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Conflict Style Associations with Cooperativeness, Directness, and Relational Satisfaction: A Case for a Six-Style Typology

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Abstract

Past research has been inconsistent in identifying the number and type of conflict styles individuals perceive themselves to use. Many typologies of conflict styles are built on the premise that level of cooperation versus competition, as well as directness versus indirectness, underlie various conflict styles. Grounded in a communication perspective, the present study uses dyadic data from 256 romantic couples to examine how self-reported tendencies to use each of six conflict styles—collaborating, compromising, competitive fighting, yielding, avoiding, and indirect fighting—associate with how (un)cooperative and (in)direct partners generally perceive actors to be during conflict, as well as how relationally satisfied both members of the dyad are. The associations that emerged suggest each of the six styles has a unique profile, that a comprehensive typology of conflict styles should include indirect fighting as well as a more neutral avoiding style, and that compromising is a weak form of collaborating that is lower in cooperativeness and directness.

Conflict, which has been defined as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017, p. 9), is an inherent part of any close relationship. Indeed, conflict is usually present in people's most significant and satisfying relationships (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). The presence of conflict, however, may not be as important as how conflict is managed. When conflict is managed ineffectively, couples are more likely to be dissatisfied with their relationships (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Poorly managed conflict also has a negative effect on individuals' mental (Choi & Marks, 2008; Marchand & Hock, 2009) and physical (Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003) health, which highlights conflict management as an important area of study with practical implications.

To discover how people manage conflict, scholars have identified various conflict styles (Canary et al., 1995). A conflict style reflects an individual's preferences, behavioral tendencies, and habits in relation to managing conflict. For over half a century, scholars have examined how conflict styles function in personal and professional relationships. Much of this research underscores that certain conflict styles are likely perceived as more cooperative or direct than others. Yet scholars have not yet reached a consensus regarding which of several existing typologies best represents these two dimensions. The present study investigates this issue by determining how the six styles from the Communication Conflict Style Typology (CCST; Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2014; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; see also van der Vliert, 1997)—collaborating, compromising, competitive fighting, yielding, avoiding, and indirect fighting—associate

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with cooperativeness, directness, and relational satisfaction within romantic dyads. Specifically, this study uses dyadic data from romantic couples to examine: (a) whether the extent that partners rate an actor as cooperative and direct is related to the conflict styles that the actor reports using; and (b) whether there are actor and partner effects for conflict style on relational satisfaction. In doing so, this study helps clarify how various styles fit along continua representing cooperativeness and directness as well as how they are differentially associated with relational satisfaction.

Conflict Styles: Cooperativeness and Directness

Scholars are still debating how to best conceptualize and operationalize conflict styles. Some researchers view conflict styles as dynamic communication patterns (Moberg, 2001), whereas others define them as predispositions determined by stable traits (Shell, 2001). Contemporary thinking suggests conflict styles represent both dynamic interaction patterns and behavioral predispositions to some extent, but perhaps most importantly, they represent people's likely communication during conflict interaction (Thomas, 2006). When individuals enter conflict episodes, they have a natural tendency to act and react in certain ways, but episodic and cognitive factors, such as their own goals and how their partner acts, also influence their behavior. Within relationships, considerable research suggests that romantic dyads often engage in habitual conflict behavior (Gottman, 1994). Thus, individuals likely identify with a conflict style or styles that characterize how they typically communicate during a disagreement with a particular partner. In line with this thinking, the present study takes a communication perspective, conceptualizing conflict styles as distinguishable based on observable characteristics such as how cooperative and direct an actor typically is during conflict situations. Most individuals' conflict styles likely fall within a range since they are affected by both their own behavioral predispositions and contextual factors.

There is a long history of research focused on identifying ways people act when in conflict situations, with these actions described variously as strategies, styles, modes, or behaviors. In a seminal study, Blake and Mouton (1964) applied their managerial grid to conflict, positing that concern for production and concern for people (or interpersonal relationships) lead people to handle conflict in five different ways: problem-solving (concern for people and production), sharing/compromising (medium concern for people and production), forcing (low concern for people, high concern for production), smoothing (high concern for people, low concern for production), and withdrawing (low concern for people and production). Thomas and Kilmann (1974; see also Thomas, 2006) extended the managerial grid to social situations by proposing that modes of conflict are rooted in how cooperative and assertive people are, with cooperativeness reflecting the intent to satisfy the partner's needs, and assertiveness reflecting the intent to satisfy one's own needs. Similar to the managerial grid, five modes of conflict emerged: collaborating (cooperative, assertive), compromising (moderately cooperative and assertive), competing (uncooperative, assertive), accommodating (cooperative, unassertive), and avoiding (uncooperative, unassertive). Although the strategies or modes in these two systems are similar, the mechanisms underlying them differ. In the managerial grid, concerns or goals about people and production are theorized to cause people to enact different conflict strategies. The conflict-handling modes, on the other hand, are descriptive rather than causal. Indeed, Thomas (1988) called his two-dimensional model of conflict modes a pure taxonomy rather than a causal model. He further noted that the dimensions represent strategic intentions that occur during the course of conflict.

Other models of conflict have been rooted in either causation or description. Two of the most popular causal models are Rahim's (1983; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979) Organizational Conflict Inventory and Pruitt's (1983, Pruitt & Rubin, 1986) dual concern model. The Organizational Conflict Inventory identifies five conflict strategies, similar to those identified earlier, based on dimensions representing the degree to which people wish to satisfy their concerns for self and other: integrating (high concern for other and self), compromising (moderate concern for other and self), dominating (low concern for other, high concern for self), obliging (high concern for other, low concern for self), and avoiding (low concern for

other and self). In the dual concern model (Pruitt, 1983), the extent to which people are concerned about their own versus their partner's needs during conflict produces one of four conflict behaviors: problem-solving (concern for both), contending (concern for self), yielding (concern for other), or inaction (concern for neither). Compromising is not included as its own style since Pruitt (1983) believed it was a weak form of problem-solving.

Several descriptive models have been proposed. Sillars' (1980) early work focused on three communicative strategies people use during interpersonal conflict situations—integrative (a prosocial strategy that involves working together to fulfill mutual goals), distributive (an antisocial strategy that involves competing against someone to fulfill individual goals), and avoidant (a strategy that involves minimizing communication). Within an organizational setting, Putnam and Wilson (1982) developed three similar strategies: solution-oriented (communication that involves looking for solutions that are integrative and creative), control (communication that involves persistently arguing for one's own position), and nonconfrontational (avoiding communication and downplaying issues). Although these three-category typologies are largely descriptive, they are tied to the desired and expected outcomes of a given conflict episode in line with an integration versus distribution dimension (Putnam, 1990; van de Vliert & Euwema, 1994). Integrative conflict maximizes chances both people will reach their goals, whereas distributive conflict maximizes chances one person will reach goals at the expense of the other.

