

Seeing Conflict: A Study of Conflict Accuracy in Work Teams

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Abstract

This study examines individual conflict accuracy, or the ability of a team member to make accurate judgments about dyadic conflict between others. We examine team member accuracy in identifying the presence of conflict between two team members and argue that individuals differ in the extent to which they accurately make judgments about conflict. We maintain that specific factors determine whether conflict is seen or not. We develop a framework for understanding individual conflict accuracy that takes into account pre-existing beliefs about the consequences that conflict has for team performance, the extent to which one is in conflict with other team members, and one's structural position within the network of team relationships. Our analyses of nearly 3,000 assessments made by team members about conflict between two of their teammates provide general support for the proposition that individual, interpersonal, and structural factors play a role in explaining team members' conflict accuracy.

Conflict is an inherent and important part of work team life, as evidenced by the large body of research that has examined it (Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jehn, 1995, 1997; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Lovelace, Shapiro, & Weingart, 2001; Tjosvold, 2008). Much of this attention is due to the potentially destructive effects conflict can have on a team and its members (Choi & Cho, 2011; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Frone, 2000). To prevent, or at least minimize, conflict's harm, team members—whether it is the parties in conflict themselves, their managers, or innocent bystanders—typically respond to the conflict in some fashion (Van de Vliert, 1981). Some responses are directed at resolving the conflict itself, perhaps formally through mediation or informally through discussion. Other responses are more indirect, such as when conflict is taken into account in the course of making other organizational decisions. For example, a manager may think twice before inviting teammates who are in conflict with the same project meeting or may discount what teammates in conflict say about each other's work.

Interestingly, the efficacy of these responses to conflict depends on a single, but crucial, assumption: When operating within a team, individuals know who among their teammates are and who are not in conflict. If individuals' assessments of conflict are correct and they respond accordingly, team members can focus on the task at hand, uncomfortable situations can be avoided, and the conflict can be effectively managed. But what if a team member's assessments of conflict among their teammates are wrong? If an individual incorrectly believes that two teammates are in conflict, he or she will have wasted time and effort trying to resolve nonexistent discord and may have missed opportunities to have the teammates collaborate more closely. Furthermore, the individual may have failed to address disputes between

teammates who really *are* in conflict. In sum, whether or not individuals believe that their teammates are in conflict affects how the teammates are treated, and there are consequences for whether the individuals are right or wrong in their assessment of who is in conflict.

An important issue to consider, then, is whether team members indeed *are* accurate in their perceptions of conflict between their teammates. In fact, a large body of social psychological research has focused on the inherent complexity surrounding the judgments individuals make about a host of social interactions (Brands, 2013; Casciaro, 1998; Funder, 1987; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988; Jones & Thibaut, 1958; Kenny, 1994; Swann, 1984). Casciaro, for example, stated that “people differ in their awareness of the social connections among those who inhabit their lives” (1998, p. 331). There is little reason to believe that members of the same team will report seeing the same pattern of conflict between teammates. For instance, members vary in the biases they hold, in the distractions they face, and in their access to superior sources of information. Thus, although conflict is an inevitable part of working in teams, accurately recognizing its presence is likely to not be automatic.

In this article, we introduce and develop the concept of *conflict accuracy* and argue that this individual attribute should not be taken for granted. Individuals, according to this argument, vary in terms of how well they accurately detect the presence or absence of conflict between two of their teammates. In doing so, we explicitly examine individuals’ conflict accuracy and its antecedents. We argue that individuals are likely to differ in the extent to which they accurately identify conflict. We further propose that specific factors facilitate or hinder an individual’s ability to accurately report conflict between other team members. Identifying conflict entails an individual-level judgment about the nature of social interactions between others. These judgments about the presence or absence of conflict, like other social and relational judgments, are complex and often difficult to make. Since our focus is on the identification of conflict by a third party, the definition for conflict that we employ builds on Thomas (1976) and views this phenomenon as “the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his” (Thomas, 1976, p. 891; for a similar definition, also see Wall & Callister, 1995). To date, existing conflict research has not provided a conceptual framework or empirical evidence on the variation of conflict accuracy across team members or its antecedents. As will be discussed, conflict research has examined variation in perceptions of conflict, both with respect to the intensity of conflict (Jehn, Rispens, & Thatcher, 2010) and its cognitive framing (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994), but we are unaware of any research that conceptualizes or operationalizes a team member’s accuracy in perceiving conflict between two of his or her teammates. Conflict accuracy, we argue, is likely to be affected by individual biases, distractions and cognitive resource constraints, and access to information about relational dynamics. We, therefore, propose that conflict accuracy is a function of individual, interpersonal, and social factors. Specifically, we develop a framework for understanding conflict accuracy that takes into account preexisting beliefs about the consequences that conflict has for team performance, the extent to which one is in conflict with the other team members being assessed, and one’s structural position within the network of team relationships.

The development of a conflict accuracy construct has clear theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, challenging the assumption of conflict accuracy implies that existing conflict frameworks may need to be modified so as to account for individuals’ conflict-related judgments (for a similar discussion, see Korsgaard, Jeong, Mahony, & Pitariu, 2008). From a practical standpoint, evidence documenting inaccuracy in identifying conflict has implications for decision-making and social exchange relationships in organizations and teams. In making everyday decisions about who to associate and engage with, who to share and exchange information with, who to allocate resources to, and who to create coalitions with, organizational members take into account the nature and quality of the relationships between individuals and groups that they interact with. Thus, for example, managers might make decisions about how to allocate scarce resources based on their assessment of the relational strength or weakness of the ties between different subordinates, providing resources to individuals or groups that are perceived to have a stronger relational foundation. Employees may account for relationships between

their managers when deciding how to report and frame information that they share. The efficacy of these social exchange-related decisions is highly contingent on the accuracy of conflict-related judgments. Finally, an understanding of conflict accuracy has clear implications for the management of conflict. If, as proposed in this article, individuals vary in their ability to see everyday conflict between team members, they are also likely to vary in their perceived need for and attention to the resolution and management of conflict. Shedding light on what drives variation in conflict accuracy is, therefore, likely to provide insight as to how organizations and teams can manage conflict better.

