involving others who are not directly embroiled in the conflict would likely be viewed as disrespectful and antagonistic, especially relative to dealing with the person directly (cf. Jeuken et al., 2015). Indeed, going behind a colleagues' back is a prototypical aggressive and uncivil behavior (Jensen & Raver, 2021; Martin & Hine, 2005), which is often perceived as a threat (Glomb, 2002) that increases negative emotions and fosters a win-lose competitive orientation (Liu et al., 2008). By using backchannels, the sender effectively conveys that the recipients' goals are threatened, which we expect will motivate more competitive responses relative to direct conflict expressions, due to the activation of threat-rigidity and negative goal-interdependence.

By contrast, direct expressions build trust and a clear understanding of what needs to be addressed, which we expect to motivate more cooperative behaviors intended to resolve the issue (e.g., information exchange) relative to indirect expressions (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015). In effect, high directness communicates mutual respect and a positive goal interdependence because the sender is transparent in their desire to discuss and resolve the conflict issue collectively, which should motivate more integrative responses that build on this open exchange (Van de Vliert, 1997). By signaling low threat coupled with a desire to engage in dialogue, high directness also makes nonconfrontational responses more desirable and less risky relative to low indirectness, which could signal potential harm. That is, it would be more functional to yield or avoid conflict when it is expressed directly, especially relative to more threatening situations in which conflict is expressed through a third party, with little interest in learning from the target's perspective. Thus, we propose.

**Hypothesis 4.** *Direct conflict expressions affect receivers' conflict management behaviors, such that directness is negatively related to (a) forcing, and positively related to (b) problem-solving, (c) compromising, (d) yielding, and (e) avoiding.*

## 4. The policy-capturing methodology

We assessed these hypotheses with two policy capturing experiments. Policy-capturing is a specific type of experimental vignette that uses a within-person design to assess decision-makers' implicit judgements based on a pre-specified set of predictors (or cues; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002). It has grown in popularity among management scholars (e.g., Drescher & Garbers, 2016; Jensen & Raver, 2021; Skarlicki & Turner, 2014) due to its enhanced controllability and precision to assess decision-making based on several simultaneous factors, juxtaposed to traditional “paper-people” vignettes that typically use between-person designs to assess explicit decisions based on a combined set of factors (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Specifically, policy-capturing involves presenting participants with many different scenarios that vary slightly, based on unique combinations of predictors at varying levels (e.g., high and low ambiguity), and asks participants to make decisions in response to each scenario. In this research, we

employed a fully-crossed (i.e., orthogonal or ‘full-factorial’) design, meaning that each facet of a conflict expression was presented with the full combination of high and low levels of all other facets (see Appendix A.1). This critical feature permits unconfounded comparisons of the relative effects of each facet by comparing the raw beta coefficients, which are completely uncorrelated (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002). Thus, the variance in each dependent variable associated to a given facet is uniquely and causally attributable to that facet (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002).

Policy-capturing was an especially fitting methodology for this research for several additional reasons. First, it is designed to explain how individuals make decisions based on a prespecified set of information, which aligns to our focus on the move-level behavioral responses to distinct conflict expressions (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019). Second, it permits us to draw causal conclusions by strictly assessing relevant factors and excluding those that might confound the results (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). This was especially appropriate for our research because the relevance of each facet was supported by prior research (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015), but their strength and direction were unknown. It also offers much-needed control by isolating the distinct effects of each conflict expressions facet, while holding potentially important person and contextual factors constant (e.g., recipient's conflict management style or relationship with the sender). Finally, the fully-crossed design overcomes potential issues of multicollinearity because the predictors are completely uncorrelated (Karren & Barringer, 2002), which offers the opportunity to examine the effects of each facet independent of the others – an opportunity that is often untenable in the field. The data and Mplus syntax for both studies are provided as an online appendix via the open science framework (OSF) website: [https://bit.ly/cecm\\_osf](https://bit.ly/cecm_osf).

## 5. Study 1

### 5.1. Participants

We recruited a sample of undergraduate students, the majority of whom were Psychology majors (74% of the final sample), via a participant pool from a mid-sized Canadian university. We recruited two samples: A pilot-test sample of 54 participants to assess manipulation checks<sup>1</sup> and a main sample of 177 participants. As sample characteristics were similar, we elaborate on the characteristics of our main sample. We removed 22 of the 177 recruited participants from our analysis because they failed our attention check questions. As a result, our final sample consisted of 155 participants: 85% identified as female and 69% identified as White. Participants' average age was 21.81 years ( $SD = 5.43$ ). The majority of the sample (93%) had some work experience, with 68% having at least two years of work experience.

### 5.2. Procedure

We followed recommended best practices in developing our scenarios to ensure that the cues were salient, realistic, and clearly demarcated (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002). We developed the cues with close consultation of

<sup>1</sup> We conducted a pilot study to evaluate manipulation checks for each cue. This was untenable with the main study as it would have resulted in an additional 426 questions per survey (71 scenarios X 6 manipulation questions). Both studies involved the identical scenarios and cues. The only difference is that we asked the six manipulation-check questions in the pilot study, whereas we asked questions representing the dependent variables (i.e., conflict management behaviors) in the reported “main” study. Results demonstrated that that there was a significant difference between the two levels of manipulations for each dependent variable cue, thus we proceeded with the main study. See Appendix A for more information.

**Table 2**  
Study 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Conflict Management Behaviors.

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Force	3.28	1.09	(.67)				
2. Problem-solve	3.72	1.04	-.23**	(.66)			
3. Compromise	3.51	1.07	-.24**	.76**	(.69)		
4. Yield	2.11	.83	-.29**	.13**	.22**	(.55)	
5. Avoid	2.82	1.20	-.24**	.22**	.25**	.34**	(.71)

Note.  $N = 155$  raters;  $N = 9920$  observations. Reliabilities, based on the average correlation of each dependent variable between the three repeated scenarios, are reported in parentheses on the diagonal. \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Weingart and colleagues' work (Behfar et al., 2020; Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Weingart et al., 2015) to ensure that they accurately reflected prior research. Importantly, we designed the scenarios to be agnostic to sender information (e.g., demographics), such as by not including any gendered pronouns, and to reflect a conflict event between peers, to avoid alternative explanations or qualifiers (e.g., status-related conflict).