Other descriptive typologies have focused on the communication characteristics associated with conflict styles rather than their causes or outcomes. Sillars and Canary (Canary, 2003; Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004) proposed four styles based on how cooperative and direct a person's communication is during conflict: collaborating (cooperative, direct); direct fighting (uncooperative, direct); accommodating (cooperative, indirect); and indirect fighting (uncooperative, indirect). Canary (2003) described these four styles as distinguishable by observable communication patterns that could be assessed using his DINN (Direct-Indirect, Nasty-Nice). Another descriptive typology had been developed previously by van der Vliert (1997) and van de Vliert and Euwema (1994). These scholars saw a need for a meta-taxonomy showing "rules of correspondence between major modes of conflict behavior in terms of common factors" and argued that agreeableness and activeness were "very appropriate factors for describing and comparing modes of conflict handling" (p. 674). To provide empirical support for this assumption, Dutch police sergeants role-played a conflict situation and observers rated their behavior. Results demonstrated that six modes of conflict—problem-solving, compromising, direct fighting, accommodating, avoiding, and indirect fighting—could be distinguished based on how agreeable and active each style was. Finally, Davis and his colleagues (Davis, Capobianco, & Kraus, 2004; Davis, Schoenfeld, & Flores, 2018) developed a behavior-based measure of conflict, the Conflict Dynamics Profile, which comprises 15 subscales that fall under four domains: active-constructive (e.g., creating solutions, perspective taking); passive-constructive (e.g., reflective thinking, delay responding); active-destructive (e.g., demeaning others, retaliating); and passive-destructive (avoiding, yielding).

Because there are various systems for measuring conflict styles, comparing findings across systems can be complicated. Yet, there are obvious similarities among these typologies. They all include a style defined as *cooperative and direct*. This style has been labeled collaborating, problem-solving, and integrative in different systems. Every typology also includes a style considered *uncooperative and direct* (with labels such as competing, dominating, direct fighting, contending, and distributive), and *cooperative and indirect* (with labels such as yielding, obliging, compliance, and accommodating). Scholars also tend to agree that compromising is moderately cooperative and moderately direct (Blake & Mouton, 1964; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Rahim, 1983, 1990). There is debate, however, on whether compromising is a distinct style, a hybrid of the yielding and collaborative styles, or a specific form of problem-solving (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). van de Vliert and Hordijk (1989) argued that despite producing outcomes similar to collaborating and yielding, compromising is distinct from other styles. They also suggested that instead of being located in the center of a grid that places the other four conflict styles in the corners, compromising should be positioned closer to collaborating and yielding.

Another debatable issue in the conflict style literature centers on whether the avoiding style is uncooperative or neutral. Some scholars use the term "avoiding" (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983, 1990) or "withdrawal" (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Kurdek, 1995) to refer to a conflict style that is uncooperative and indirect. Other scholars use the term "avoiding" to represent a neutral style that can be either cooperative or uncooperative depending on the situation (Roloff & Ifert, 2000), and the term "indirect fighting" for a style that is competitive and indirect (Sillars et al., 2004; van der Vliert, 1997). In the Conflict Dynamics Profile, both avoiding and yielding are considered indirect and uncooperative.

To help resolve these discrepancies and create a more comprehensive model, Guerrero et al. (2014) presented the CCST as a descriptive tool, which like other typologies before it, is based on the underlying dimensions of cooperativeness and directness (see Figure 1). This typology was utilized by La Valley and Guerrero (2012) and is consistent with van der Vliert (1997) work, which showed that the six styles he examined—problem-solving, compromising, avoiding, accommodating, direct fighting, and indirect fighting—could be distinguished based on how disagreeable and active each style was. Similar to van de Vliert's typology, the CCST is descriptive. The dimensions underlying the six styles—levels of cooperativeness and directness—represent interpretations of the communication an individual engages in during conflict. As van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) argued, intentions and motivations may guide conflict behavior, but they represent cognitive processes that vary greatly in the extent to which they are reflected in behavior. Rather than trying to see inside people's minds, the CCST typology classifies conflict styles based on the observable characteristics of cooperativeness and directness.

As noted above, scholars have developed various typologies to describe or predict conflict behavior. The CCST is unique in terms of measuring six styles. Thus, rather than choosing a mix of subscales from different measures to assess the six different conflict styles described herein, this study uses the CCST to provide an initial test of how all six styles vary in terms of their associations with cooperativeness, directness, and relational satisfaction. Using the CCST was a reasonable choice given that in many of the other typologies, avoiding and indirect fighting are not distinguished from each other, and/or compromising is not included.

Within the CCST, three styles involve direct communication. Directness refers to the extent to which individuals talk directly about issues, express their opinions, and pursue their goals. The three direct styles—collaborating, compromising, and competitive fighting—should vary in terms of how

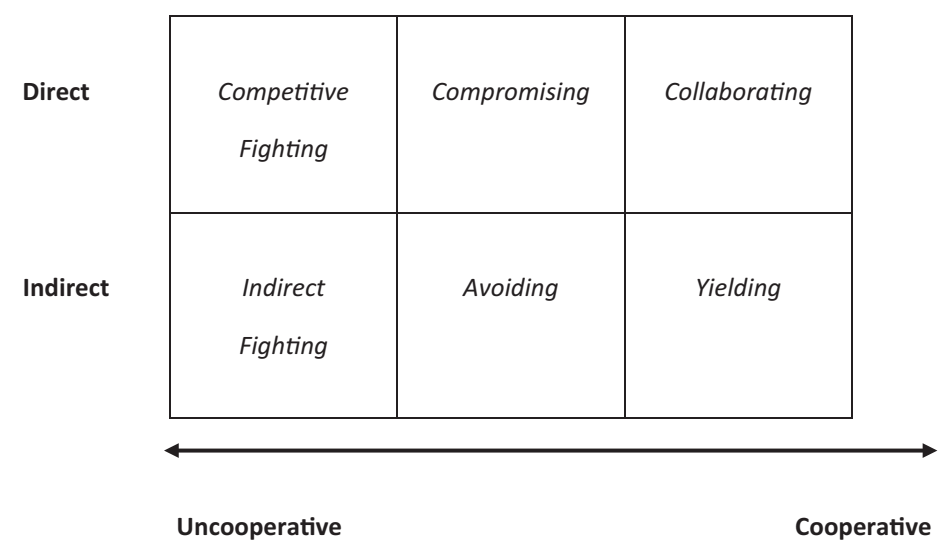

Figure 1. Conflict styles (from Guerrero et al., 2014).

cooperative they are judged to be. *Collaborating* (or problem-solving) is the style likely seen as most cooperative. Active listening, brainstorming, creative solutions, information exchange, social support, and validating comments are the hallmarks of this style (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992; Sillars et al., 2004). *Compromising* involves pursuing mutually acceptable solutions that involve both partners making concessions to obtain some of their goals (van der Vliert, 1997). Although compromising requires some cooperation, both partners are still more invested in reaching their own goals than their partner's goals. Thus, compromising is unlikely to be related to cooperativeness as strongly as collaborating. Finally, *competitive fighting* (or direct fighting) is a direct style that focuses on winning the argument to obtain one's own needs with little or no regard for the needs of the partner. As such, competitive fighting typically involves using threats, insults, and other negative communicative behaviors.