In what follows, we put the conflict accuracy assumption to the test by examining the extent to which team members are able to recognize and identify conflict between their colleagues. Furthermore, we examine factors that may enhance or hinder conflict accuracy. Our analyses of nearly 3,000 assessments made by team members about conflict between two of their teammates provide general support for the proposition that individual, interpersonal, and structural factors are likely to play a role in explaining team members' conflict accuracy.

Toward a Theory of Conflict Accuracy

While the concept of conflict accuracy has, to date, not received scholarly attention, conflict researchers have been interested in two areas of inquiry that provide a strong foundation for our study. Specifically, our study extends existing research on both conflict asymmetry and conflict frames. Conflict asymmetry refers to variation in member perceptions of the level of conflict present in a given team (Jehn et al., 2010). Conflict frames refer to the different cognitive lenses applied to a dispute or a conflict episode (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994). Our examination of conflict accuracy builds on both of these elements: Variation in conflict perceptions across individuals and the recognition of different individual lenses through which conflict is experienced. In this section, we briefly review these constructs as a foundation for our development of an accuracy approach to the study of conflict inside teams.

The absence of research on conflict accuracy is largely a function of a dominant focus among conflict scholars on shared experiences and associated perceptions across team members, with less attention given to divergences in how conflict is viewed and perceived. Conflict scholars have, for the most part, examined conflict at the team level and have treated it as a climate measure. Individual perceptions of conflict are, therefore, aggregated to the team level. As Jehn and colleagues noted, “[O]ne of the shortcomings of past conflict research is that it often rests on an assumption that all members of a group perceive the same amount of conflict, neglecting the view that members may have different perceptions about the amount of conflict that exists in their group” (Jehn et al., 2010, p. 596). If conflict experiences are assumed to be shared and common across team members, there is little room for variation in members' ability to identify and see conflict.

Recent conflict research has, however, begun to recognize variation in perceptions and experiences of conflict (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn et al., 2010; Korsgaard et al., 2008). According to this stream of research, team members are likely to perceive different levels of conflict. In addition to examining mean levels of perceived conflict in teams, this approach calls for the study of conflict perception asymmetry, or the extent to which team members vary in their perceptions of team conflict levels. This research has documented differences across members of the same team in the way they experience and perceive conflict with implications for both the team and the individual. For example, Friedman et al. (2000) found that individual conflict styles affected employee reported levels of conflict. As such, employees varied in their experiences of conflict as a function of their different individual methods of dealing with conflict.

The concept of conflict asymmetry advances team conflict research by calling into question the notion that team members are likely to arrive at a consensus view of conflict. It, therefore, begins to challenge the assumption that conflict is seen and identified in a similar manner across all team members. Thus,

documenting conflict perception variation opens the door for the argument that some individuals are more accurate than others in seeing conflict.

Nevertheless, this research is still limited in its ability to capture and explain variation in individuals' conflict accuracy. First, the focus on conflict asymmetry implies that different team members will perceive different *levels* of conflict, but it still assumes a shared recognition of the presence of some baseline conflict. Second, the emerging research on conflict asymmetry measures conflict as an aggregated construct without capturing which members are involved in conflict. Conflict asymmetry pertains to team members' general perceptions of the existing conflict climate and not to their judgments about specific and identifiable conflict between specific team members. This is primarily due to the fact that established measures of conflict in teams do not capture conflict between specific individual members. Third, research on conflict asymmetry has, for the most part, examined the effects of divergent perceptions but has not attempted to explain where such variation comes from. In other words, this research does not provide empirical evidence on the factors that shape different team member perceptions of conflict levels.

A second foundational stream of research in terms of variation in perceptions of conflict is the conflict frames literature. This research examines the different cognitive lenses applied to a given conflict or dispute (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994; Schweitzer, DeChurch, & Gibson, 2005). Pinkley (1990) argued that negotiation and conflict scholars had been primarily focused on the outcomes associated with a given dispute and had given little attention to the manner in which conflict was interpreted and defined by different disputants. Individuals, Pinkley argued, have different cognitive frames through which they interpret and understand conflict episodes. Those with different conflict frames focus on different information, thereby making certain elements or characteristics of a given conflict more or less salient (Gelfand et al., 2001; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994).

As with the conflict asymmetry research, the literature on conflict frames is a useful building block in the development of our conflict accuracy framework, since it provides support for our overarching argument that team members are likely to differ in the manner in which they see conflict. Nevertheless, like the conflict asymmetry literature, conflict frames research does not fully address the question of conflict accuracy variation or its antecedents. First, much of the conflict frames research examines the manner in which two individuals engaged in a given conflict interpret that same dispute. As noted, our research examines the manner in which team members accurately perceive conflict between others. Second, the conflict frames research assumes the acknowledgment and recognition of conflict between two individuals and documents differences in how this agreed upon conflict is interpreted and perceived by the disputants. Thus, this research does not account for the recognition of dyadic conflict by a third party. Finally, although implicit in the conflict frames literature, this body of research does not provide empirical evidence on what drives differences in perceptions of conflict.

Taken together, existing research on conflict perceptions provides a solid foundation for our argument regarding conflict accuracy by supporting the notion of variation in perceptions of conflict and in the cognitive lenses used to make sense of it. Our approach to conflict accuracy moves away from perceptions regarding the general level of team conflict and focuses on identifying when and why team members are, or are not, able to accurately identify conflict between other team members. Conflict research has distinguished between different types of conflict. Most notable among existing typologies is the distinction between relationship and task conflict (Jehn, 1995, 1997). Both types of conflict are subject to variation in judgment accuracy. In developing our hypotheses below, we distinguish between relationship and task conflict accuracy.

Hypotheses Development

If, as proposed, individuals vary in the extent to which they accurately identify conflict, what explains this variation? As noted above, making judgments about social phenomena in general, and about conflict

between others in particular, is likely influenced by individual biases, by the relational connections to the individuals about whom judgments are being made, and by an individual's access to information regarding these individuals. Accuracy is, therefore, likely to be shaped by preconceived notions that individuals bring to a given social setting, by perceptions shaped by interactions within this social setting, and by the informational resources they have access to. With this in mind, we consider factors affecting individual accuracy that fall under three general categories. First, we argue that individual beliefs about conflict are likely to influence conflict accuracy. Second, conflict accuracy is also likely to be influenced by the perceiver's own relationship with the parties about whom conflict judgments are being made. Finally, access to relational information based on an individual's positions within the team is also likely to affect individuals' conflict accuracy.