Moreover, we included two covariates – conflict type (i.e., task versus relationship conflict) and frequency (i.e., low versus high frequency) – to increase realism and consistency of cue representations. That is, we had to describe the nature of the conflict experience for the scenarios to read logically (i.e., the conflict had to concern something), but wanted to rule out the plausibility that our results only pertain to one form of conflict or depend on the dyads historical experiences; hence, we counterbalanced the inclusion of conflict type (task and relationship) and frequency (high and low), by including them as cues in each scenario, along with the conflict expressions facets. In particular, we asked participants to imagine themselves in the situation described below, after which we presented them with the scenarios in a randomized order.

*You work as a sales analyst at FineFoods Inc., a large consumer packaged goods company. Your team just learned about an unforeseen production issue at the {Name Omitted} plant and is scrambling to adapt. This year's Snow Pea crop is short, so you will not have enough inventory to satisfy all of your customers. This shortage could lead to customer delisting (removing your product) and substantial profit loss, not to mention negative publicity!*

*Your manager, Riley, scheduled an emergency task force to brainstorm about different solutions. During this meeting, your colleague, Taylor, suggested that your team stop all Flyer Features and Sales (e.g., \$1 OFF) until inventory is replenished. Other ideas were also discussed; you suggested that your team ship a similar product – English Peas – to one large customer, Costco, which would allow you to maintain the status quo with other customers. Riley concluded the meeting by suggesting that everybody reflect on the best option and reconvene the next day to decide. This is what happened immediately following the meeting...*

The fully-crossed design yielded 64 distinct scenarios: High/low 2 (entrenchment)  $\times$  2 (subversiveness)  $\times$  2 (ambiguity)  $\times$  2 (target-directness)  $\times$  2 (conflict type)  $\times$  2 (conflict frequency). For example, high target-directness was represented by the cue "Taylor approached you", whereas low target-directness was represented by the cue "Taylor approached Riley [(the manager in the scenario)]". Appendix B and C contain the cue manipulations.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these 64 scenarios, we presented four scenarios at the introduction of the study to help participants get acquainted with this unique study design (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002) and duplicated three scenarios to assess reliability (Karren & Barringer, 2002). Thus, in total, participants read 71 scenarios, which

<sup>2</sup> The cue manipulations for conflict type and target-directness had descriptive-implications for the other cues, as noted in the appendices. Specifically, conflict type was embedded in the cue for ambiguity, as it focused on the task (pea shortage) or relationship. As well, target-directness was embedded in the cue for entrenchment, as it focused on a direct ("you") or indirect target ("Riley").

fell within best-practice recommendations (e.g., 50–80 scenarios; Aiman-Smith et al., 2002) that emphasize a trade-off of selecting enough cues and scenarios to account for all relevant variables and ensure sufficient statistical power, but not too many cues that it taxes participants, resulting in careless responding. We also addressed concerns of participant fatigue by including attention check questions to assess and remove inattentive participants (as noted above), as well as by randomizing the order that scenarios were presented (though we presented the cues in the same order within a given scenario because they followed a logical narrative, as can be seen in Appendices B and C).

### 5.3. Measures

We operationalized conflict management behaviors by asking participants to report how likely they would respond to each scenario with a given conflict management behavior, using a one-item measure to reflect each behavior. Specifically, we leveraged the DUTCH (De Dreu et al., 2001) to assess conflict management behaviors with the question prompt: "How likely are you to respond to Taylor in the next meeting by..." followed by the items: (1) "Forcing: Dig in and fight for your idea", (2) "Problem-solving: Strive for a mutually optimal solution through discussion", (3) "Compromising: Try to find common ground between your ideas", (4) "Yielding: Give in and agree with Taylor's idea", and (5) "Avoiding: Avoid confrontation as much as possible." This scale was anchored from 1 ("very unlikely") to 5 ("very likely").<sup>3</sup>

### 5.4. Analysis and results

We first assessed the reliability of participants' responses (i.e., test-retest reliability) by comparing their ratings of the five conflict management behaviors between the three duplicated scenarios (Karren & Barringer, 2002). Results indicated that the average correlation for each dependent variable between the three repeated scenarios was significant ( $r = .66, p < .001$ ), which offers support for the reliability of the assessments such that participants decisions were largely consistent across scenarios (see Table 2 for construct-specific reliabilities).

Next, we assessed the requirement for multilevel modelling because policy-capturing is a within-person design, and thus the 64 cues are inherently nested within individuals' assessment. That is, it may be important to separate between-person factors that vary due to the person (i.e., level 2) from within-person factors that vary due to the cues (i.e., level 1) to account for individual differences in conflict handling (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Jensen & Raver, 2021). Results support the need for multilevel modelling as between-person factors explained

<sup>3</sup> We included anger and information acquisition as additional dependent variables in both studies, due to their alignment with conflict expressions theory (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Todorova et al., 2022; Weingart et al., 2015). We assessed anger with the one-item measure "I feel angry and upset after this exchange" and information acquisition with the measure "This exchange helped me understand Taylor's perspective." The results were largely consistent with our predictions; however, we removed these outcomes from the presented research for parsimony – to better align our research with conflict management behaviors. More information is available upon request.

significant variance for each dependent variable. Thus, we proceeded to test our hypotheses using multilevel modeling in MPlus 7.0 (Muthen & Muthen, 2017) by simultaneously regressing the Level 1 dummy-codes for the six cues (four facets of conflict expressions and two covariates) on each of the five conflict management behaviors. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 2, multilevel regression results are reported in Table 3. We calculated effect sizes for each model by using the *pseudo R*<sup>2</sup> formula recommended by Snijders and Bosker (1994; see also Jensen & Raver, 2021; LaHuis et al., 2014).

Results generally supported the hypotheses, and in the predicted direction (see Table 3 for detailed results). The only exceptions are that target-directness was not significantly related to forcing ( $\beta = -.01, n.s.$ ; Hypothesis 4a) or avoiding ( $\beta = .04, n.s.$  Hypothesis 4e). As well, conflict frequency was not significantly related to avoiding ( $\beta = -.03, n.s.$ ).