The CCST also includes three styles that involve indirect communication: yielding, avoiding, and indirect fighting. These styles are indirect because they involve a lack of communication, a lack of assertion, or a passive means of communicating. *Yielding* (or accommodating) is highly cooperative because it occurs when one individual makes concessions and lets the other partner get her or his way (Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992). *Avoiding* is a disengaging strategy that involves avoiding the issue at hand by denying or refusing to communicate about a particular topic (Wilmot & Hocker, 2017). Avoiding can be beneficial in certain situations, such as agreeing to disagree or taking a break from talking about something when one is emotionally heated. Other times, avoiding can prevent a problem from being solved. This is why avoiding is represented as neutral rather than clearly cooperative or uncooperative in Figure 1. *Indirect fighting* is a passive-aggressive style (van der Vliert, 1997), which is often enacted through hostile nonverbal behaviors such as ignoring one's partner, giving cold and dirty looks, and withdrawing affection (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012; Sillars et al., 2004).

These six styles represent the gamut of distinct conflict styles scholars have identified based on variations in cooperativeness and directness or similar underlying dimensions (such as concern for others' goals vs. one's own goals). In line with this descriptive model, van der Vliert (1997) demonstrated that yielding (or accommodating) and problem-solving (or collaborating) were perceived as the most cooperative styles. Collaborating, compromising, and competitive (or direct) fighting styles were perceived as the most active (in that order), whereas avoiding, yielding, and indirect fighting styles were perceived as the least active (also in that order).

The present study attempts to replicate and extend van der Vliert (1997) findings using the CCST in the context of personal relationships with a different methodology (e.g., examining whether people's self-reported conflict styles are associated with how cooperative and direct their partners view them). In addition, this study adds the component of relational satisfaction. Based on the conceptualizations of the various conflict styles within the CCST (see Figure 1), their predicted positions on dimensions of cooperativeness and directness, and their likely relationships with each other based on those positions, the following hypotheses and questions are advanced:

H1: Partners rate an actor as cooperative during conflict to the extent that the actor reports using (a) high levels of collaborating, (b) high levels of yielding, (c) low levels of indirect fighting, and (d) low levels of competitive fighting.

R1: Are partners more (or less) likely to rate an actor as cooperative during conflict if the actor reports using the (a) compromising or (b) avoiding style?

H2: Partners rate an actor as direct during conflict to the extent that the actor reports using (a) high levels of collaborating, (b) high levels of compromising, (c) high levels of competitive fighting, (d) low levels of yielding, (e) low levels of avoiding, and (f) low levels of indirect fighting.

H3: The cooperative styles of collaborating and yielding are positively correlated.

H4: The competitive styles of indirect fighting and competitive fighting are positively correlated.

H5: The opposite styles of (a) competitive fighting and yielding and (b) collaborating and indirect fighting are inversely correlated.

Conflict Styles and Relational Satisfaction

A next logical step is to determine whether the six styles vary in terms of their associations with relational satisfaction. Indeed, an underlying assumption in much of the literature on conflict styles is that, in most cases, cooperative styles produce and reflect more relational satisfaction than competitive styles. In other words, people in satisfying relationship likely cooperate more, and cooperation likely also fosters satisfaction. In support of this, considerable literature has shown that cooperative conflict styles such as collaborating are associated with relational satisfaction (Greeff & De Bruyne, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pike & Sillars, 1985) and that using cooperative messages helps individuals manage conflict in healthier ways (Canary et al., 1995). Gottman's (1994) research suggests that stable relationships include a higher proportion of positive communicative behaviors (e.g., cooperative conflict) than negative communicative behaviors (e.g., competitive conflict). Other scholars have demonstrated that couples report having higher quality relationships when wives are supportive toward their husbands when discussing problems (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Furthermore, people's perceptions of their own use of cooperative conflict styles (such as the collaborating style) associate with relational satisfaction in romantic dyads (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) as well as parent-child dyads (La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). Cooperative behaviors help couples address issues when conflict arises, and this may help couples maintain a satisfying relationship and avoid breakup or divorce (Weiss & Heyman, 1990).

On the other hand, competitive conflict styles are associated with relational dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Marchand & Hock, 2009). Certain patterns of conflict behavior, including sequences involving demand and withdrawal (Heavey et al., 1995) and criticism, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1994) are especially destructive. Spouses who report poor conflict management skills and resort to strategies such as withdrawal are less satisfied in their marriages than spouses who report using more constructive conflict styles (Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009). Further, research suggests that individuals who are satisfied in their relationships refrain from using uncooperative conflict behaviors such as coercion, manipulation, blaming, criticizing, and aggression (Gottman, 1994). Over time, couples who report using these types of uncooperative behaviors are more likely to find themselves stuck in negative communication patterns such as withdraw-demand, which often lead to relationship deterioration (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Although the literature linking conflict styles to relational satisfaction is impressive, Segrin et al. (2009) noted that "dyadic analyses of habitual conflict styles and couples' satisfaction" are relatively rare (p. 209). Exceptions to this include their own study, as well as work by Kurdek (1995) and Acitelli, Douvan, and Veroff (1993). Acitelli et al. (1993) used a dyadic perspective to investigate constructive versus destructive conflict styles within newlywed couples. Constructive responses included calmly discussing the problem, listening to each other, and compromising. Destructive responses included yelling at, insulting, and threatening one's partner. Acitelli et al. found that people's perceptions of each other's destructive conflict behavior were more accurate than their perceptions of each other's constructive conflict behavior, perhaps because constructive conflict behaviors are less memorable and go unnoticed more often than destructive conflict behaviors. For wives, having an accurate understanding of their husband's behavior was the best predictor of marital satisfaction. In contrast, for husbands, their own and their wives' reports of conflict behavior were the strongest predictors of satisfaction.

Kurdek's (1995) study examined three specific conflict styles—negative engagement[1] (e.g., yelling and getting out of control), withdrawal (e.g., shutting down and refusing to talk), and compliance (e.g., passively giving in and not sticking up for oneself)—to determine whether these styles were linked to

[1]Kurdek used the term "engagement" rather than "negative engagement" in his work. We have used the term negative engagement here to differentiate this concept from other types of engagement, such as engaging in problem-solving or collaborating behavior.

changes in marital satisfaction over a two-year period. Couples reported less satisfaction when the wife reported using negative engagement and the husband reported using withdrawal, which suggests that patterns of demand and withdrawal can indeed decrease martial satisfaction. Wives also reported being less satisfied in their marriages if they used withdrawal, regardless of which styles their husband reported using.

Segrin et al. examined the same three conflict styles as Kurdek plus problem-solving. They examined actor and partner effects for each of these styles on marital satisfaction separately. One's own and one's partner's reports of negative engagement and withdrawal were inversely associated with satisfaction for both husbands and wives. A sex difference emerged for problem-solving: Husbands were more satisfied when both they and their wives' reported using the problem-solving style, but wives' satisfaction levels were only associated with their own reports of problem-solving and not their husband's. Both husbands and wives reported being more satisfied if they used less compliance, regardless of the amount of compliance their spouse used.

