2023

Observing the Personal Narratives Among Conflict Participants and Their Responses to Conflict

Monika Fudala
monika.fudala@siu.edu

OBSERVING THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES AMONG CONFLICT PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

By
Monika Fudala
B.S., Southern Illinois University, 2021

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

School of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2023

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

OBSERVING THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES AMONG CONFLICT PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

By

Monika Fudala

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of Communication Studies

Approved by:

Craig Engstrom, Ph.D., Chair

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

February 14, 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank both committee members, Craig Engstrom, Ph.D., and Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Ph.D., for inspiring me to choose this topic. Both offered communication courses that were very influential during my time at SIU Carbondale.

My advisor, Dr. Engstrom, offered a course titled Communication and Conflict while I was a senior in my undergraduate year, and this course was my first time learning about conflict styles. This course made me seriously consider going into graduate school to advance my knowledge. Dr. Engstrom has also been one of my biggest supporters. He looks for the best in his students and helps them achieve their goals. I thank him for his patience and for going through this process with me as my advisor.

Dr. Gingrich-Philbrook offered a course titled Compassionate Communication during my first year in graduate school, which approached communication as a resource for compassion. I noticed the similarities between compassion and conflict management since both require humanizing yourself and others in conversations. Through our conversations, Dr. Gingrich-Philbrook is always encouraging and supportive of my work. I am grateful he was willing to be a reader of this research report. I thank him for extending his compassion and support when I leaned on him.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mama, Maria, for supporting me, and my family, the Fudalas for encouraging my choice to go to graduate school and believing that I can be the first Fudala to earn a master's degree.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

HEADING 1

INTRODUCTION

I have known people who bragged about their abilities to be fair and cooperative with others but did not meet that expectation when presented with conflict. They would use competitive or uncooperative tactics that harmed the situation overall. For example, I've seen an individual who claimed to be cooperative escalate an argument by raising their voice and making personal attacks when they felt their needs were not being heard and then justified their actions. I also observed someone who described themselves as collaborative start to avoid someone and gossip behind their back when they perceived their relationship was threatened, and then also justify their actions. I would wonder whether these individuals would reflect on their conflict experiences and try to learn from them to better their skills. I have come to realize that some people do not analyze their sense of self and, therefore, their communication tactics do not align. My experience with people who display dissonance in defining their conflict style and their actions during conflict has led me to ask, "how do individuals define their conflict styles compared to their stories of being involved in the conflict?" This question is best analyzed by observing respondents' conflict styles through a qualitative study in which I ask them to describe themselves and then analyze whether they have congruent or contrasting results in conflict.

This study aimed to explore participants' self-perception of their conflict style when describing a recent conflict episode they experienced. The goal was to identify alignment or dissonance between how conflict participants describe a recent conflict and their conflict styles. If conflict participants show a discrepancy between their story and identified conflict style, I would like to understand why. Therefore, I created a questionnaire to compare with semi-in-depth interviews. I was curious whether there may be congruence between certain types of

conflict styles and interviewees' level of self-perception. I tried to compare stories of conflict and other results from these interviews. This study contributes to social and cognitive communication by analyzing the perception of self and interpersonal conflict. In this research report, I will review the literature on this topic, explain my research questions, and describe the methods I used for data collection, analysis techniques, and findings. In the discussion, I recommend future directions for research.

HEADING 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I define conflict used by communication researchers, explain conflict styles, describe the traits of each conflict style according to the Thomas-Kilmann model, and define other concepts relevant to my study.