5.5. Discussion

Altogether, these results largely support our predictions as participants generally reported a stronger willingness to respond with competitive versus integrative or nonconfrontational behaviors when conflict was expressed unambiguously, indirectly, with high entrenchment, and in a highly subversive manner. Interestingly, we found that entrenchment was the strongest facet for predicting conflict behaviors (avg  $|\beta| = .49$ ), whereas target-directness (avg  $|\beta| = .04$ ) and conflict frequency (avg  $|\beta| = .06$ ) produced the weakest (sometimes null) effects.

Despite these intriguing findings, there were some limitations that we wished to address in a follow-up study to enhance the robustness and generalizability of our findings, as well as to provide evidence of replication (Hofman et al., 2021). One limitation is that the Study 1 sample was comprised entirely of students, so it would be beneficial to examine these findings with a more representative sample. Second, this sample was highly skewed towards women (85%) and a younger population (22 years old). This could have affected our results given that women tend to respond differently to conflict than men (DeChurch et al., 2007; Weingart et al., 2015), and older adults tend to have greater self-control, which may affect their conflict reactions (Duckworth, 2011). Therefore, a more gender and age balanced sample was needed to examine the robustness of these results. Finally, given the strong effects for entrenchment, we re-examined the cue manipulation and noted that it had the longest word count of all the cues. Thus, we also sought to revise this cue and re-examine its effects in a follow up study to address the possibility that this subtle difference may have unintentionally amplified its effects.

6. Study 2

6.1. Participants

We used Prolific, an online participant recruitment service that has grown in popularity among management scholars over the past several years (e.g., Li & Tangirala, 2021; Watkins, 2021), to recruit a nationally-representative sample of participants based in the United States. Prolific provides access to a diverse pool of over 70,000 vetted participants, including the ability to recruit a representative sample, based on gender, age, and ethnicity, which we leveraged for this study. In total, we recruited 322 participants for Study 2; however, we removed 23 of these people (7%) because they failed our attention check. As a result, the final sample consisted of 299 participants, of which 50% identified as female. The average age of the sample was 45.42 years ( $SD = 15.93$ ). The racial breakdown of the sample was largely consistent with the US population (U.S. Census Bureau, Dec 2019) with 63% of participants identifying as White, 15% as Black or African American, 9% as Asian, and 7% as Hispanic. Most participants had some college education (90%), with 51% completing at least a bachelor's degree. Sixty-seven percent of participants were employed at the time of the study and the average work experience of the sample was 22 years ( $SD = 15.30$ ).

Table 3  
Study 1: Multilevel Regression of Conflict Expression Cues on Conflict Management Behaviors.

	Competition			Integration			Nonconfrontation								
	Force (a)			Problem-solve (b)			Yield (d)			Avoid (e)					
	$\beta$	SE	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	95% CI			
Intercept	3.90**	.26	3.40–4.40	5.32**	.37	4.59–6.04	5.07**	.37	4.25–5.80	4.25**	.26	3.73–4.77	3.10**	.18	2.75–3.46
H1: Entrenchment	.51**	.05	.41–.62	-.54**	.04	-.63(-.46)	-.62**	.05	-.71(-.53)	-.53**	.05	-.63(-.44)	-.24**	.07	-.37(-.11)
H2: Subversiveness	.12**	.02	.07–.17	-.10**	.02	-.14(-.06)	-.14**	.02	-.18(-.10)	-.13**	.02	-.17(-.08)	-.10*	.03	-.15(-.04)
H3: Ambiguity	-.16**	.02	-.20(-.11)	.16**	.02	.12–.21	.17**	.02	.13–.22	.16**	.02	.11–.21	.08**	.02	.04–.12
H4: Target-directness	-.01	.02	-.05–.02	.07**	.02	.03–.10	.07**	.02	.03–.11	.04 <sup>†</sup>	.02	.00–.07	.00	.02	-.03–.04
Covariates:															
Conflict type	.10**	.03	.05–.16	-.16**	.03	-.22(-.11)	-.21**	.03	-.26(-.15)	-.14**	.03	-.20(-.10)	-.08*	.03	-.13(-.03)
Conflict frequency	.06*	.02	.02–.10	-.07**	.02	-.10(-.03)	-.07*	.02	-.10(-.03)	-.05 <sup>†</sup>	.02	-.09(-.00)	-.03	.02	-.06–.01
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		4.3 %			5.3 %			7.0 %			5.2 %			1.0 %	

Note. N = 155 raters. Bold indicates significant relationships. SEs are based on the standardized results. Entrenchment, subversiveness, ambiguity, and conflict frequency coded such that 0 = low and 1 = high (i.e., 1 = highly (a) entrenched position, and (b) subversive expression, (c) ambiguous conflict and (d) frequent conflict). Target-directness coded such that 0 = indirect (i.e., "Riley") and 1 = direct (i.e., "your"). Conflict type coded such that 0 = task conflict and 1 = relationship conflict. <sup>†</sup>  $p < .05$ . \*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

6.2. Procedure

The procedures were identical across studies, with two exceptions. First, we removed the conflict frequency covariate to reduce respondent burden. The main challenge for participants completing policy-capturing studies is that they are repetitive, which can increase the probability of careless responding due to boredom and fatigue (Aiman-Smith et al., 2002; Karren & Barringer, 2002). We removed conflict frequency because Study 1 results suggest that it has a weak or null effect on conflict reactions, and thus is not as critical a cue for inclusion. This change reduced the total number of scenarios from 64 to 32 (due to the exponential nature of the fully-crossed design). Second, we reduced the length and strength of the entrenchment cue, and increased the length and strength of the subversiveness cues, to address the abovementioned concern as to whether Study 1 findings were partly influenced by cue wording and length, as opposed to the underlying meaning of these constructs (see Appendices D and E for the updated cues for Study 2, which can be contrasted against Study 1 cues located in Appendices B and C).