By focusing on these factors, we explore variables affecting conflict accuracy at three different levels of analysis: individual, interpersonal, and structural. In addition, we examine variables that are likely to have a direct effect on conflict accuracy. Individuals' accuracy in perceiving conflict is likely influenced by a number of different factors. Nevertheless, given that our effort in this article is to develop a new theoretical construct and to establish accuracy as a phenomenon of interest, we chose to focus on independent variables that have a clear and proximal conceptual link to the manner in which conflict is perceived. Thus, beliefs, experiences with conflict, and access to information through social structure are all likely to shape how individuals see perceive conflict.

Believing is Seeing: The Role of Conflict Beliefs

At the individual level, we propose that what a team member believes about conflict will influence the likelihood that he or she will accurately identify conflict among teammates. Social psychologists have long maintained that the beliefs people hold about groups and group member interactions affect how they themselves act as a member of a group (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958). As an example of the effect of beliefs, consider team diversity. After decades of studying diversity, scholars recognize that the effects of diversity within teams are complex, as sometimes diversity affects a team positively and other times negatively (for reviews, see Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Recent evidence, however, shows that simply *being* diverse only tells part of the story; it also matters what team members *believe* about diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Homan, Greer, Jehn, & Koning, 2010; Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007). For instance, Homan et al. (2007) found that a demographically diverse team could take better advantage of its information diversity and ultimately perform better when team members believed that diversity among members was more important than similarity among members.

Prior research has established that individuals also vary in how they think about team conflict, including how conflict is interpreted (Gelfand et al., 2001) and whether conflict (both task and relationship) is believed to be necessarily detrimental to team performance (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008). Just as beliefs about diversity's consequences affect how one responds to the presence of diversity, we expect that the beliefs one holds about conflict's consequences will affect how one responds to the presence of conflict. Specifically, we propose that a team member's views regarding the link between conflict and team performance will affect the likelihood that a member recognizes whether specific pairs of teammates are, or are not, in conflict. That is, we propose that beliefs about conflict's negative effects on team performance will decrease conflict accuracy.

We argue that such beliefs about conflict are likely to decrease conflict accuracy in two possible ways. For some, beliefs about the detrimental nature of conflict for team performance are likely to foster hypervigilance about the presence of conflict in the team. Members who believe that conflict is more likely to undermine their team's ability to attain goals and objectives will, we propose, be overly sensitive to its presence. Such conflict hypervigilance is likely to distort an individual's accuracy by increasing the likelihood that team members will *see* conflict when it is not actually present.

Yet for others, beliefs about the negative implications of conflict could increase the likelihood of *not* seeing conflict when it actually is present. Rather than have a heightened sensitivity toward identifying conflict, individuals who think that conflict necessarily harms a team's performance may instead wish to believe that their team is experiencing less conflict than actually exists. In other words, viewing conflict as a team obstacle may lead members to avoid recognizing it when it is present. We, therefore, propose that individuals who have more pessimistic views of conflict's effects on team performance will be more inaccurate in perceiving conflict among their teammates.

Hypothesis 1: Beliefs that task/relationship conflict has negative consequences for team performance will decrease dyadic task/relationship conflict accuracy.

Blinded by Conflict: The Accuracy Effects of Conflict with Others

In this article, we focus on the ability of team members to accurately identify conflict between their teammates. Team members, however, are also a part of the very social dynamic that they are evaluating and perceiving. In addition to individual beliefs about conflict, one's own interactions with the dyads being evaluated are likely to affect their conflict judgment accuracy. Thus, at the interpersonal level, we argue that members' engagement with the social world around them—specifically their own conflict experiences with dyad members—will affect the likelihood that they can accurately perceive conflict between their teammates.

Research on perception accuracy has documented ways in which our perceptions of others are affected by our own social surroundings (Gilbert et al., 1988; Jones & Thibaut, 1958; Kenny & Albright, 1987; Swann, 1984). For example, Labianca, Brass, and Gray (1998) found that individuals who reported negative social interactions with members of other groups at work also reported increased levels of intergroup conflict (Labianca et al., 1998). Judgments about organizational conflict are, therefore, affected by the social context in which they are made, making it possible that an individual's interactions with his or her teammates will affect the likelihood of accurately perceiving the presence of conflict among them. In particular, we argue that being in conflict with members of an evaluated dyad is especially likely to affect judgments about whether they are in conflict.

We propose two ways in which individuals' own conflict *with* their teammates will cloud their judgments about the existence of conflict *between* other teammates. Accurately identifying conflict between others requires that one is aware of the conflict and is paying attention to it. Yet the very act of being in conflict with others limits one's own attentional resources. Team conflict has been shown to lead to members experiencing cognitive overload (Carnevale & Probst, 1998), job dissatisfaction (Frone, 2000; Giebels & Janssen, 2005), and reduced well-being (Dijkstra, Van Dierendonck, Evers, & De Dreu, 2005), including increased levels of stress (Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008), burnout (Giebels & Janssen, 2005), and depression (Frone, 2000). Time and effort spent attending to one's own conflict and its consequences thus restricts the time and effort available to spend on other activities and can, we argue, affect one's ability to accurately perceive conflict between others.

We suggest two ways by which this could occur. One possibility is that being engaged in conflict with a dyad member could lead to a general lack of awareness of what occurs between the dyad members, including the presence of conflict. One's own conflict could, therefore, lead to an underestimation of the presence of conflict among others—that is, not seeing conflict that is present. Alternatively, members who are consumed with their own incidents of conflict may pick up on some—but not all—clues necessary to identify conflict between others. A question of clarification could be misinterpreted as task conflict, peaceful silence could be misunderstood as relationship conflict, and true instances of either task conflict or relationship could be mistaken for each other. One's own conflict, in this case, could lead to an overestimation of the presence of conflict between others—that is, seeing conflict that is not present.