The present study extends this line of research. First, six conflict styles that represent different levels of cooperativeness and directness are investigated. Therefore, the current study provides a more comprehensive view of how different conflict styles associate with satisfaction in ways that reflect particular combinations of cooperation (vs. competition) and directness (vs. indirectness). If differences among the styles emerge for satisfaction, such findings would provide additional evidence concerning how the six styles vary. Second, the present investigation examines how all the styles work together to predict relational satisfaction. This type of test reflects how conflict styles function in real life since individuals are not limited to using only one style during a given conflict episode or within a particular relationship. Third, the present study checks for interactions between actor and partner effects in addition to looking for main effects. As work on the demand-withdrawal sequence suggests (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Schrodt, Witt, & Shimkowski, 2014), partners' styles can combine in ways that are associated with relational satisfaction. Based on this reasoning and the previously reviewed literature, the following hypotheses and research questions are advanced:

H6: There are *actor effects* such that individuals within dyads report more relational satisfaction when they perceive themselves to use high levels of (a) collaborating and (b) compromising, and low levels of (c) indirect fighting and (d) competitive fighting.

H7: There are *partner effects* such that individuals within dyads report more relational satisfaction when they perceive their partner to use high levels of (a) collaborating and (b) compromising, and low levels of (c) indirect fighting and (d) competitive fighting.

R2: Are there actor or partner effects for avoiding and/or yielding on relational satisfaction?

R3: Do actor and/or partner reported conflict styles interact to predict relational satisfaction?

R4: Do sex (male vs. male) or relationship stage (married, cohabiting, dating) moderate any of the effects for conflict style on relational satisfaction?

Method

Undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a university in the Southwestern United States were invited to participate in an anonymous online study in exchange for extra credit. Students in these courses represented a variety of majors, but were primarily business, communication, and interdisciplinary studies students. The vast majority were juniors or seniors. To qualify for the study, students had to currently be in a romantic relationship that had lasted at least six months. Eligible students were invited to complete the online survey themselves and then have their partners (who were a more diverse group in terms of majors and class standing) complete the same survey independently. Those who were not currently in a relationship that had lasted at least six months were asked to recruit a dating or (preferably) married couple they knew to participate in the study and secure them extra credit in their

course. Surveys were posted on class websites via Blackboard. At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to write down the last four digits of their cell phone and their partner's cell phone. This information was used to match up surveys later.

This procedure resulted in 512 usable questionnaires from 256 couples after surveys that could not be matched (n = 27) were discarded. All participants in the matched dyads reported they were currently in a heterosexual romantic relationship that had lasted at least six months (although being straight was not listed as a condition for participation). Individuals within the dyads classified themselves as "dating" (n = 91), "seriously dating" (n = 294), "cohabiting but not married" (n = 27), and "married" (n = 100). The average age across all participants was 25.53 years old (SD = 8.12). Individuals reported their ethnic backgrounds as primarily White (n = 432), Mexican or Latin American (n = 34), African American (n = 20), Asian American (n = 11) biracial (n = 9), Native American (n = 2), and other (n = 4).

Measurement

Conflict Styles

Conflict styles were measured using the six-style conflict management typology developed by Guerrero and her colleagues (Guerrero et al., 2014; La Valley & Guerrero, 2012). Participants were asked to think about a significant conflict or conflicts they had with their partner over the past six months and to reflect upon how they tended to communicate during those conflict episodes. They then responded to a 30-item scale that includes 5-item subscales for each of the following conflict styles: collaborating (e.g., "I attempt to work with my partner to find a creative solution we both like"); compromising (e.g., "I try to meet my partner halfway"); competitive fighting (e.g., "Sometimes I criticize my partner to show that he or she is wrong"); yielding (e.g., "If the issue is important to my partner, I usually give in"); avoiding (e.g., "I avoid talking with my partner about issues of disagreement"); and indirect fighting (e.g., "I am likely to give my partner cold or dirty looks as a way of expressing disagreement"). The items within each of these subscales are measured on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*). Means, standard deviations, reliabilities, and paired t-tests (female vs. male) relevant to these six conflict style measures, as well as the other measures used in this study, are displayed in Table 1.

Cooperativeness and Directness

Items (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*) were developed to measure perceptions of a partner's general levels of cooperativeness and directness without referring to specific conflict styles. Items were modeled after definitions of cooperativeness and directness found in the conflict literature (Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1973; Rahim, 1983; Wilmot & Hocker, 2017). Cooperativeness was measured using the following five items: "My partner is cooperative during disagreements with me," "My partner helps me meet my goals if we disagree about something," "In a conflict situation, my partner acts in ways that facilitate me meeting my goals," "My partner is supportive even when we disagree," and "When we get into a conflict, my partner shows me that s/he is willing to cooperate with me." Directness was also measured with five items: "My partner readily expresses her/his thoughts when we disagree about something," "My partner communicates with me in a direct manner when we are engaged in conflict," "My partner tells me what she or he is thinking when we don't agree about something," "In a conflict situation, my partner uses direct communication to try and achieve goals," and "When we disagree, my partner is assertive in telling me what he or she wants." (See Table 1 for reliabilities for each of these scales.)

Relational Satisfaction

The degree to which individuals within dyads were satisfied with their relationships was measured using the five positively worded items from Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale (e.g., "In general,

Table 1
Alpha Reliability Coefficients, Within-Dyad Correlations, Means and (Standard Deviations) for All Variables of Interest

Variable	α	*r*	Female *M* (*SD*)	Male *M* (*SD*)
Collaborating (SR)	.91	.35***	4.85 (1.19)	4.84 (1.17)
Compromising (SR)	.86	.20***	4.69 (0.95)	4.76 (0.98)
Yielding (SR)	.77	.14**	4.13 (1.16)	4.03 (1.03)
Competitive fighting (SR)	.91	.39***	3.04 (1.27)	3.10 (1.29)
Avoiding (SR)	.83	−.02	3.73 (1.57)	3.68 (1.52)
Indirect fighting (SR)	.74	.30***	3.57 (1.42)	3.48 (1.31)
Cooperativeness (PP)	.83	.22***	4.57 (0.91)	4.53 (0.96)
Directness (PP)	.87	.08	4.31 (0.71)	4.30 (0.66)
Relational satisfaction (SR)	.92	.46***	5.61 (1.15)	5.64 (1.16)

Note. Reliabilities represent the average when the mean reliability for females and the mean reliability for males were summed and divided by two. Variables followed by SR indicate a self-report, whereas variables followed by PP indicate that participants reported their perceptions of their partner. Thus, respondents reported their own level of relational satisfaction and their own use of the six conflict styles but rated the degree to which their partner is generally cooperative and direct during conflict situations.
***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$, two-tailed.