Given these changes, we conducted another pilot study with a sample of 46 participants recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk to reassess manipulation checks. Once again, results supported discrimination between the two levels of manipulations for each cue, as illustrated in Table 4. Of particular importance, the difference between the means of high and low cues for entrenchment decreased from Study 1 (4.13) to Study 2 (3.31), whereas the difference between the means of high and low cues for subversiveness increased from Study 1 (1.58) to Study 2 (2.01), suggesting that we accomplished our goal of adjusting cue strength in the intended direction.

6.3. Analysis and results

Again, we first assessed the reliability of participants' responses and the requirement for multilevel modelling. Results indicated that the average correlation of each dependent variable between the three repeated scenarios was significant ( $r = .72, p < .001$ ), and that between-person factors significantly explained variance in each dependent variable, supporting reliability and the need for multilevel modelling. As such, we proceeded with hypothesis testing. Descriptive statistics and

**Table 4**  
Study 2: Manipulation Check for Independent Variables (Pilot Test).

Conflict expressions cue manipulation	Ratings				Mean <sub>H</sub> - Mean <sub>L</sub>
	High-level Cue		Low-level cue		
	Mean <sub>H</sub>	SD	Mean <sub>L</sub>	SD	
Entrenchment	5.63	.10	2.32	.32	3.98***
Subversiveness	5.69	.13	3.68	.49	4.69***
Ambiguity	4.35	.65	5.53	.28	4.94***
Target-directness	5.80	.09	1.93	.22	3.87***
Conflict type	2.85	.48	5.66	.08	4.26***

Note.  $N = 51$  raters. Target-directness coded such that "low-level" = indirect and "high-level" = direct. Conflict type coded such that "low-level" = task conflict and "high-level" = relationship conflict. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 5**  
Study 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Conflict Management Behaviors.

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Force	3.32	1.11	(.73)				
2. Problem-solve	3.90	.99	-.28**	(.71)			
3. Compromise	3.67	1.09	-.36**	.77**	(.68)		
4. Yield	2.08	.92	-.35**	.16**	.31**	(.67)	
5. Avoid	3.03	1.27	-.21**	.32**	.35**	.32**	(.79)

Note.  $N = 299$  raters;  $N = 10242$  observations. Reliabilities, based on the average correlation of each dependent variable between the three repeated scenarios, are reported in parentheses on the diagonal. \*\*  $p < .001$ .

correlations are listed in Table 5. Results, which are described in detail in Table 6, demonstrate support for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. However, Hypothesis 4 was not supported, as target-directness was not significantly related to forcing ( $\beta = -.01, n.s.$ ), problem-solving ( $\beta = .03, n.s.$ ), compromising ( $\beta = .02, n.s.$ ), yielding ( $\beta = .02, n.s.$ ), or avoiding ( $\beta = -.02, n.s.$ ).

7. Discussion

Study 2 results largely replicated Study 1 findings, which lends robust support for our predictions. The only notable difference between studies is that target-directness was not related to any conflict management behavior in Study 2. Therefore, we can conclude that receivers were more likely to engage in competitive versus integrative or nonconfrontational behaviors when conflict was expressed unambiguously, in a highly entrenched and subversive manner. Again, we want to draw attention to a few intriguing findings. First, these results reinforce the predictive power of entrenchment on conflict behaviors (avg  $|\beta| = .47$ ), which has important implications for studying conflict expressions, as it suggests that entrenchment has the strongest effect on receivers' behaviors relative to the other facets. Subversiveness (avg  $|\beta| = .33$ ) and conflict type (avg  $|\beta| = .26$ ) were the next strongest predictors, which highlights their power for predicting conflict management behaviors. Second, although entrenchment produced a stronger effect on conflict behaviors than subversiveness, they were nearly as likely to predict forcing behaviors (subversiveness ( $\beta = .38$ ); entrenchment ( $\beta = .44$ )), suggesting that subversiveness has a particularly strong influence on competitive conflict reactions, presumably due to its insidious nature as reflecting a covert attempt to cause harm, which may produce a strong self-preservation threat response (O'Neill et al., 2018a). Finally, we observed that, relative to other relationships, nonconfrontation was especially strongly related to ambiguity, which suggests that conflict uncertainty may motivate people to avoid confrontation entirely, at least relative to clearer signals of a conflict issue (e.g., defensiveness, relational issues). This intriguing finding provides some clarification to social interdependence theory, which does not specify much detail about the conditions for avoidant responses, along with the unique consequences of ambiguous conflict expressions.

7.1. General discussion

The goal of this research was to examine how the nature of a conflict expression (i.e., the level of entrenchment, subversiveness, ambiguity, and target-directness) influences recipients' willingness to respond with competitive (forcing), integrative (problem-solving, compromising), and nonconfrontational (yielding, avoiding) conflict management behaviors. Specifically, we sought to advance research by integrating theories of conflict expressions (Weingart et al., 2015) with conflict management (Van de Vliert, 1997) to clarify the unique effects of each facet of a conflict expression on receivers' conflict management approaches. We explored this objective with two policy-capturing experiments through which we manipulated a sender's conflict expressions and assessed receivers' intentions to respond competitively, integratively, and nonconfrontationally, thereby offering causal conclusions on the relative importance of each facet for predicting conflict management behaviors, irrespective of other potentially relevant factors (e.g., other facets, individual differences, conflict type and frequency).

7.2. Theoretical implications

One of the most important theoretical implications of this research is our integration of conflict management theories (e.g., De Dreu et al., 2001; Rahim, 1983; Van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994) to specify the ways in which people are likely to respond to particular conflict expressions. Integrating conflict management behaviors helps to advance our understanding of the consequences of conflict expressions, as behavioral