A second way that individuals' own conflict experiences could contribute to inaccurate perceptions of conflict among teammates is when individuals are considering whether those with whom they report to be in conflict might also be in conflict with *other* teammates. To illustrate, consider two teammates, Pat and Chris. Suppose that Pat reports being in conflict with Chris and then considers whether Chris is also in conflict with other members of the team. Attribution theory suggests that Pat's self-report about conflict with Chris increases the likelihood of Pat reporting Chris to be in conflict with other teammates regardless of Chris's actual conflict (Allred, 2000; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2009). According to the self-serving bias (Bradley, 1978; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977; Zuckerman, 1979), Pat will create an explanation for the conflict with Chris that protects Pat's own self-esteem, such as the conflict being Chris's fault. Furthermore, the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, Amabile, & Steinmetz, 1977) holds that Pat will assume that the cause of Chris's "fault" will be a dispositional trait (e.g., short temper, combative personality) that, in turn, makes it more likely that Chris would end up in conflict with others. Finally, by actually reporting Chris to be in conflict with other teammates, Pat reinforces (at least in Pat's own mind) the consistent behavior of Chris being a difficult teammate (Kelley, 1967). This, then, is an additional way in which one's own conflict can lead to an overestimation of the presence of conflict among others—that is, seeing conflict that is not present. Building on the rationales described above, we propose that being in conflict with others will decrease an individual's ability to accurately identify conflict between other team members.

Hypothesis 2: Team member task/relationship conflict with members of a dyad will decrease task/relationship conflict accuracy.

Where You Sit Alters What You See: The Accuracy Effects of Network Centrality

A member's own conflict experience with the evaluated dyad is one specific and interpersonal way in which being part of the social setting can influence how accurately one perceives it. Team members also engage with one another more generally via their daily task and social interactions. These patterns of interactions, or relationships, form the team's social structure (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Wellman, 1988). A member's position within that structure provides him or her with a particular vantage point for acquiring relational information (Burt, 1992). A central tenet of network research is that those who have superior structural positions—that is, those with higher network centrality—tend to have superior access to information (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Anderson, 2008; Burt, 1992; Reinholdt, Pedersen, & Foss, 2011). Central to our article's focus, network centrality not only increases access to information about technical details and who holds such information but also to information regarding social interactions between team members. We expect that the better the vantage point a member has for knowing how his or her teammates interact with one another, the better the member's conflict-relevant information will be and the more likely the member will be accurate in perceiving the presence or absence of conflict.

Prior research has supported this expected relationship between one's structural position and having accurate perceptions of one's social surroundings. Early studies in this area demonstrated that members who occupied a central position within a group's social structure held more accurate perceptions of how the group generally felt about individual members (Greer, Galanter, & Nordlie, 1954; Newcomb, 1961). More recent studies have shown that having a central position within a group is also related to being more accurate in perceiving relationships between specific pairs of individuals, including who goes to whom for advice (Bondonio, 1998; Casciaro, 1998) and who is friends with whom (Bondonio, 1998; Casciaro, 1998; Krackhardt, 1992).

We maintain that the relationship between being centrally located within a team's structure and having accurate perceptions of the team's social dynamics will also apply to perceiving conflict. Following prior research that has emphasized the importance of differentiating between formal and informal social networks (Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), in this study, we focus on

workflow (task) and *socializing* (nontask) networks. Workflow networks represent formally defined interdependencies between team members. Workflow centrality refers to the role that an individual team member plays in executing work-related tasks. Higher workflow centrality implies a more central role in the process through which team members interact to complete their work and thus access to greater amounts of information about team member work-related interactions (Brass, 1981). Being central in a workflow network is therefore likely to provide a member with more accurate information about conflicts and tensions related to the work at hand—that is, task conflict.

Socializing centrality, on the other hand, refers to an individual's position in terms of the informal, non-work-related interactions between team members. Socializing centrality is likely to provide individuals with greater amounts of information about non-task-related relational dynamics in a team. Socializing centrality is therefore likely to increase a member's access to accurate information about relational tensions and disagreements—that is, relationship conflict. Taken together, we propose that greater access to information afforded by centrality within a network will increase overall accuracy.

Hypothesis 3: Centrality within a workflow/socializing network will be positively related to task/relationship conflict accuracy.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

We tested our hypotheses using data collected at a state scientific agency in the Midwest. This organization is one of several such agencies in the state, each of which is dedicated to the study of one aspect of the state's natural and cultural resources, including its water supply, geology, plant and wild life, and archaeological artifacts. Each agency employs scientists and support staff, both technical and administrative, and uses teams to work on complex problems and to encourage collaboration. The agency in this study agreed to participate in exchange for a presentation of team-level and organization-level findings. At the time of our study, the agency had 26 project teams ranging in size from 3 to 17 members, with an average of 6.92 members.

We surveyed the participants using a web-based instrument. We sent an initial invitation and three reminders via email. We sent each reminder about one and a half weeks after sending the previous message, which yielded a 6-week period for survey completion. Participation was voluntary, and employees were allowed to complete the survey during working hours. We guaranteed that individual responses would be kept confidential and that only aggregate results would be reported to management. Of the 145 employees contacted, 110 completed the survey for a response rate of 76%. Because approximately 20% of employees were members of more than one team, these responses yielded information on 137 of a possible 180 team memberships (also 76%). Among respondents, team members varied in age ($M = 42.6$, $SD = 11.6$), gender (62.0% male), and highest education completed (high school diploma: 2.8%; bachelor's degree: 18.5%; master's degree: 44.4%; doctorate: 34.3%).

Measures

Conflict Accuracy

We are interested in understanding how accurate respondents are in assessing conflict between dyads (pairs) of their teammates; thus, our dependent variables are conflict accuracy for both relationship conflict and task conflict. We asked participants to report whether they believed members of their team—including themselves—were in conflict. First, we defined task conflict and relationship conflict for our respondents.