Conflict

A popular topic in academic communication literature is conflict in interpersonal relationships (Dost-Gözkan, 2019; Huang, 2016; Lathren et al., 2021; Miller & Simons, 1974; Putnam & Poole, 1987). Conflict varies from constructive to destructive, which can either support or destroy a relationship, but the most common assumption is that conflict is overall negative (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Wilmot and Hocker's (2018) approach to conflict as a positive phenomenon drew me into studying conflict. They argue that "conflict is inevitable ... [brings] problems to the table ... helps people join together and clarify their goals ... [and helps] people understand each other" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018, p. 47-49). Wilmot and Hocker further support the idea of conflict being a productive and expected part of relationships when stating, "communication is the medium for conflict management," which means effective communication helps resolve conflicts (2018, p. 2). There are many definitions of conflict in literature. In this study, I will use one of the most-cited definitions of conflict: "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, 2018, p. 3).

Perceived Incompatible Goals

Wilmot and Hocker (2018) point out that "perceived incompatible goals are central to all conflicts" (p. 8). There are two types of perceived incompatible goals, where parties may want

"(1) the same thing or (2) different things" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018, p. 8). The first perception may occur when two parties perceive competition to obtain the same thing. For example, two people may compete for the attention of a third party, or two employees may compete for a promotion (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018). In these cases, the goals are perceived as incompatible since both parties' goals are the same.

The second perception may occur when there are two different goals. One example from Wilmot and Hocker (2018) is two roommates, Allison and Janet, planning to move out of a dorm and into an apartment. After looking around at different apartments, Janet expresses that she should stay where they currently are, which is at the dorms, which causes Allision to feel hurt. After talking it through, they realized the conflict was motivated by Allison's suggestion to live in a more expensive place than Janet thought she could afford. Together, they formed an acceptable budget and continued their apartment search. The perceived incompatible goal in this example is the affordability of the apartment. Allison had a tangible goal of an affordable apartment, and Janet had a perceived incompatible goal of Allison not wanting to live together.

Perceived Scarce Resources

A *resource* can be defined as "any positively perceived physical, economic, or social consequence" (Miller & Steinberg, 1975, p. 65). In conflict, an individual may be presented with objectively real resources or perceived-as-real resources to an individual. The *scarcity,* or *limitation,* of those resources, may be real or apparent as well (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018). An example of perceived scarcity in conflict is a person feeling that their best friend is not spending as much time with them and spending more time with other friends, making the best friend's time and attention appear as a limited resource.

Perceived Interference

The term *interference* can be described as the final condition for conflict. A person who interferes with a goal is typically seen as the problem. For example, Wilmot and Hocker (2018) describe a hard-working high school student who wants to ask for time off for a well-needed vacation, and the boss declines because they are the only employee that can open the store. Frustrated, the high school student almost quit because they saw the boss blocking their goal. In this scenario, they are both interdependent because the high school student needs this job, and the boss needs someone to open the store. The conflict is resolved by the high school student training another employee to open the store while they were gone.

Conflict can have a positive outcome based on the definitions of these concepts and the examples I've provided. As I stated earlier, conflict is not a negative phenomenon. Research suggests that conflict will occur acutely in meaningful and satisfying relationships (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). Good relationships are the product of productive conflict. Since conflict is often present in interpersonal interaction, people sometimes navigate and respond in specific ways called conflict styles.

Conflict Styles

Everyone has specific ways of responding to conflict, called *conflict styles*. Guerrero (2020) defines conflict styles as "an individual's preferences, behavioral tendencies, and habits in relation to managing conflict" (p. 24). Conflict is pervasive and permeates families, friendships, romantic partnerships, marriages, and so on. As such, studies of conflict tend to focus on specific relationship types. Research shows that the dynamics of specific types of relations can influence one's response to conflict, such as the type of relationship, as well as the context one may be in (Canary et al., 1995). Examples of these relationships are family, friends,

intimate partners, and co-workers. The variety of interpersonal dyads has led to the creation of many models for identifying conflict styles. Scholars often debate the best style to use (Guerrero, 2020). Comparing them all, most conflict models have five categories of conflict styles, with varying terms that mean the same thing (Adkins, 2006; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). For example, Thomas and Kilmann (1974) use the term *accommodating*, Rahim (1983) uses the term *obliging*, and Adkins (2006) uses the term *harmonizing*, as one of the conflict styles in their respective models to mean appeasing the opposing party and giving into their wishes. All the models and their categories of conflict styles closely follow these definitions from Thomas and Kilmann (1974). I chose to use Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) definitions of conflict styles because they apply to social situations, are heavily cited in conflict literature, and are well-known in conflict style scholarship. Below, I list and define each category with a quote from Thomas and Kilmann.