**Table 6**  
Study 2: Multilevel Regression of Conflict Expression Cues on Conflict Management Behaviors.

	Competition			Integration			Nonconfrontation								
	Force (a)			Problem-solve (b)			Yield (d)			Avoid (e)					
	$\beta$	SE	95 % CI	$\beta$	SE	95 % CI	$\beta$	SE	95 % CI	$\beta$	SE	95 % CI			
Intercept	3.66**	.25	3.17–4.16	5.92**	.56	4.82–7.02	5.62**	.48	4.69–6.55	4.05**	.29	3.48–4.62	3.02**	.18	2.67–3.38
H1: Entrenchment	.44**	.04	.36–.52	-.44**	.04	-.52–(-.36)	-.55**	.04	-.63–(-.48)	-.58**	.04	-.66–(-.50)	-.34**	.04	-.42–(-.26)
H2: Subversiveness	.38**	.04	.30–.45	-.31**	.03	-.37–(-.24)	-.33**	.03	-.39–(-.27)	-.35**	.03	-.41–(-.28)	-.26*	.04	-.35–(-.18)
H3: Ambiguity	-.20**	.03	-.26–(-.14)	.14**	.03	.09–.21	.21**	.03	.15–.27	.24**	.03	.18–.30	.18**	.03	.11–.24
H4: Target-directness	-.01	.02	-.05–.04	.03	.02	-.01–.08	.02	.02	-.03–.06	.02	.03	-.03–.07	-.02	.02	-.06–.02
Covariate:															
Conflict type	.23**	.04	.16–.31	-.32**	.04	-.40–(-.25)	-.32**	.04	-.40–(-.24)	-.26**	.03	-.32–(-.20)	-.19*	.04	-.27–(-.12)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		6.3 %			8.7 %			11.1 %			8.3 %			2.9 %	

Note. N = 299 raters. Bold indicates significant relationships. SEs are based on the standardized results. Entrenchment, subversiveness, and ambiguity coded such that 0 = low and 1 = high (i.e., 1 = highly (a) entrenched position, and (b) subversive expression, and (c) ambiguous conflict). Target-directness coded such that 0 = indirect (i.e., "Riley) and 1 = direct (i.e., "you"). Conflict type coded such that 0 = task conflict and 1 = relationship conflict. \*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

reactions to an initial conflict expression are likely instrumental to whether conflict starts on an escalatory or de-escalatory trajectory (Deutsch, 1994; Van de Vliert, 1997). As Deutsch (1990, p. 245) noted, "if one has systematic knowledge of the effects of cooperative and competitive processes, one will have systematic knowledge of the conditions which typically give rise to such processes and, by extension, to the conditions which affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course."

Indeed, our results demonstrate how each facet of a conflict expression can affect receivers' willingness to respond with competitive, integrative, and nonconfrontational behaviors, which has important ramifications for the initiation of conflict cycles. For example, we found that recipients were more likely to compete, and less likely to cooperate, when conflict was expressed intensely and unambiguously (versus mildly and clearly), and extensive research on conflict management shows that competitive behaviors tend to escalate conflict (Deutsch, 1990; 1994; Janssen & Van de Vliert, 1996; Van de Vliert, 1997). Additionally, we contribute to research by offering integrative theory and empirical evidence as to when and why individuals prefer certain conflict management approaches, which has been scarcely examined (cf. Todorova et al., 2022).

Another important contribution is our identification of which conflict expression facet yields stronger explanatory power, in addition to the nature of their relationship with distinct behaviors. Specifically, our results suggest that entrenchment is the strongest predictor of conflict management behaviors, and thus has the greatest potential to provoke a multiple-move escalatory spiral. Interestingly, subversiveness, the other facet of oppositional intensity, was the next strongest predictor, followed by ambiguity. By contrast, target-directness exhibited a weak or null effect in both studies, which suggests that future theorizing and research on conflict expressions may benefit from a stronger emphasis on the other facets.

Importantly, our theorizing regarding the effects of ambiguity departs slightly from Weingart and colleagues (2015), as we argue that unambiguous conflict expressions can be more threatening than ambiguous ones, thereby transmitting less information to the recipient. Indeed, we found that recipients responded more competitively and less integratively or nonconfrontationally to clear conflict expressions. At the same time, it is important to note that this finding may be bound by our focus on the facet-level effects of an initial conflict move, as, for example, an unambiguous conflict expression may become clearer over a multi-move episode, in which case ambiguity may have less of an effect, or even a positive effect, on conflict behaviors. Thus, research on the dynamics of conflict expressions over time is needed. Overall, our results suggest that both facets of oppositional intensity have a stronger influence on conflict behaviors than conflict directness, type, or frequency, which is an intriguing finding given prior emphasis on conflict type for predicting outcomes (cf. DeChurch et al., 2013).

Relatedly, conflict type produced a strong significant effect on conflict behaviors, suggesting that it would be valuable to embed conflict type in future research on conflict expressions. Specifically, our results show that task conflict leads to less competitive, and more integrative and nonconfrontational responses, relative to relationship conflict. These findings align with arguments in the conflict literature that task conflict can be beneficial because of its potential to promote cooperative conflict management behaviors (Janssen et al., 1999; O'Neill et al., 2017; 2018b), whereas relationship conflict tends to evoke negative emotions and competitive behaviors (Behfar et al., 2011; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Cronin & Bendersky, 2012). For example, several studies have shown that conflicts involving task issues tend to be perceived more positively, and reciprocated with more cooperation, than relationship conflicts (DeChurch et al., 2007; Peterson & Behfar, 2003; Telecan et al., 2022; Todorova et al., 2022).

At the same time, it is possible that findings pertaining to conflict type were due to our design, which contrasted task conflict against relationship conflict (as opposed to high and low levels of task and/or relationship conflict). That is, the strong negative effects of relationship conflict, rather than the potential positive effects of task conflict, may

actually explain our results. Alternatively, task conflict may be particularly beneficial at the move-level but, over a prolonged period, may heighten animosity and perceived threat by spilling over into relational issues. This could explain the typically small main effect found in most meta-analysis of conflict states (e.g., de Wit et al., 2012). Therefore, our research, like other recent works (e.g., Shah et al., 2021), underscores the value of examining the consequences of conflict types at a move or episodic level, rather than solely based on team members' overall perceptions across a longer time scale (i.e., static team state; DeChurch et al., 2013). While too much conflict of any type may damage relationships and impair team functioning when occurring over a prolonged period (Farh et al., 2010; O'Neill & Allen, 2014), at the move level, our research suggests that task conflict may lead to more cooperation and less competition relative to relationship conflict.