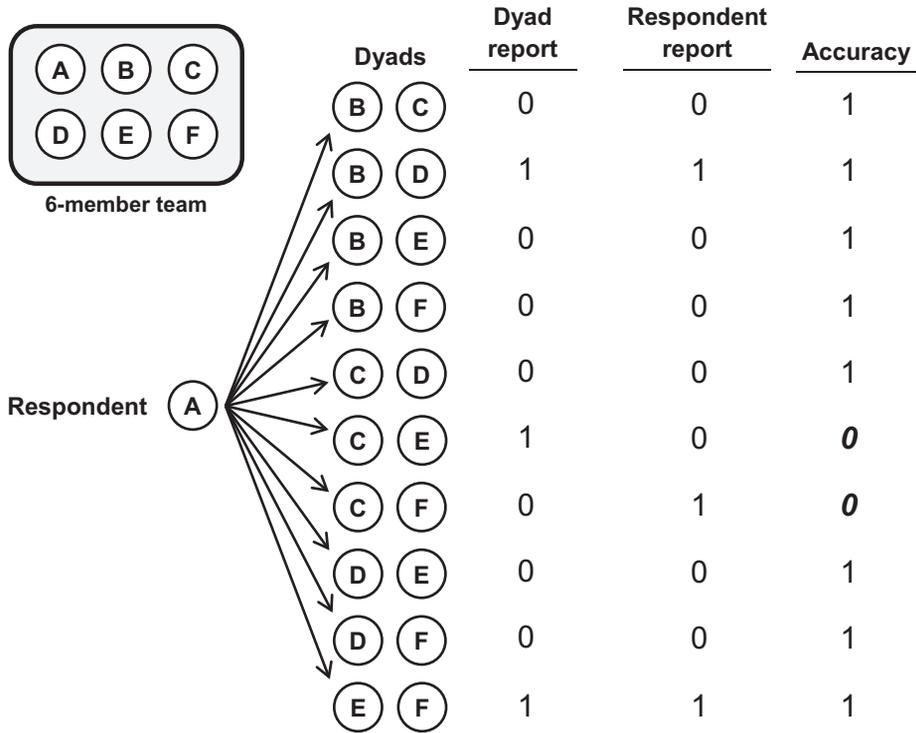


Figure 1. An example respondent’s accuracy in assessing conflict among team members.

Sometimes people have disagreements about work, including specific tasks that need to be completed (e.g., what to do, who should do what, the order tasks should be completed). We call this *task conflict*. Conflict between other people may not have anything to do with the work itself but instead is due to non-task interpersonal incompatibilities (e.g., tension, animosity, annoyances). We call this *relationship conflict*.

We then listed each dyad within the group and, for each dyad, asked respondents to indicate whether they believed that the two members had experienced task conflict, relationship conflict, both types of conflict, or no conflict.

To determine a respondent’s accuracy, we compared the respondent’s evaluation of a dyad to the self-evaluations reported by members of the dyad. Because we consider conflict to exist between two people once one person perceives his or her concerns to be impeded by the other person (Thomas, 1976), we operationalize conflict between two members to exist when at least one of the members reported it.¹ Accuracy is then defined as whether the participant’s assessment of a dyad matches what the members themselves reported. Figure 1 provides an example. In this six-person team, member A has given assessments of conflict for the 10 possible dyads that exist among her five teammates. A has reported conflict between members B and D, between members C and E, and between members E and F. Neither C nor E, however, reported that they were in conflict, and thus A’s response for this dyad is inaccurate. Furthermore, C and F have indicated that they are in conflict, but A failed to report this, yielding a second inaccurate response.

¹Among the 366 dyads in our study, relationship conflict was reported by 21.3% of the dyads and task conflict was reported by 30.3% of the dyads.

This variable is measured at the respondent-dyad level of analysis. Each respondent provided judgments on the existence (or lack thereof) of conflict in each pair of members in his or her team. In a given survey, each respondent, therefore, assessed conflict episodes of $((T - 1)(T - 2))/2$ dyads within his or her team for a total of $T((T - 1)(T - 2)/2)$ respondent-dyads per team, where T represents the number of team members. Of the original 26 teams, 24 had at least three respondents and could be included in the analysis. The number of respondents in these 24 teams ranged from 3 to 16 ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 2.9$). The number of possible respondent-dyads was 2,997, although due to missing data, the number of observations in our regression models is slightly less. We measured accuracy separately for relationship conflict and task conflict.

Beliefs About Conflict Consequences

We assessed whether respondents believed that conflict is detrimental to team performance by using two 6-item scales—one for relationship conflict and one for task conflict—from Sanchez-Burks et al. (2008). These items ask participants about the extent to which they agree with statements about the link between conflict and team performance (e.g., “Task (Relationship) conflict gets in the way of a team’s potential to complete a task successfully,” and “For a team to complete a job successfully, they must first focus their attention on resolving task (relationship) conflict before moving forward on the project.”). Items were rated on a 5-point scale (*strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha for the beliefs about relationship conflict scale was .78 and for the beliefs about task conflict scale was .76.

Conflict with Others

We constructed two variables of the respondent’s own self-reported relationship conflict and task conflict with members of the focal dyad. The possible values for each variable are 0 (*not in conflict with either member*), 1 (*in conflict with one of the members*), and 2 (*in conflict with both members*). Data for these measures came from the same method described in measuring a respondent’s perceptions of conflict among team members.

Network Centrality

We collected data on both task-related (workflow) and non-task-related (socializing) networks. We asked participants to indicate how much they were required to interact with each team member in order to accomplish their work (workflow) and how often they socialize with each team member during free time (socializing). In response to each question, participants chose from five options: *not at all*, *a little*, *a moderate amount*, *a lot*, and *a great deal*. We coded responses as binary variables using cut points that provided the most balanced dichotomy. For workflow networks, 0 = {*not at all*, *a little*} (36.8% of responses) and 1 = {*a moderate amount*, *a lot*, *a great deal*} (63.2% of responses), and for socializing networks, 0 = {*not at all*} (50.3% of responses) and 1 = {*a little*, *a moderate amount*, *a lot*, *a great deal*} (49.7% of responses). We measured each participant’s centrality within each network using betweenness centrality. We used betweenness centrality because, in the context of intrateam conflict, betweenness best reflects our argument that certain network positions yield information advantages. We conducted centrality calculations using the *sna* package for R, written by Butts (2013).

Control Variables

We controlled for several characteristics of each respondent that we believed could affect the accuracy of his or her perceptions of conflict among teammates, including the respondent’s age, gender (coded as 0 for *female* and 1 for *male*), highest education attained (dummy variables for high school diploma, master’s degree, and doctoral degree, with bachelor’s degree as the reference group), and tenure with the team (in years). We also controlled for team size and for whether the members of the dyad being evaluated were the same gender.