Collaborating (cooperative, assertive)

"Digging into an issue to find a solution that completely satisfies the concerns of both parties. Sample statement: 'I tell him my ideas and ask him for his'" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 250).

Compromising (moderately cooperative and moderately assertive)

"Attempting to partially satisfy both oneself and the other by finding a middle-ground position. Sample statement: 'I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for both of us'" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 250).

Competing or Dominating (uncooperative, assertive)

"Pursuing one's own concerns at the other's expense. Sample statement: 'I am firm in pursuing my goals'" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 250).

Accommodating (cooperative, unassertive)

"Neglecting one's own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person. Sample statement: 'If it makes the other person happy, I might let him maintain his views'" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 250).

Avoiding (uncooperative, unassertive)

"Neglecting both one's own and another's concerns by not addressing the issue. Sample statement: 'I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about'" (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 250).

Limitations of Current Studies

Currently, most studies focus on communication competence and emotional intelligence in the study of conflict styles. Using EBSCO, I mostly found articles on communication competence (e.g., Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary et al., 2001; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989, 1990; Lakey & Canary, 2002) and emotional intelligence (Rahim et al., 2002; Rahim & Minors, 2003; Riaz et al., 2012) that were the closest to my research goals. A substantial amount of the literature on conflict is from psychology, which studies conflict styles specifically in interpersonal relationships (Adams & Laursen, 2007; Kurdek, 1994; Van Doorn et al., 2008; Van Doorn et al., 2011). However, these articles are focused more on a functionalist view of cognition and draw conclusions from quantitative analysis. I am interested in interpretively examining how respondents orient their style in conflict, through qualitative storytelling, rather than whether they were communicatively correct in their conflict or how they are *thinking* about conflict.

Other Concepts

Concepts are classifications and labels used by communication theorists to "classify and

label perceived patterns and variables in human interaction" (Littlejohn et al., 2016). Concepts relevant to this study are self-construal, self-perception, and self-awareness.

Self-Construal

The first concept is *self-construal*, which Singelis and Brown (1995) define as "an ideal choice to explain culture's (or ethnicity) influence on behavior because of its link to cultural values, norms, and communication" (cited in Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001, p. 91). This term has been predominantly used in intercultural communication research using a psychological approach (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985). This concept has also been applied to conflict styles research (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001); however, it stands alone as a term for cultural influence on the self. For example, in individualistic cultures like the United States, *avoiding* and *accommodating* may be viewed as negative conflict styles. However, in collectivistic cultures like Japan, *avoiding* and *accommodating* are sometimes viewed positively. Therefore, one's culture can influence the perception of their conflict style. Although intercultural communication was not the focus of this study, this term was still helpful in understanding how external factors may influence an individual's conflict style.

Self-Perception and Self-Awareness

In psychology, concepts like self-perception and self-awareness are valuable to define for this study. Self-perception means that "Individuals come to 'know' their own attributes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs" (Bem, 1972, p. 2). For instance, individuals may reflect on a conflict experience and draw conclusions about themselves from the reflection, which would reinform their sense of self.

Self-perception is also similar to the concept of self-awareness, which is the idea that

one's consciousness focuses on the *self* and observes themselves objectively (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Silvia and Duval (2001) also support this by stating self-awareness happens by focusing on one's self compared to standards. According to these authors, people become mindful of themselves by comparing their traits to others. Both terms can work in conjunction with my study to explore if people are aware of their conflict styles.

Research Questions

Thus far, the literature has focused on how people perceive themselves in conflict. This study looks at congruence or dissonance between conflict styles and how participants describe their conflict styles when telling stories about conflict. In this study, I try to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do respondents perceive their conflict styles?