### 7.3. Limitations and future directions

The current research contains some limitations that raise new and interesting avenues for future research. First, our experiments necessarily could only focus on initial moves in a conflict experience – the sender's conflict expression and the receiver's responses – to precisely link distinct facets of a conflict expression to reciprocating behaviors. Nevertheless, we encourage future research that extends our work with longitudinal and observational designs. For example, future research may involve a confederate (e.g., video-recordings) to engage in a series of conflict moves involving distinct conflict expressions and behaviors, which can address the notion of conflict spirals. However, we recommend that such designs consider collapsing the four facets of conflict expressions into the two overarching dimensions (intensity and directness), as it would be untenable to examine that many combinations with a multi-move design.

Relatedly, we encourage scholars to explore interactions between the facets of conflict expressions, as they may combine to affect conflict outcomes in unique ways, as Weingart and colleagues (2015) originally theorized. For example, while we found that receivers were more likely to respond competitively when conflict was expressed indirectly to a third party, this effect may be attenuated by the level of intensity, as a low intense, indirect conflict expression may not trigger a threat-rigid response, especially relative to an intense indirect expression. This approach could also integrate considerations of conflict type and/or frequency more directly into the theorizing, as the consequences of task versus relationship conflict may also depend on how conflict is expressed (e.g., mild relationship conflicts may be less likely to induce competitive responses relative to intense task conflicts).

Another limitation due to the precision of our experimental design is that our results cannot speak to how conflict expressions affect receivers' reactions beyond other potentially relevant variables, such as the sender's characteristics (e.g., reputation) or conflict norms (Jehn, 1997; Weingart et al., 2015). As Weingart et al. (2015) noted, "individual differences like personality and conflict experience, expectations derived from organizational and cultural norms, power differences between the parties, and the history of the conflict all can influence an individual's perception of a conflict expression, over and above the observable characteristics of the expression itself" (p. 246). However, to offer precise insights, we held contextual factors constant in our design; thus, future research may benefit by systematically examining different contextual factors.<sup>4</sup> For example, consistent with our supplemental

<sup>4</sup> As we collected information on participants' gender and age, we were able to explore potential moderation effects based on these receiver-characteristics. Overall, although only a portion of the moderation effects were significant (12/40; 24%) we found that men and younger participants were more likely to respond with competitive versus integrative or nonconfrontational behaviors, as compared to women and older participants, specifically in response to entrenched conflict expressions. See the attached supplemental materials for details on these analyses and results.

analyses, future research may benefit from examining distinctions based on the sender and target's demographics, as gender tends to affect how people encode and react to threats (Telecan et al., 2022). Indeed, we found that younger males were more inclined to respond aggressively as compared to women or older adults. Likewise, cultural differences may affect how individuals express, perceive, react, and attempt to resolve conflicts (Weingart et al., 2015). Finally, individuals hold different conflict management orientations, which may affect their tendency to use certain approaches regardless of how conflict is expressed (De Dreu et al., 2001; DeChurch et al., 2007).

Additionally, our methodology prohibited us from examining precisely why conflict expressions relate to each conflict behavior. Thus, we encourage future research to explore potential mediating mechanisms underlying these effects, such as by focusing on emotions and information acquisition proposed by Weingart and colleagues (2015; see Todorova et al., 2022). As well, we focused on conflict expressed within a dyad, and thus future research would benefit from examining how dyadic conflict expressions permeate the rest of the team, affecting team-level perceptions (Shah et al., 2021). This is a significant research effort, but it would help to link conflict origins based on move-level expressions to our broader understanding of team conflict, which has been extensively studied at the period, or static state, level (DeChurch et al., 2013).

A final avenue for future research is to evaluate which elements of a conflict expression receivers actually perceive, as well as how they perceive them. In that respect, Brunswick's (1952) lens model could be useful (see also Kuncel et al., 2013; Paunonen, 1989). It unpacks individual perception in terms of (a) cue validity (was the sender's communication a valid representation of their intended message), (b) cue detection (was the sender's communication noticed by the receiver), and (c) the judgment process (did the receiver accurately interpret the sender's cue). The broader team's literature indicates that perceiver variance is large, meaning that independent of a sender's conflict cues, people will respond quite differently to the same set of cues (Schmidt et al., 2021). Using a perceptual lens to unpack the interpretive process of how receiver's register conflict expressions may offer meaningful insights to future research.

### 7.4. Practical implications

This research also offers several important implications for practice. Foremost, by identifying how specific conflict expressions affect recipients' reactions, we can inform and train employees on how to express conflict in ways that are more likely to be reciprocated with integrative and/or nonconfrontational behaviors, rather than competitive tactics. Such training programs could be directed at senders and receivers and can be very prescriptive (if cue "x" is detected, try response "y" or "z" rather than "a" or "b"). What training programs allow, beyond their obvious implications for practice, is to further test theories of conflict processes or mechanisms occurring at the move-level, as well as offer an alternative method for testing theory (O'Neill et al., 2017a). Specifically, conflict interactions may be designed in a lab or captured via diary studies to include particular sender cues paired with responses learned through training (as well as a control response set). Research of this nature would be a valuable and unique way to extend our knowledge of the links between conflict expressions and conflict management. Additionally, we can train organizational leaders on triggers that are more likely to spark competitive versus integrative and nonconfrontational reactions, such as to be mindful of situations when employees are inflexible and/or ambiguously express disagreements, as this is likely to provoke more contentious, and less cooperative, responses.

In summary, our research contributes much-needed theoretical refinement and empirical evidence on conflict expressions with respect to how it predicts receivers' conflict management behaviors, irrespective of other potential factors (e.g., sender's status), as well as how each facet operates independently, with a design in which they are

necessarily uncorrelated. This is particularly important given recent movements that emphasize conflict as dyadic, occurring at the move level, and based on how it is expressed (Cronin & Weingart, 2019; Humphrey et al., 2017; Shah et al., 2021; Todorova et al., 2014; Weingart et al., 2015). Altogether, our results imply that conflict recipients are more likely to respond with competitive versus integrative and nonconfrontational behaviors when conflict is expressed with the particularly nasty combination of high entrenchment, high subversiveness, and low ambiguity.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence

the work reported in this paper.

**Data availability**

Data and Mplus syntax are available via the open science framework (OSF) website: [https://bit.ly/cecm\\_osf](https://bit.ly/cecm_osf).