Analysis

Given the hierarchical nature of our data (almost every respondent evaluated multiple dyads of teammates and respondents are nested within teams) and that our dependent variables are binary (a respondent's perceptions are either accurate or inaccurate), we used multilevel, mixed effects logistic regression. In addition to fixed effects for the independent variables and control variables described above, we included random effects for respondents and teams. We conducted our analysis using meqrlogit in Stata 13 (StataCorp, 2013).

Results

Table 1 provides summary statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) and a correlation matrix of the variables used in the analysis.

In Tables 2 and 3, we report the results of the regression analyses for relationship conflict and task conflict, respectively. In the tables, we report exponentiated coefficients (e^{β}) rather than the raw coefficients (β) to provide an easier interpretation of effects. Exponentiating the coefficients of logistic regression allows us to discuss the odds ratio rather than the log of odds (logit) ratio. For example, a 1 unit change in a variable increases the odds of a respondent's accuracy by a multiplier of e^{β} , holding everything else constant. Thus, exponentiated coefficients that are >1 represent factors that lead to increased accuracy of conflict assessment and exponentiated coefficients that are less than 1 represent factors that lead to reduced accuracy of conflict assessment (see Long, 1997, pp. 79–82, for an easy-to-follow explanation on how to interpret logistic regression coefficients using odds ratios).

Relationship Conflict

We start by interpreting the results for respondents' accuracy of relationship conflict among dyads of team members. Model 1 is the baseline model with only control variables. Few coefficients approach statistical significance. When looking at the coefficients of control variables across all models, only those for the gender composition of the focal dyad achieve statistical significance, in which the odds of a respondent being accurate decreased by almost 40% when the members of the dyad under evaluation were either both male or both female.

Model 2 includes the measure of whether respondents believe that relationship conflict necessarily harms team performance. The coefficient is in the same direction as predicted in Hypothesis 1—that stronger beliefs lead to more inaccurate perceptions—and is statistically significant at the .10 level² ($z = -1.66$; $p = .097$). A 1 standard deviation increase in beliefs that relationship conflict necessarily harms team performance reduces the odds of relationship conflict assessment accuracy by 8.5% ($e^{\ln(0.86) \times 0.59} = 0.915$). Hypothesis 1 regarding relationship conflict is not supported statistically at the .05 level, but these results suggest that future examination of this variable in the context of conflict accuracy may be worthwhile.

Model 3 tests Hypothesis 2, that respondents who themselves were in conflict were more inaccurate in their perceptions of conflict between team members. For each member of the dyad with whom the respondent is in relationship conflict, the odds of the respondent being accurate in assessing whether the dyad is in relationship conflict decrease by 44% and is statistically significant ($z = -5.41$; $p < .001$). This provides support for Hypothesis 2 for relationship conflict.

In model 4, we test the effect that social position has on respondents' conflict assessment accuracy. We had hypothesized, in Hypothesis 3, that respondents who were central in the socializing network would

²All statistical tests are two-tailed.

Table 1
Summary Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Accuracy judging relationship conflict	0.81	0.39	0	1												
2. Accuracy judging task conflict	0.72	0.45	0	1	.35											
3. Beliefs about relationship conflict consequences	3.14	0.59	1.5	4.83	.01	.01										
4. Beliefs about task conflict consequences	3.37	0.57	1.5	4.67	.04	.04	.41									
5. Relationship conflict episodes reported by respondent with dyad members	0.25	0.49	0	2	-.13	-.07	.03	-.04								
6. Task conflict episodes reported by respondent with dyad members	0.39	0.60	0	2	-.08	-.07	.07	.05	.47							
7. Workflow centrality (betweenness)	3.45	5.74	0	36.83	.05	.05	.15	.11	-.05	.05						
8. Socializing centrality (betweenness)	5.53	8.56	0	44.08	.00	.00	.00	.08	.00	.03	.27					
9. Age	43.39	11.87	23	77	.04	.00	.29	.03	-.08	-.01	.25	-.06				
10. Gender (female=0, male=1)	0.65	0.48	0	1	.01	.00	.22	-.05	.00	.03	.19	-.07	.26			
11. Tenure with team (years)	7.75	7.99	0	37.25	.03	.05	.22	.04	.04	.06	.15	.15	.51	.21		
12. Team size	12.68	4.03	3	17	-.04	.00	-.07	-.05	.04	-.06	.02	.30	-.17	.00	-.04	
13. Dyad members same gender	0.53	0.50	0	1	-.05	-.09	-.02	.02	-.02	.00	.01	.01	.01	-.03	-.01	-.04

Table 2
Results of Multilevel, Mixed Effects Logistic Regression for Accuracy in Perceiving Relationship Conflict Between Two Teammates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Age	0.99 (.01)	0.99 (.01)	0.99 (.01)	0.99 (.01)	0.99 (.01)
Male	0.96 (.11)	0.99 (.12)	0.97 (.14)	0.96 (.11)	0.99 (.14)
Team size	0.95 (.09)	0.95 (.09)	0.96 (.09)	0.95 (.09)	0.95 (.09)
High school diploma‡	0.75 (.27)	0.69 (.25)	0.55 (.22)	0.75 (.27)	0.53 (.21)
Master’s degree‡	0.94 (.14)	0.89 (.13)	0.92 (.16)	0.94 (.14)	0.89 (.15)
Ph.D.‡	0.98 (.18)	0.92 (.18)	0.89 (.20)	0.98 (.18)	0.86 (.19)
Tenure with team [years]	1.01 (.01)	1.01 (.01)	1.01 (.01)	1.01 (.01)	1.01 (.01)
Dyad members both male or both female	0.63*** (.06)	0.63*** (.06)	0.62*** (.06)	0.63*** (.06)	0.62*** (.06)
Beliefs about relationship conflict		0.86† (.08)			0.91 (.10)
Relationship conflict episodes reported by respondent with dyad members			0.56*** (.06)		0.57*** (.06)
Socialize centrality (betweenness)				1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)
Constant	22.61*** (20.49)	36.52*** (34.93)	26.02*** (22.49)	22.59*** (20.46)	35.69*** (33.32)
Observations	2,703	2,703	2,664	2,703	2,664
Log likelihood	-1303.18	-1301.80	-1265.57	-1303.17	-1265.17

Notes. Exponentiated coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Random effects for Respondent and Team are omitted for readability.