I'm satisfied with my relationship with my partner," "Our relationship is good compared to most"). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

Nonindependence is often an issue when analyzing dyadic data. Since dyadic partners were distinguishable from one another by sex (male vs. female), the level of nonindependence was assessed using Pearson correlations, as recommended by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006). As shown in Table 1, for all variables except avoiding and directness, partners' scores within dyads were correlated, making a dyadic analysis using either a full or partial Actor-Partner Interdependence Model appropriate (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010; Kenny et al., 2006). Multilevel modeling was conducted with restricted maximum likelihood estimation using IBM SPSS Version 23.

Conflict Styles and Cooperativeness

To address H1 and R1, multi-leveling modeling tested the associations between actors' self-reported conflict styles (the predictor variables) and their partners' perceptions that they were cooperative (the dependent variable). Recall that participants completed scales measuring their own conflict styles and their perceptions of the extent to which their partner tends to be cooperative during disagreements. Thus, this analysis tested to see if actors' self-reported conflict styles associated with how cooperative their partner reported them to be. The analysis did not include examining how actors' self-reported conflict styles associated with how cooperative they reported their partners to be.[2] However, because it was still important to control for interdependence between partners, a partial Actor-Partner Interdependence model was conducted. This model accounted for approximately 58 percent of the variability in perceptions that an individual is cooperative. In line with H1, the model showed that actors who reported using high

[2]Although not expected, a full Actor-Partner Interdependence Model was conducted to rule out the possibility that effects would occur for associations among individual's reports of their own conflict style and their partner's level of cooperativeness. These effects were nonsignificant.

levels of collaborating, $\beta = .48$, $t(233) = 64.37$, $p < .001$, high levels of yielding, $\beta = .50$, $t(240) = 72.11$, $p < .001$, low levels of indirect fighting, $\beta = -.27$, $t(231) = 34.17$, $p < .001$, and low levels of competitive fighting, $\beta = -.14$, $t(233) = -2.31$, $p < .05$, tended to be rated as cooperative by their partner.[2] Thus, H1 was fully supported. In response to R1, the model showed that neither avoiding, $\beta = -.01$, $t(232) = -.83$, $p > .05$, nor compromising, $\beta = .08$, $t(235) = 1.86$, $p > .05$, were significantly associated with perceptions of cooperativeness.

Conflict Styles and Directness

H2 predicted that people would rate their partners as more direct to the extent that their partner reported using high levels of the collaborating, compromising, and competitive fighting styles and low levels of the yielding, avoiding, and indirect fighting styles. Thus, multilevel modeling was used to determine whether actor reports of conflict styles (the predictor variables) were associated with how direct their partners perceived actors to be (the dependent variable). The model, which accounted for approximately 41 percent of the variability in perceptions of directness, fully supported H2. When actors reported using high levels of collaborating, $\beta = .25$, $t(227) = 30.46$, $p < .001$, compromising, $\beta = .18$, $t(228) = 16.50$, $p < .001$, and competitive fighting ($\beta = .17$, $t(227) = 11.90$ $p < .001$), their partners tended to be rate them as direct; however, when actors reported using high levels of yielding, $\beta = -.25$, $t(232) = -33.00$, $p < .001$, avoiding, $\beta = -.13$, $t(227) = -23.36$, $p < .001$, and indirect fighting, $\beta = -.17$, $t(225) = -16.50$, $p < .001$, their partners tended to rated them as indirect.

Correlations among Conflict Styles

The next set of hypotheses predicted that the two cooperative conflict styles (H3) and the two competitive conflict styles (H4) would be positively correlated. As shown in Table 2, collaborating and yielding were positively correlated, in support of H3. Competitive fighting and indirect fighting also showed a direct correlation, thereby supporting H4. H5 predicted that the opposite styles (in terms of predicted positions on the dimensions of cooperativeness and directness) would be inversely related. Consistent with this hypothesis, collaborating and indirect fighting were negatively correlated, as were competitive fighting and yielding. To better visualize how the various conflict styles were related to one another and to cooperativeness and directness, correlations were also plotted based on their associations with these two dimensions, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, following Van de Vliert and Kabanoff (1990), a Spearman rank correlation was computed to compare the theorized distances between correlations shown in Figure 1 and the Euclidian distances shown in Figure 2. The resulting Spearman correlation of .726 ($p < .01$) provides evidence that the CCST has theory-based validity given that there was a significant degree of similarity between the pattern of associations predicted among the conflict styles and those that emerged from the data (see Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990, for more information regarding this validity test).

Conflict Styles and Relational Satisfaction

An Actor-Partner Interdependence Model tested the final hypotheses and research questions by determining if there were significant actor (H6) and partner (H7) effects for conflict styles on relational satisfaction. Thus, the dependent measure was relational satisfaction, and the individual variables were actor and partner reports of the six conflict styles. Sex was also entered as a repeated variable in the analysis, and relational stage (dating, seriously dating, cohabiting but not married, and married) was entered as covariate. Before checking for main effects related to actor and partner reports of conflict style, all possible two-way interactions were tested in three waves (i.e., actor by partner, actor by actor, and partner by

Table 2
Correlations among Actor Perceptions of their own Conflict Styles

	2	3	4	5	6
1. Collaborating	.30***	.22***	−.24***	.07	−.33***
2. Compromising		.36***	−.06	.17**	−.27***
3. Yielding			−.37***	.19**	.02
4. Competitive fighting				.24***	.44***
5. Avoiding					.22***
6. Indirect fighting					–

Note. ***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$, two-tailed.

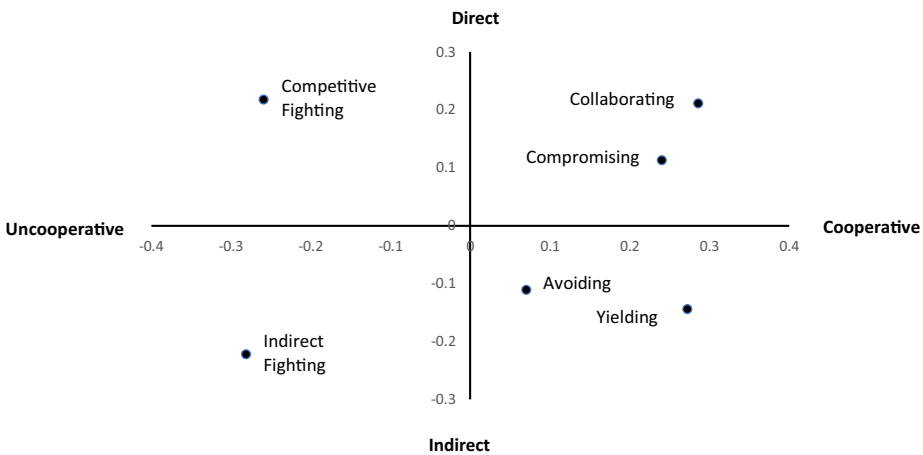

Figure 2. Plotted correlations between conflict styles and the dimensions of cooperativeness and directness.
Note. Coordinates represent the correlations for each conflict style with the two underlying dimensions (cooperativeness, directness), as follows: collaborating (.286, .211), indirect fighting (−.281, −.222), avoiding (.070, −.111), compromising (.240, .113), competitive fighting (−.259, .218), and yielding (.272, −.144).

partner) to test R3. The significant interactions from these analyses were then included in an initial model along with all potential main effects. A final re-parameterized model that included only the significant effects was then conducted. As reported in Table 3, three interactions were significant within this final model: Actor reports of the avoiding style interacted with partner reports of indirect fighting (see Figure 3); actor reports of avoiding interacted with partner reports of competitive fighting (see Figure 4); and actor reports of collaborating interacted with actor reports of the competitive fighting style (see Figure 5). The final model that included these interaction effects as well as the main effects for partner and actor accounted for approximately 38 percent of the variability in relational satisfaction.