RQ2. How do respondents narrate their conflict style when recalling a specific conflict episode in their life?

RQ3. How do their stories align with the perception of their style?

HEADING 3

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

My data collection is composed of a survey and interviews. In this section, I will discuss the structure of each.

Participants and Procedure

Research participants were required to be at least 18 years or older and enrolled in at least one Communication Studies course for the fall semester. I specifically invited students that were in 300- or 400-level Communication Studies courses for the fall 2022 semester because I wanted participants to have some knowledge of communication theory and practices, and they were also readily available for me to advertise my study.

Questionnaire

The first step was distributing a questionnaire I created online through SurveyMonkey (see Appendix A). I posted a flyer to students' online MyCourses (D2L) course pages and then emailed students inviting participation in my study at the beginning of September 2022. I accepted responses for four weeks, which overlapped the interviewing step of my data collection. The questionnaire was eight questions long with general demographic and conflict-related questions. After answering general demographic information, such as major, educational status, gender, etc., participants moved on to the conflict styles portion of the survey. The first question was as follows: "From this list of conflict styles, what would you classify as your general approach when engaged in conflict," which then listed the definitions of each conflict style:

> "A. I am cooperative and assertive. I dig into an issue to find a solution that completely satisfies me and the other person.
>
> B. I am moderately cooperative and moderately assertive. I attempt to partially satisfy both

oneself and the other by finding a middle-ground position.

C. I am uncooperative and assertive. I pursue my own concerns at the other's expense.

D. I am cooperative and unassertive. I neglect my own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person.

E. I am uncooperative and unassertive. I neglect my own and other's concerns by not addressing the issue."

I deliberately did not include the label for each style so participants could think more critically about their actions in the conflict and not be swayed by the terms. Nevertheless, response A, for example, clearly aligns with Thomas & Kilmann's (1974) definition of *collaboration*. By not labeling each response, participants avoided selecting an answer carelessly and were required to put some more thought into their responses. Another reason I did not want to list all the conflict style labels was if participants proceeded to be interviewed, I did not want them to have a definition in mind when answering interview questions. Having the exact term and definition in mind could have influenced their response by believing they must commit to only one term. Overall, allowing participants to define themselves in their own words gave them more flexibility when thinking about their style in terms of cooperativeness and assertiveness.

The second question changed the perspective and asked, "How would others define your conflict style based on the options above? Explain." A text box was provided for responses. I chose to have a text box because participants could have easily chosen the same answer they did when describing themselves if it was another multiple-choice question. Creating a text box again challenged the respondent to self-reflect. More importantly, I included this question because I wanted to understand how participants perceive others describing their conflict. Asking the participant to reflect on others' perspective of the conflict gave me insight into how congruent

participants' descriptions of their conflict style was between the perception (survey) and practices (story).

Seventy-one respondents completed the questionnaire, which was 11 more than the goal of 60. As noted, the questionnaire was the first step in observing respondents' self-perception of their conflict style. The survey offered a broad overview of each participant's self-perception of their style, how they believe others would describe them, and began the self-reflection process if they were to continue with the interview.

Interviews

The second step of the study was conducting interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) define interviews as an "interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 4). The specific interview type best suited for this study was a "respondent interview," which Tracy (2020) defines as "[interviews] that take place among social actors who all hold similar subject positions and have experiences that directly attend to the research goals … respondents are relied upon to speak primarily of and for themselves – about their own motivations, experiences, and behaviors" (p. 159). I chose this type of interview because I believe it was the best way to engage with participants about personal experiences. I laid out my interviews by asking the participants to describe a recent conflict they were involved in and how they responded.

All the interviews were about 10 minutes, and each participant was asked eight questions (see Appendix B). The first question had them describe their personality. This question gave me insight as to how each participant perceived themselves in general. The next few questions asked interviewees to describe a recent conflict they were involved in and detail the relationship with those involved. The next series of questions asked how the participant responded in conflict and

how the other party responded to observe their conflict strategies in action. The last two questions asked interviewees to describe the overall experience of the conflict and if there were any other relevant things to note.