‡Results are with respect to the reference group of employees with a bachelor’s degree.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

be more accurate in their assessment of relationship conflict among team members. The exponentiated coefficient for this variable is almost exactly 1, which indicates that a respondent’s betweenness centrality in the socializing network had no effect on the respondent’s accuracy in reporting conflict among his or her teammates. Hypothesis 3 is thus not supported for relationship conflict.

For robustness, we include model 5, the full model including all variables from models 1–4. The previous findings for our variables of interest remain substantively unchanged, although with a slightly weaker effect and a slightly larger standard error, the coefficient for beliefs about relationship conflict is no longer significant, even at the .10 level.

Task Conflict

We now turn to Table 3 and the respondents’ accuracy in assessing their teammates’ task conflict. Model 1 includes only the control variables. As with relationship conflict, the gender composition of the dyad being evaluated had a significant effect on a respondent’s accuracy in reporting task conflict. The odds of

Table 3
 Results of Multilevel, Mixed Effects Logistic Regression for Accuracy in Perceiving Task Conflict Between Two Teammates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Age	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)
Male	1.00 (.11)	1.01 (.11)	0.98 (.11)	0.94 (.10)	0.92 (.11)
Team size	1.02 (.07)	1.02 (.07)	1.02 (.06)	1.01 (.06)	1.01 (.06)
High school diploma‡	0.43* (.15)	0.44* (.15)	0.39** (.14)	0.40** (.14)	0.36** (.13)
Master's degree‡	0.97 (.13)	0.99 (.13)	0.95 (.13)	1.01 (.14)	1.03 (.15)
Ph.D. ‡	0.88 (.15)	0.90 (.16)	0.83 (.14)	0.97 (.17)	0.95 (.18)
Tenure with team [years]	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)	1.00 (.01)	1.01 (.01)	1.01 (.01)
Dyad members both male or both female	0.60*** (.06)	0.60*** (.06)	0.60*** (.06)	0.60*** (.06)	0.59*** (.06)
Beliefs about task conflict		1.10 (.09)			1.13 (.11)
Task conflict episodes reported by respondent with dyad members			0.83* (.07)		0.81* (.08)
Workflow centrality (betweenness)				1.04* (.02)	1.04* (.02)
Constant	3.80* (2.37)	2.83 (1.91)	4.25* (2.53)	4.18* (2.56)	3.17† (2.05)
Observations	2,703	2,703	2,664	2,703	2,664
Log likelihood	-1499.21	-1498.61	-1473.80	-1495.93	-1469.56

Notes. Exponentiated coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses. Random effects for Respondent and Team are omitted for readability.

‡Results are with respect to the reference group of employees with a bachelor's degree.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

a respondent being accurate decreased by about 40% when the members of the dyad under evaluation were either both male or both female. Also, compared with respondents with a bachelor's degree, those with a high school diploma tended to provide fewer accurate assessments of conflict among their team members. All other control variables had no significant effect on a respondent's accuracy.

Model 2 includes the measure of whether respondents believe that task conflict necessarily harms team performance. The coefficient is not statistically significant ($z = 1.10$; $p = .276$) and is in the opposite direction as predicted in Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 is, therefore, not supported for task conflict.

In model 3, we test Hypothesis 2: whether respondents' accuracy was influenced by their own conflict. For each member of the dyad with whom the respondent is in task conflict, the odds of the respondent being accurate in assessing whether the dyad is in task conflict decrease by 17% and is statistically significant ($z = -2.28$; $p = .022$). Hypothesis 2 is, therefore, supported for task conflict.

Model 4 allows for the testing of Hypothesis 3, that workflow centrality would increase a respondent's accuracy in reporting task conflict. As predicted, the effect of workflow centrality is positive (exponentiated coefficient is >1) and statistically significant ($z = 2.49$; $p = .013$); respondents who were central in their team's workflow network were more accurate in their assessment of task con-

flict between teammates. A 1 standard deviation increase in workflow centrality increases the odds of task conflict assessment accuracy by 25% ($e^{\ln(1.04) \times 5.74} = 1.25$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported for task conflict.

Finally, model 5 is the full model that includes all variables from models 1 to 4. The previous findings for our variables of interest remain substantively unchanged.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's overarching objective was to document variation in conflict accuracy and, more importantly, to explain it. Specifically, we examined the role played by a respondent's beliefs about conflict, conflict with dyad members, and network centrality in understanding why some people were more accurate than others in perceiving conflict between two of their teammates. Interestingly, some of these factors had different effects for task and relationship conflict.

We found that respondents' own conflict with members of a given dyad was significantly and negatively related to conflict accuracy. This pattern held for both relationship and task conflict. We also provided evidence for the role that network centrality plays in explaining conflict accuracy. Workflow centrality significantly affected task conflict accuracy. Individuals who were more central within their teams' formal workflow network were more accurate in their perceptions of task conflict. Social network centrality, however, was not significantly related to relationship conflict accuracy. Finally, we found some support for the argument that the extent to which team members viewed conflict as detrimental to performance decreased individual conflict accuracy. Specifically, beliefs regarding relationship conflict were marginally, statistically, and negatively related to relationship conflict accuracy, while beliefs regarding task conflict were not significantly related to task conflict accuracy. Although when included in the full model, beliefs about relationship conflict were no longer significantly related to conflict accuracy, they showed a similar tendency. This finding suggests that conflict beliefs are likely to play a role in affecting conflict accuracy, but interpersonal and team-level factors appear to play a more dominant role.