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**Appendix A. Orthogonal policy-capturing design**

**Appendix A.1**

Study 1: Summary of Experimental Conditions (Predictors) with Mean-Levels of Each Outcome.

Scenario	Covariates		Conflict expressions				Conflict management behaviors				
	Conflict type	Conflict frequency	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Entrenchment	Subversive	Force	Problem-solve	Compromise	Yield	Avoid
1	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	3.08	3.92	3.78	2.27	2.91
2	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	3.23	3.84	3.69	2.15	2.79
3	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	3.43	3.53	3.38	2.11	2.88
4	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	High	3.55	3.50	3.32	1.97	2.86
5	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	2.90	4.06	3.91	2.42	3.00
6	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	High	3.07	3.99	3.83	2.26	2.81
7	Low	Low	Low	High	High	Low	3.33	3.59	3.41	2.01	2.79
8	Low	Low	Low	High	High	High	3.43	3.58	3.38	1.97	2.81
9	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	2.97	4.02	3.93	2.43	3.02
10	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	High	3.05	3.92	3.79	2.34	2.97
11	Low	Low	High	Low	High	Low	3.46	3.59	3.31	1.92	2.77
12	Low	Low	High	Low	High	High	3.54	3.52	3.30	1.97	2.68
13	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low	2.88	4.11	3.97	2.49	2.96
14	Low	Low	High	High	Low	High	3.01	4.05	3.86	2.34	2.96
15	Low	Low	High	High	High	Low	3.39	3.63	3.43	2.07	2.81
16	Low	Low	High	High	High	High	3.46	3.77	3.55	2.11	2.81
17	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	3.04	3.90	3.79	2.23	2.92
18	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	High	3.19	3.79	3.59	2.23	2.81
19	Low	High	Low	Low	High	Low	3.45	3.52	3.21	1.99	2.78
20	Low	High	Low	Low	High	High	3.55	3.46	3.19	1.93	2.72
21	Low	High	Low	High	Low	Low	3.05	4.05	3.94	2.43	2.90
22	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	3.03	3.94	3.75	2.28	2.92
23	Low	High	Low	High	High	Low	3.31	3.71	3.46	2.03	2.81
24	Low	High	Low	High	High	High	3.40	3.55	3.37	2.01	2.83
25	Low	High	High	Low	Low	Low	3.03	4.02	3.91	2.42	2.97
26	Low	High	High	Low	Low	High	3.08	3.84	3.69	2.28	2.90
27	Low	High	High	Low	High	Low	3.50	3.57	3.40	1.98	2.70
28	Low	High	High	Low	High	High	3.48	3.49	3.23	1.81	2.68
29	Low	High	High	High	Low	Low	2.96	4.12	3.95	2.45	3.08
30	Low	High	High	High	Low	High	3.06	4.04	3.90	2.29	2.95
31	Low	High	High	High	High	Low	3.37	3.62	3.50	2.03	2.76
32	Low	High	High	High	High	High	3.48	3.63	3.29	1.99	2.75
33	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	3.01	3.74	3.54	2.11	2.95
34	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	High	3.28	3.72	3.50	2.14	2.79
35	High	Low	Low	Low	High	Low	3.45	3.48	3.17	1.95	2.75
36	High	Low	Low	Low	High	High	3.61	3.54	3.26	1.77	2.73
37	High	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	2.97	3.97	3.84	2.39	2.94
38	High	Low	Low	High	Low	High	3.13	3.86	3.68	2.22	2.75
39	High	Low	Low	High	High	Low	3.36	3.59	3.31	2.00	2.72
40	High	Low	Low	High	High	High	3.50	3.50	3.18	2.00	2.79
41	High	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	3.17	3.90	3.68	2.21	2.88
42	High	Low	High	Low	Low	High	3.15	3.85	3.61	2.25	2.82
43	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	3.56	3.46	3.18	1.93	2.75
44	High	Low	High	Low	High	High	3.58	3.44	3.19	1.86	2.59
45	High	Low	High	High	Low	Low	2.95	3.96	3.87	2.37	2.99
46	High	Low	High	High	Low	High	3.02	3.98	3.78	2.26	3.01

(continued on next page)

Appendix A.1 (continued)

Scenario	Covariates		Conflict expressions				Conflict management behaviors				
	Conflict type	Conflict frequency	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Entrenchment	Subversive	Force	Problem-solve	Compromise	Yield	Avoid
47	High	Low	High	High	High	Low	3.44	3.59	3.41	1.95	2.75
48	High	Low	High	High	High	High	3.32	3.57	3.27	1.89	2.68
49	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	3.23	3.77	3.61	2.18	2.91
50	High	High	Low	Low	Low	High	3.32	3.69	3.44	2.09	2.74
51	High	High	Low	Low	High	Low	3.55	3.43	3.20	1.86	2.72
52	High	High	Low	Low	High	High	3.63	3.30	3.03	1.86	2.61
53	High	High	Low	High	Low	Low	3.07	3.85	3.77	2.33	3.03
54	High	High	Low	High	Low	High	3.13	3.73	3.56	2.17	2.86
55	High	High	Low	High	High	Low	3.38	3.54	3.29	1.99	2.77
56	High	High	Low	High	High	High	3.49	3.45	3.14	1.92	2.74
57	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low	3.16	3.87	3.66	2.20	2.92
58	High	High	High	Low	Low	High	3.30	3.81	3.55	2.05	2.80
59	High	High	High	Low	High	Low	3.65	3.40	3.15	1.81	2.57
60	High	High	High	Low	High	High	3.63	3.32	3.12	1.77	2.59
61	High	High	High	High	Low	Low	2.98	4.05	3.86	2.39	3.05
62	High	High	High	High	Low	High	3.16	3.83	3.65	2.34	2.90
63	High	High	High	High	High	Low	3.45	3.48	3.22	1.97	2.74
64	High	High	High	High	High	High	3.55	3.43	3.17	1.89	2.65

Note. N = 155 raters; N = 9920 observations. Scenarios were presented in a random order. Conflict type coded such that "Low" = task conflict and "High" = relationship conflict. Target-directness coded such that "Low" = indirect and "High" = direct.