I wrapped interviews by hearing the participants' feelings on the conflict. This question aimed to get a general sense of their orientation to conflict. Their responses allowed me to also compare the response to how they described themselves at the beginning of the interview and the survey response. The main goal for the analysis of interviews was to discuss a recent experience they were involved in and compare the in-depth observation of them in conflict with their responses in the survey.

HEADING 4

FINDINGS

My findings gave me insight into all three of my research questions. In this section, I will first provide results from the questionnaire and introduce the concept of *fundamental attribution error*. Then, for the interview section, I present the *theory of relational dialectics* to explicate the results. I organized my findings chronologically to show how the data unfolded.

Questionnaire Results

For the demographic groups in my study, the participants were 60.56% female, 36.62% male, and 2.82% non-binary. Roughly 71.83% of respondents were not Communication Studies majors and 28.17% were Communication Studies majors. Of the Communication Studies majors, 70% were General specialization majors, and 30% specialized in Public Relations. Regarding degree completion status, 64.79% were senior or junior level, and 35.21% were second-year or first-year students. The participants mainly were an accurate representation of the demographic of SIU Carbondale because we have more women than men that attend this school and Communication Studies is a small portion of all majors.

Table 1 provides the data for the first conflict style question: “What would you classify as your general approach when engaged in conflict?”

Table 1
Questionnaire Conflict Style Answers 1

Style	***N***	**%**
Compromising	32	45.07%
Collaborating	29	40.85%
Accommodating	8	11.27%
Avoiding	1	1.41%
Dominating	1	1.41%

Most respondents (n = ~86%) perceive their conflict styles as compromising or collaborative (cooperative, assertive), meaning most people perceive their conflict style as positive and productive. This result is surprising, and I did not expect the overwhelming response to be that people positively view their behaviors in conflict. My takeaway is that respondents generally perceive their efforts to reach their goals during the conflict as the correct response.

The second question was, “How would others define your conflict style based on the options above? Explain.” Table 2 highlights these results.

Table 2
Conflict Style Answers 2

Style	***N***	**%**
Collaborating	21	30%
Compromising	15	21.43%
Accommodating	14	20%
Dominating	8	11.43%
Avoiding	6	8.57%
Unclear	6	8.57%

For the second conflict style question, *collaborating* and *compromising* were still the most answered (n= ~51%). *Accommodating* remained in third. The most significant change to note when participants described others' view of their conflict style was *dominating* and *avoiding* increased significantly. Lastly, six respondents left an unclear description which did not allow me to place them in a category. Based on these data, participants generally reported that the way others view their conflict style is slightly more uncooperative and/or unassertive.

The difference in data between these two questions suggests conflict participants tend to view their conflict style as more productive amidst conflict, whereas also reporting that others may view their conflict style generally as unproductive. For example, for the first question, "What would you classify as your general approach when engaged in conflict?" One participant chose *compromising* as their self-perception. Then, for the second question, "How would others define your conflict style based on the options above? Explain," they wrote "Uncooperative and assertive," which means *dominating*. The contrast in these answers means that the respondents admitted to viewing their conflict style as productive and others viewing their conflict style as

destructive. Overall, the questionnaire data suggest that participants view their conflict style as productive during conflict and know that others view their style as unfavorable.

Fundamental Attribution Error

The results from the survey support a cognitive attribution theory known as fundamental attribution error (FAE) by Ross (1977). The FAE is when an individual draws a conclusion about another's personality based on their actions and excludes alternative explanations for that behavior (Ross, 1977). In social psychology, this theory is typically used to support when one does not acknowledge situational factors that may be influencing someone's behavior but rather only focuses on their behavior within the moment (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Paley, 2015).