These findings make a number of contributions to the study of conflict. First and central to the study's overarching objective, we have demonstrated that seeing conflict in teams is not automatic. Individuals are known to vary in terms of the accuracy with which they perceive the social world. Individual accuracy has been examined in a variety of different areas, including social ties as well as the traits, attitudes, perceptions, and emotions of others (Casciaro, 1998). One of the domains that has not received scholarly attention in this regard is conflict accuracy, or individuals' abilities to make accurate judgments about the presence or absence of conflict in a social setting. Although conflict is almost always present in team settings, the ability of all members to actually recognize and identify it should not be taken for granted. Some individuals appear to be more apt at recognizing conflict than others. Individuals, therefore, vary in the likelihood that they can accurately assess the presence of conflict among their team members. This finding is central to our understanding of how conflict plays out in teams and raises a number of questions about established conflict findings. If individuals vary in the extent to which they identify conflict accurately, it may suggest that existing findings regarding the positive and negative effects of conflict on key outcomes may be either over- or understated. In addition, variation in conflict accuracy has clear implications for the adequacy of a host of social exchange decisions made within organizations. To the extent that individuals decide how to engage with their peers and supervisors as a function of, among other things, the perceived quality of their relationships with others, our findings call into question the foundation on which many of these decisions are made.

Second, in addition to documenting variation in conflict accuracy, we have provided support for the argument that this variation is a function of individual, interpersonal, and network-related factors. Team members' ability to accurately see conflict appears to be modestly influenced by their beliefs about the consequences associated with conflict and, more prominently, their conflict with other team members as well as their position within workflow networks. Put simply, the ways in which individuals see conflict in

the social world around them is enhanced or constrained by the position and context in which they operate, their relationships with others, and, to a lesser extent, their own differences.

As noted above, however, it is important to recognize the more central role that being in conflict with others and being centrally located within the workflow network play in affecting conflict accuracy when compared to individual beliefs. While this finding is not fully consistent with our predictions, it has important practical implications for the management of conflict in teams. Specifically, managers are likely to have some influence over the interpersonal relationships between peers. Furthermore, managers are likely to have considerable influence over task-related network structures. Thus, our findings suggest that conflict accuracy is a phenomenon that can be influenced, at least to some degree, by managerial decisions and actions.

Our rationale for selecting each of the independent variables was based on an effort to examine factors that operate at different levels of analysis. Thus, we examined individual-level beliefs, interpersonal dynamics, and the structural position within a team. It is worth noting that each of our explanatory variables also represents broader categories of accuracy-related factors that should be explored in future research. Conflict beliefs represent the role that individual beliefs or ideologies play in affecting conflict accuracy. Conflict with others captures a key dimension of the relational dynamics between the perceiver and the work around her. More specifically, this variable allows us to examine a factor that likely constrains available accuracy resources. Finally, network centrality allows us to capture the role that access to social information plays in explaining conflict accuracy. Each of these broader categories, namely beliefs, resource constraints, and access to information, is likely to yield additional factors that can help explain conflict accuracy variation and should be explored in future research.

Third, we have demonstrated that examining conflict at the dyadic level is meaningful and captures important evidence regarding individuals' perceptions of conflict. When measuring conflict, traditional constructs capture general levels and amounts of this social phenomenon. These measures do not, however, capture or identify actual dyad-level conflict, which can be seen as the core interpersonal nucleus of a team's conflict. Perceptions of overall team conflict are, arguably, a respondent's aggregation of perceived dyadic conflict present in a group or team. Dyadic conflict is, therefore, the building block on which a general conflict climate is developed. Nevertheless, this level of analysis has been almost entirely absent from the contemporary study of conflict (for a similar argument, see Korsgaard et al., 2008). It is not surprising, therefore, that the question of accuracy of conflict judgments has received little if any scholarly attention. By focusing on actual dyadic conflict between team members, we were able to demonstrate when and why some individuals are more accurate at identifying actual conflict. This analysis would not have been possible using traditional climate-based measures of group conflict. This suggests that alongside the use of traditional conflict climate measures, researchers should also study specific conflict between individual team members.

Fourth, it is interesting to note that relationship and task conflict accuracy varied in the extent to which they were influenced by each of the factors studied. Beliefs about conflict showed evidence of affecting relationship conflict accuracy and not task conflict accuracy, whereas network centrality explained task conflict accuracy but not relationship conflict accuracy. We believe that this evidence sheds new light on an old debate, namely the extent to which these two types of conflict are, in fact, separate and distinguishable. This variation in the type of conflict accuracy predicted suggests that these are, in fact, distinct forms of conflict and that they are identified and perceived differently by individuals.

Our article is not without its limitations. First, although the number of dyads examined in this study is rather large, the number of teams and team members is relatively small. Second, our sample consisted of science-based teams. Although we believe that the context and substance of these teams was similar to other general settings and that understanding conflict dynamics in science-based teams is a contribution in its own right, there may be questions about the generalizability of our findings. Third, the focus of this study is on accuracy in general; we do not differentiate between conflict overestimation (imagining conflict that does not exist) and conflict underestimation (not recognizing conflict that is present). The purpose

of this article was to introduce the concept of conflict accuracy and to document individual variation in accurately detecting conflict. Future research should examine differences between overestimating versus underestimating conflict and factors that may influence individuals' likelihood of doing either. Fourth, we operationalized conflict as existing as long as one of the members acknowledged it. This is consistent with how we and others (Thomas, 1976; Wall & Callister, 1995) conceptualize dyadic conflict, but future studies may wish to take a more nuanced look at the mutual acknowledgment of the conflict and its effect on third-party accuracy. For instance, in situations where both dyad members report the conflict, the conflict may be more visible to third-party members and lead to more accurate perceptions. Overall, however, we believe that the strengths of our methods and results outweigh these possible limitations.

This study also highlights the need for additional research. For example, our findings support direct relationships between each of the three factors examined and team member conflict accuracy. More research needs to be conducted, however, to tease out the mechanisms through which conflict accuracy is affected. Our article proposes a number of possible mechanisms, such as access to information and cognitive overload. Future research should empirically test these proposed mechanisms. Second, our article examines three important factors that influence conflict accuracy. This is clearly not an exhaustive list of accuracy antecedents. Future research should expand the set of factors examined in this context. Finally, in this study, we examine conflict accuracy as an outcome variable. Conflict accuracy is also likely to affect other variables. Thus, alongside the study of accuracy predictors, it will be important to also assess the extent to which conflict accuracy affects individual, team, and organizational outcomes, such as satisfaction, team cohesiveness, and performance.

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