Appendix B. Pilot study details (manipulation check information)

Manipulation Check Questions for the Pilot Studies.

Construct	Manipulation check question
Entrenchment	Taylor was very defensive & resistant to other views
Subversiveness	Taylor will try to undermine [my idea/me] at the next meeting
Ambiguity	Taylor clearly took issue with my [idea/personality]
Target-directness	Taylor approached me directly
Conflict type	It concerned my idea about how to overcome the pea shortage
Conflict frequency <sup>a</sup>	Taylor frequently does this

Note. Question prompt: Please imagine yourself in this scenario and answer these questions based on this reflection. To what extent do you agree with these statements about this exchange (scaled from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7)): Parenthesis indicate variation based on the conflict type cue for the given scenario {task/relationship}.

<sup>a</sup> We only conducted a manipulation check for conflict frequency in Study 1, as this cue was not included in Study 2.

Appendix C. Study 1: Manipulation Check for Independent Variables.

Conflict expressions cue manipulation	High-level cue		Ratings Low-level cue		Mean <sub>H</sub> -Mean <sub>L</sub>
	Mean <sub>H</sub>	SD	Mean <sub>L</sub>	SD	
Entrenchment	6.17	.14	2.04	.18	4.11***
Subversiveness	5.63	.31	4.05	.35	4.84***
Ambiguity	4.92	.28	6.10	.20	5.51***
Target-directness	6.51	.12	1.53	.14	4.02***
Conflict type	6.26	.08	2.14	.15	4.20***
Conflict frequency	1.78	.17	6.34	.13	4.06***

Notes. N = 46 raters. Target-directness coded such that "low-level" = indirect and "high-level" = direct. Conflict type coded such that "low-level" = task conflict and "high-level" = relationship conflict. \*\*\* p < .001.

**Appendix D. Study 1 Experimental Cues for Conflict Expressions (Task Conflict Scenarios)**

Cue level	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Cue type		Subversiveness
			Conflict frequency	Entrenchment	
High	Taylor approached <b>you</b>	to <b>discuss</b> your idea. In particular, Taylor <b>wondered aloud whether Costco would agree to substitute peas?</b>	You <b>weren't</b> surprised because Taylor <b>does this all of the time.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>defensive, uninterested, and wouldn't really listen to anything that Riley {you}a said in response.</b>	In the end, you <b>felt pretty sure that Taylor would try to undermine your idea at the next meeting.</b>
	Taylor approached <b>Riley</b>	to <b>argue about</b> your idea. In particular, Taylor <b>directly stated that Costco would never agree to substitute peas.</b>	You <b>were</b> surprised because Taylor <b>never does this.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>open, attentive, and really considered Riley's {your} response.</b>	In the end, you <b>weren't really sure how Taylor felt about your idea.</b>

Notes. Bold indicates difference between cues. We rotated between "Riley" and "you" depending on the target-directness cue for the given scenario.

**Appendix E. Study 1 Experimental Cues for Conflict Expressions (Relationship Conflict Scenarios)**

Cue level	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Cue type		Subversiveness
			Conflict frequency	Entrenchment	
High	Taylor approached <b>you</b>	to <b>discuss</b> your personality. In particular, Taylor <b>wondered aloud if everything was alright on your end?</b>	You <b>weren't</b> surprised because Taylor <b>does this all of the time.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>defensive, uninterested, and wouldn't really listen to anything that [Rile/you]a said in response.</b>	In the end, you <b>felt pretty sure that Taylor would try to undermine you at the next meeting.</b>
	Taylor approached <b>Riley</b>	to <b>complain about</b> your personality. In particular, Taylor <b>directly stated that you were being very difficult.</b>	You <b>were</b> surprised because Taylor <b>never does this.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>open, attentive, and really considered [Riley's/your] response.</b>	In the end, you <b>weren't really sure how Taylor felt about your relationship.</b>

Notes. Bold indicates difference between cues. We rotated between "Riley" and "you" depending on the target-directness cue for the given scenario.

**Appendix F. Study 2 Experimental Cues for Conflict Expressions (Task Conflict Scenarios)**

Cue level	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Cue type		Subversiveness
			Entrenchment	Entrenchment	
High	Taylor approached <b>you</b>	to <b>discuss</b> your idea. In particular, Taylor <b>wondered aloud whether Costco would agree to substitute peas?</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>defensive and didn't really consider [Riley's/your]a response.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>defensive and didn't really consider [Riley's/your]a response.</b>	In the end, you <b>knew that Taylor would try to undermine your idea and dominate the next meeting.</b>
	Taylor approached <b>Riley</b>	to <b>argue about</b> your idea. In particular, Taylor <b>directly stated that Costco would never agree to substitute peas.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>open and really considered [Riley's/your] response.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>open and really considered [Riley's/your] response.</b>	In the end, you <b>weren't sure what Taylor would do at the next meeting.</b>

Note. Bold indicates difference between cues. We rotated between "Riley" and "you" depending on the target-directness cue for the given scenario.

**Appendix G. Study 2 Experimental Cues for Conflict Expressions (Relationship Conflict Scenarios)**

Cue level	Target-directness	Ambiguity	Cue type		Subversiveness
			Entrenchment	Entrenchment	
High	Taylor approached <b>you</b>	to <b>discuss</b> your personality. In particular, Taylor <b>wondered aloud if everything was alright on your end?</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>defensive and didn't really consider [Riley's/your]a response.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed especially <b>defensive and didn't really consider [Riley's/your]a response.</b>	In the end, you <b>knew that Taylor would try to undermine you and dominate the next meeting.</b>
	Taylor approached <b>Riley</b>	to <b>complain about</b> your personality. In particular, Taylor <b>directly stated that you were being very difficult.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>open and really considered [Riley's/your] response.</b>	At the same time, Taylor seemed <b>open and really considered [Riley's/your] response.</b>	In the end, you <b>weren't sure what Taylor would do at the next meeting.</b>

Note. Bold indicates difference between cues. We rotated between "Riley" and "you" depending on the target-directness cue for the given scenario.

**Appendix H. Supplementary material**

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104208>.

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