Significant main effects are displayed in Table 3. In partial support of H3, there were significant actor effects for three of the four predictors. Specifically, individuals who perceived themselves to use high levels of collaborating and compromising, as well as low levels of indirect fighting, reported more relational satisfaction. The actor effect for competitive fighting was not significant. H4, which focused on partner effects, also garnered partial support, with three out of four predictions supported. Individuals reported more relational satisfaction when their partners perceived themselves as using high levels of collaborating and compromising, and low levels of competitive fighting. The partner effect for indirect fighting was not significant. The differences between the actor and partner effects for collaborating and

Table 3
Summary of Actor-Partner Interdependence Model Analysis Predicting Actor Relational Satisfaction from Actor and Partner Conflict Styles

Independent variable	Estimate	*t*
Actor collaborating	.26	5.72***
Actor compromising	.21	3.81***
Actor indirect fighting	−.18	−2.68**
Partner collaborating	.23	3.68***
Partner compromising	.15	2.24*
Partner competitive fighting	−.15	2.05*
Actor avoiding by partner indirect fighting	−.19	−4.76***
Actor avoiding by partner competitive fighting	−.14	−2.72**
Actor collaborating by actor competitive fighting	−.18	−2.28*

Note. ***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$, two-tailed. Only the significant predictor variables are listed.

compromising were nonsignificant. In response to R2, there were no significant actor or partner effects for avoiding or yielding on relational satisfaction.

The final research question (R4) addressed possible moderating effects for sex or relational stage. For all the significant findings, sex and relational stage were entered in separate models as possible moderators (by creating the appropriate interaction terms). Results suggest that neither sex nor relational stage interacted with any of the other effects. Thus, the answer to R4 was no. The main effects for sex and relational stage were also nonsignificant within the model, as were *t*-tests that compared men's and women's scores within each dyad (see Table 1).

Discussion

This study investigated how actors' self-reported conflict styles are associated with partner perceptions that an actor acts in a (un)cooperative and (in)direct manner during conflict interactions. The present study also examined how actors' and partners' self-reported conflict styles associate with relational satisfaction. As such, this study helped clarify how the six styles proposed by Guerrero et al. (2014) and van der Vliert (1997) associate with cooperativeness, directness, and satisfaction within the context of romantic relationships. Importantly, the findings show that the styles in the CCST differ based on their associations with these three variables. As shown in Table 4, each style is associated with cooperativeness, directness, and satisfaction in a unique way. The data also show that the associations among the conflict styles on these dimensions are similar to those predicted in Figure 1.

Cooperativeness

One goal of the present study was to determine whether people perceived their partner's conflict style in line with theoretical predictions regarding how cooperative each style is. Results showed that partners tended to rate actors as more cooperative when actors reported using high levels of collaborating or yielding, and low levels of indirect fighting or competitive fighting. These findings are similar to van der Vliert's (1997) results, with some small variation. In Van de Vliert's work, yielding (or accommodating) and problem-solving (or collaborating) were perceived as the most cooperative styles, followed by indirect fighting, avoiding, compromising, and direct (competitive) fighting. The present study also revealed that yielding and collaborating had the strongest positive associations with cooperativeness, but in contrast to Van de Vliert's findings, indirect fighting had a stronger negative association with cooperativeness than competitive fighting. This difference could be due to the context of romantic relationships or the dyadic nature of the data. In van der Vliert's (1997) work, observers viewed an interaction between a

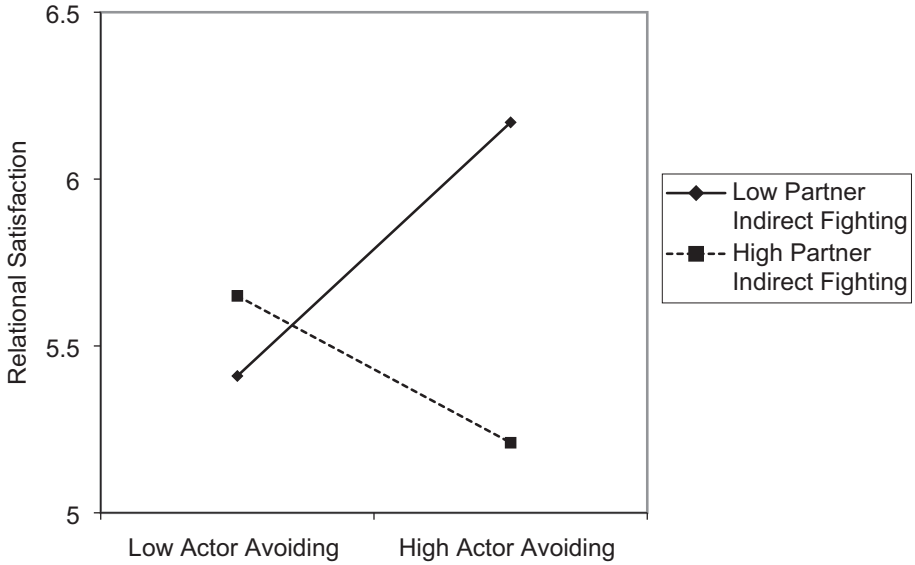

Figure 3. Interaction between actor avoiding and partner indirect fighting on satisfaction.

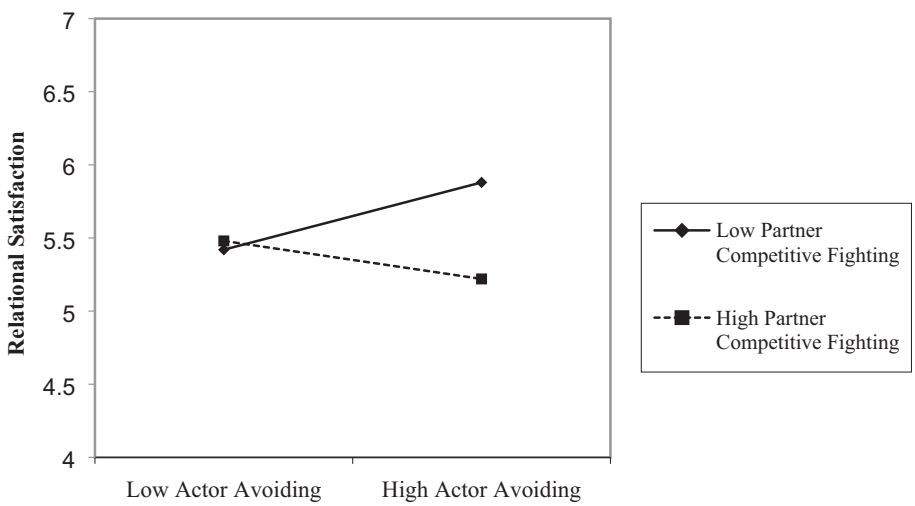

Figure 4. Interaction between actor avoiding and partner competitive fighting on satisfaction.

supposed superior and subordinate and then rated the degree to which their behavior was agreeable and active (see also van de Vliert's & Euwema, 1994). In the present study, people reflected on the behaviors that occurred within their romantic relationship and then rated themselves in terms of their conflict style and their partner in terms of how cooperative and direct they tend to be. Perhaps the indirect fighting style is more prevalent and exaggerated in romantic relationships compared to superior–subordinate relationships and therefore perceived as more uncooperative in the former type of relationship. Additionally, observers may not pick up on some of the subtle nuances of nonverbal behaviors that represent indirect fighting, such as rolling eyes and a sarcastic tone, as much as romantic partners do.