Applying this theory to the definition of conflict provided earlier,[1] one could infer that FAE can be present in conflicting interactions because of the perception of "incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018, p. 3). The examples of conflict provided in the literature review are helpful to reflect on for examples of conflict. The conflicts were someone feeling that their friend does not spend enough time with them, a boss declining vacation from their student worker, and a roommate thinking their other roommate wants to spend too much money on an apartment. These conflicts were present because of the participants' perception at that moment of their goals compared to the conflicting party. However, they were resolved once external contexts were considered, like when the student worker shifted their perspective from their boss interfering with their goals to training someone new to cover for her while she went on vacation.

Looking at FAE with an emphasis on conflict, one could infer that people typically perceive conflicting parties' actions without considering the context of the conflict. When

[1] "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, 2018, p. 3).

respondents' goals feel threatened, conflict generally is viewed as negative (Wilmot & Hocker, 2018). Since someone can feel threatened during the conflict, this can make them feel defensive of their needs, which leads people to view their own actions as productive compared to the conflicting party.

Since the participants generally reported their self-perception of their conflict styles as more cooperative and assertive, but then generally reported others' view of their conflict style as more uncooperative and unassertive, the FAE theory supports why participants describe their conflict style as more positive or productive.

Interview Results

During the interviews, four respondents answered with conflicting answers compared to their interview. Four respondents mostly answered with congruence. Having both conflicting and congruent answers allowed me to observe both sides of one's self-perception when thy were recalling a conflict they experienced.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Another theory that supported my research was *relational dialectics*. One aspect of relational dialectics is the belief that contradictions exist within relationships ontologically (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Martin & Nakayama, 1999, 2010). The argument of contradictions being inevitable in relationships is typically used to support the fluidity and ever-changing nature of interpersonal relationships and how one's identity is impacted by the ongoing evolution (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Martin & Nakayama, 1999, 2010). This theory provides the baseline for understanding the self in relation to the other. Bakhtin (1981) and Martin and Nakayama (1999, 2010) support this when they state that people form their understandings of themselves through interpersonal interactions through connection

with others (centripetal force) and separation from others (centrifugal force). Through these forces is how an individual defines themselves, which is relevant to the concept of self-perception mentioned in the literature review. Understanding the idea of relational dialectics, like how people form their sense of self compared to others, helped make sense of some of my interviews.

One of the participants, Participant 2, provided me with a heavily contrasted description of their conflict style. In the initial survey, they chose "accommodating" (cooperative, unassertive) as what they describe themselves as and provided this description for what others would describe their conflict style as:

"I just let the other person do what they want because I don't have the energy to deal with confrontation. Regardless of what the conflict is, it's guaranteed that I'll be no help in resolving it in a satisfying manner and therefore cannot be relied on" (Participant 2).

Then, during the interview, they described being at a university event for a movie night, located outside in the dark and on school property. Somebody in the crowd was smoking, and Participant 2 disclosed to me that it agitated their breathing disorder. Since authorities weren't taking any action, Participant 2 said they took matters into their own hands and yelled into the crowd to stop smoking. Participant 2 described their behavior as confrontational, stated they would have been verbally aggressive if they were face-to-face with the conflicting party, and that they weren't afraid because Participant 2 knew the conflicting party was in the wrong. The survey and interview are complete opposites since they initially described their style as "accommodating" (cooperative, unassertive), and then told me about a scenario I classified as being "dominating" (uncooperative, assertive).

Another individual from the interviews, Participant 7, also gave me contradicting results

of their conflict style. In the survey, they chose their self-view as "collaborating" and described others' view of them as "dominating" by writing, "If what I believe … is the best option or argument, I will stick with what I believe. However, I have been told that I tend to look out for the best interests of other people" (Participant 7). This description can arguably be both dominating and collaborating since they mention looking out for others. However, based on this description alone, I interpret them as dominating over collaborating because while they are looking out for the "best interests of other people," they can still do this by sticking with what they believe by being uncooperative and assertive in conflict (Participant 7). Fisher et al. (2011) call the commitment to one's side in an argument *positional bargaining*. The negotiation strategy of positional bargaining has downsides because it hinders the conflict parties from reaching a "wise agreement" (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 4). Positional bargaining is another reason why I categorized Participant 7 as dominating over compromising. They have their position on the topic and are unwilling to discuss strategies for resolving it with collaboration or compromise. Situational factors, of course, may limit whether a conversation is an option.