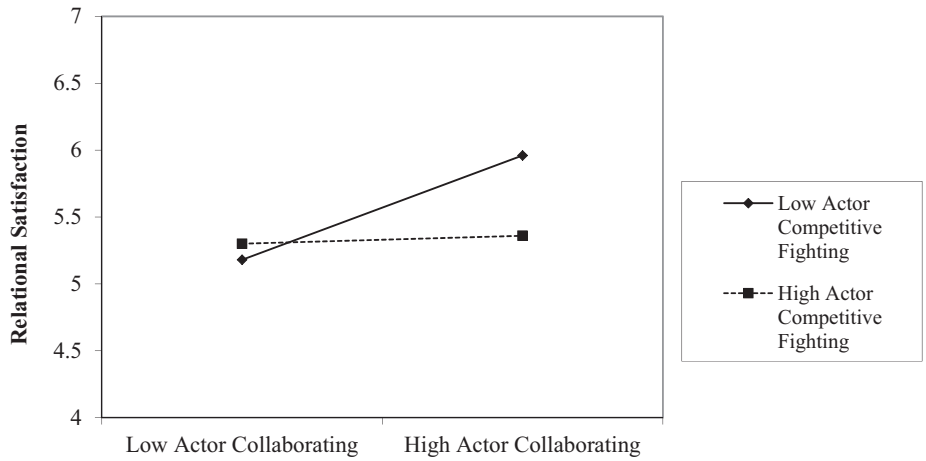

Figure 5. Interaction between actor collaborating and actor competitive fighting on satisfaction.

Table 4
Summary of Findings for Each Conflict Style

	Cooperativeness	Directness	Relational Satisfaction
Collaborating	High	High	High
Compromising	Neutral to high	Moderate to high	High
Yielding	High	Low	Neutral
Competitive fighting	Low	High	Low
Avoiding	Neutral	Low	Neutral†
Indirect fighting	Low	Low	Low

Note. †Interactions suggest that people who rate themselves as using high levels of avoiding tend to report higher levels of satisfaction when their partner reports low levels of indirect fighting, and lower levels of satisfaction when their partner reports high levels of competitive fighting.

Directness

Data from the present study also revealed that partners rated actors as more direct during conflict to the extent that actors reported using high levels of the collaborating, compromising, and competitive fighting styles, and low levels of the yielding, avoiding, and indirect fighting styles. This finding mirrors that of van der Vliert (1997). Both the present study and Van de Vliert's work found that collaborating (or problem-solving) was rated as the most assertive, followed by compromising and competitive fighting. Both studies also found that avoiding, yielding, and indirect fighting were perceived as relatively low in directness (or activeness).

Relational Satisfaction

The associations between the conflict styles and relational satisfaction helped distinguish the six styles in the CCST from one another beyond the traditional dimensions of cooperativeness and directness. Collaborating and compromising emerged as the two styles associated with high levels of relational satisfaction. This finding held across actor and partner effects. In other words, people reported being more satisfied in their relationships when they themselves reported using more collaborating and

compromising as well as when their partner reported using more collaborating and compromising. As noted previously, these two styles vary in terms of cooperativeness. Specifically, the association between collaborating and cooperativeness was significant and positive, whereas the association between compromising and cooperativeness was not significant. This suggests that cooperativeness alone does not explain why the collaborating style is related to satisfaction—instead the problem-solving aspect of collaborating may be what is linked to satisfaction since problem-solving is at the heart of both the collaborating and compromising styles. Dyads who can resolve or at least successfully manage conflict by solving the problem at hand through innovative strategies and/or compromise may be happiest in their relationships, or relatedly, those who are happy in their relationships may especially willing to put in the effort required to collaborate or compromise. Indeed, Sierau and Herzberg (2012) found that even anxiously attached individuals tend to report high levels of relational satisfaction when their partners engage in problem-solving strategies during conflict. Another explanation is that, as Montes, Rodríguez, and Serrano (2012) found, people who are happier and in better moods tend to collaborate and/or compromise during conflicts.

The findings for the yielding style also suggest that cooperativeness and relational satisfaction do not always go hand-in-hand. Yielding was perceived as cooperative in the present study yet was unassociated with relational satisfaction. This finding may reflect the dynamics underlying the yielding style. Giving in to someone may be cooperative in terms of helping partners meet their goals, but if one person is always giving in, the relationship likely suffers from a power imbalance, making it less satisfying than it could be. One partner may be meeting her or his goals at the expense of the other partner's goals. On the other hand, knowing when to yield may be a skill that increases satisfaction. For example, there are times when it is appropriate to concede or give in to someone's requests. In future work, researchers should investigate when yielding is positively versus negatively associated with relational satisfaction by examining potential modifiers such as who the issue is more important to, whether yielding is reciprocated in other interactions, and how power-balanced the relationship is.

Based on the idea that competitive fighting and indirect fighting are uncooperative strategies, it was hypothesized that these styles would have both actor and partner effects on relational satisfaction. Findings were partially supportive. In each case, only one of the predicted effects emerged in the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model. For competitive fighting, there was a partner effect such that actors were more likely to report low levels of relational satisfaction to the extent that their partner had reported using competitive fighting. For indirect fighting, there was an actor effect such that people were more likely to report low levels of relational satisfaction to the extent that they themselves reported using indirect fighting. To unpack these findings further, the bivariate correlations among these variables were computed. The zero-order correlations showed that actors were more satisfied with their relationships when they themselves self-reported using less competitive fighting ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$) and less indirect fighting ($r = -.33$, $p < .001$) and when their partners reported using less competitive fighting ($r = -.33$, $p < .001$) and less indirect fighting ($r = -.20$, $p < .001$). However, when interdependence was controlled for in the model, only the actor effect for indirect fighting and the partner effect for competitive fighting emerged. This suggests that although both the uncooperative strategies associated negatively with relational satisfaction, indirect fighting had the stronger actor effect when other variables were controlled, whereas competitive fighting had the stronger partner effect. It may be especially frustrating and draining to have a partner who uses competitive fighting because this style promotes defensiveness and counterarguing. Resorting to indirect fighting may also reflect a high level of frustration; such a passive-aggressive approach may indicate that an individual either does not have the desire or the skill to address a conflict directly or cooperatively, which could either promote decreased satisfaction or reflect that a relationship was already dissatisfying.

Finally, the avoiding style is low in directness, neutral to moderate in cooperativeness, and generally neutral in relational satisfaction although it can interact with other styles in ways that associate positively or negatively with satisfaction. The finding that the avoiding style lies on a more neutral position on the

cooperative-competitive than yielding or indirect fighting is important conceptually. As noted previously, some scholars have categorized avoiding as uncooperative (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983, 1990), whereas others have conceptualized it as neutral or as either cooperative or uncooperative depending on when and how it is used (Roloff & Ifert, 2000). In the present study, avoiding is clearly different than indirect fighting, which is a more negative and passive-aggressive form of avoidance (see also Sillars et al., 2004; van der Vliert, 1997). This is key because most typologies do not have separate categories for avoiding and indirect fighting. The data in the present study suggest this distinction is important.

The findings also support Roloff and Ifert's (2000) contention that avoiding can be positive or negative depending on situational and relational variables. Indeed, in Figure 2, avoiding is closer to the cooperative style of yielding than the uncooperative style of indirect fighting, which suggests that it can be cooperative at times. In addition, actor effects for avoiding interacted with partner effects in the ways that were associated with more or less satisfaction. Specifically, when actors perceived themselves as using high levels of avoiding, they (a) tended to report more relational satisfaction to the extent that their partner reported low levels of indirect fighting and (b) tended to report less satisfaction to the extent that their partner reported high levels of competitive fighting. The first of these findings suggests that avoiding can be functional in cases where one's partner is not using indirect fighting. The second of these findings is consistent with the satisfaction-dampening effects of the demand-withdrawal cycle that have been well documented in the literature (Caughlin & Scott, 2010; Schrodt et al., 2014). When one partner avoids and the other engages in demanding, competitive behaviors, problems and negativity are typically exacerbated.

Implications

This study's results have implications for couples as well as the future conceptualization and operationalization of conflict styles. For couples, results suggest certain conflict styles are viewed as more cooperative and direct than others, and that some styles are related positively to relational satisfaction while others are related negatively. While it is not news that collaborating is perceived as cooperative and shares a positive association with relational satisfaction, or that indirect and competitive fighting are perceived as uncooperative and share a negative association with relational satisfaction, it is noteworthy that these findings emerged within a dyadic analysis that suggests self-reported conflict styles are manifest in ways that relate to their partner's perceptions of their communication. The interactions also suggest that the conflict styles of both members of a couple should be considered, especially in terms of avoiding.

There are also implications for how conflict is conceptualized and measured. As discussed previously, there are many approaches to measuring conflict that reflect dimensions related to cooperativeness and directness. Some researchers focus on goals or outcomes, others focus on describing the behaviors. Some focus on general styles, whereas others focus on behaviors. The present study suggests a link between self-reported styles and behaviors insofar as partners must have noticed some behavior that caused them to regard each other as more or less cooperative and direct. Even more importantly, the present study suggests that avoiding, indirect fighting, and yielding are all unique, which is a distinction not made in many typologies.

How to best operationalize the six styles is still unclear. Scholars have developed many different instruments that tap into one or more of these six styles. A comprehensive analysis of items from different scales may be in order. Most scales already have items that measure styles similar to collaborating and competitive fighting. Others also include scales measuring yielding and either avoiding or indirect fighting or some combination of the avoiding styles. The CCST was used in the present study because it measures all six styles and showed good reliability and predictive validity when used by La Valley and Guerrero (2012) but it is a new scale that is most applicable to the context of relationships. Thus, more work is necessary to analyze which items from various existing scales might work together to create the

best measurement system for researchers wishing to assess all six styles. Within many systems, a re-consideration of how avoiding versus indirect fighting are conceptualized and operationalized seems warranted. Finally, the dimensions examined in this study (cooperativeness and directness) have been used as a way to help describe both styles and behaviors, and therefore have implications for both types of analysis. The behaviors in systems such as Canary's (2003) Direct-Indirect-Nasty-Nice Typology and Davis's Conflict Dynamics Profiles (Davis et al., 2018) may not all fall cleanly within the specified quadrants. For example, some behaviors may not clearly be "nasty" or "nice" but may instead fall near the middle of this continuum. In Davis et al.'s system, avoiding and yielding both fall under the passive-destructive construct, yet certain types of avoiding and yielding behaviors are likely to be cooperative, as shown in this article. In sum, researchers should consider differentiating among the indirect styles and conceptualizing both styles and behaviors as falling along continua representing levels of cooperativeness versus competitiveness and directness versus indirectness.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the greatest strengths of the current study is the use of dyadic data. Rather than having participants rate their own conflict styles and levels of cooperation and directness, each participant rated her or his own conflict styles and level of satisfaction and assessed how cooperative and direct their partner was. Thus, significant associations between the styles and dimensions suggest that when actors reported engaging in a particular style, their partners saw them as more or less cooperative and direct. Several limitations also exist. For example, even though the findings revealed correlations between actors' self-reported conflict styles and their partners' reports of how cooperative/assertive they are, as well as partner effects for conflict styles on relational satisfaction, all data were still collected using pen and paper measures that represent assessments (or perceptions) of one's own and one's partner's behavior. Thus, although common method variance can be ruled out for some of the effects found because of the nature of the dyadic data that was collected, the current study still examined perceptions rather than actual behaviors. Of course, the fact that partners rated actors as more or less cooperative and direct based on actors' self-reported conflict styles suggests there is overlap between self-reports and actual behavior. In addition, avoiding is likely better captured by survey than observations. Nonetheless, the correlation between self-reported and actual conflict behavior needs empirical validation, and future studies should employ observational methods and experimental investigations as comparative tests.

Other key limitations affect the generalizability of the findings. In particular, this study only examined heterosexual romantic couples, the vast majority of which identified themselves as White. Couples were also either in college or knew someone in college, suggesting a higher level of education and perhaps socioeconomic status than the general population. Another limitation is that the study is restricted to people residing in the U.S. Cooperativeness and directness may function differently in less individualistic cultures where people use more indirect styles as a way to increase harmony and save the face of their partner. In the future researchers should seek to replicate the associations found in this study in other populations.

Conclusion

People use various strategies and tactics when communicating during conflict, and no typology can come close to capturing fully all the nuances that characterize conflict communication. However, the six styles discussed in this article appear to provide a solid conceptualization of styles that emerge based on the underlying dimensions of cooperativeness and assertiveness. Moreover, the results from the present study suggest it is important to separate indirect fighting from the more neutral style of avoiding and to recognize that a style can be perceived as cooperative but not associate with relational satisfaction (or vice versa—a style that is not perceived as particularly cooperative can still be associated with relational

satisfaction). Much more research remains to be done to further refine the conceptualization and operationalization of these six styles and determine their associations with other processes and outcomes related to conflict interaction.

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