During the interview with Participant 7, they described a conflict between them and two of their siblings. They stated that one of the siblings (S1) just had a child and was not spending enough family time with their child, Participant 7 (P7), and the other sibling (S2). Rather, P7 expressed that S1 was focusing their time more on friends. P7 said they reacted to this conflict by not saying anything to S1, ranting with S2 that felt the same way and spending more time together without S1. P7 and S2 both did not tell S1 they had an issued and continued to rant to people that weren't involved in the conflict. P7 described their frustration as building more and more over time as S1 would bail on their family plans until eventually, both P7 and S2 verbally attacked S1. S1 removed themselves from the situation and then P7 calmed down and apologized

for their behavior. One key thing that Participant 7 mentioned at the end of the interview was that this is a common occurrence in how they handle conflict, which is an indicator of their conflict style as being avoidant.

I classified Participant 7's behavior in their conflict as avoidant. One could argue that at the end of the situation, Participant 7 and S2 took a dominant approach when attacking S1. This example is possibly why Participant 7 said that others would describe them as dominating in the survey. However, observing Participant 7's cooperativeness and assertiveness in the conflict, there was a lot of avoidance present. Participant 7 and S2 escalated the argument with S1 with verbal attacks. They also demonstrated being unassertive by avoiding S1 during conflict episodes. Participant 7's and S2's needs were not shared, and they never alerted S1 of how S1's actions were impacting them.

By comparing Participant 7's survey responses, which were collaborating (cooperative, assertive) and dominating (uncooperative, assertive) with the interview response, which I classified as avoidant (uncooperative, unassertive), this is another example of a participant that provided contrasting results of their conflict style.

Participant 5 disclosed in their survey that their self-perception of their conflict style was "accommodating" (cooperative, unassertive), and wrote "I try to agree most of the time to avoid a conflict, especially with people that I care about" for how others would describe their style. During the interview, Participant 5 told me about their friend group that is heavily involved in sports and one conflict party in that group that tries to "overpower" others when arguing about who the best player is in a specific team. Participant 5 described the conflict party as aggressive, dominant, and argumentative and that they usually join the conflict party's stance in order not to argue. One thing to note from this interview is when Participant 5 was asked to describe

themselves generally, they chose “people-person” and “friendly.” Their response is an example of congruence for the individual describing their conflict style between the survey and interview and further shows that the theory of relational dialectics can be supported by congruent results.

These examples produce varying results of congruency and dissonance between the survey and interview. Still, the results overall point to the dynamic nature of conflict and the way an individual defines oneself through interpersonal interaction. Participant 2 defined themselves in the survey as accommodating and in the interview as dominating. The conflict scenario in the interview was with a stranger, and since the stranger was breaking the law and agitating their breathing disorder, Participant 2 classified the conflict-other as immoral and wrong, and themselves as justified and moral in their action to yell into the crowd aggressively. So, Participant 2 viewed the conflict-other as complete opposites. The relationship between these two caused Participant 2 to justify their stance on how they approached the conflict. For the survey, Participant 2 described themselves as accommodating, and although they did not disclose the relationships where they feel this way, it makes me curious if they were describing themselves within their close relationships such as friends, family, etc. which in that case view themselves as “no help” and not able to resolve the conflict in a “satisfying matter,” and the opposite of that is viewing the other party as capable of resolving the conflict.

Participant 7’s perspective was that their actions were supporting themselves and their sibling in comparison to their conflict siblings’ actions. In the survey, Participant 7 described themselves as collaborating but provided an avoidant example during the interview. Comparing these two, I noticed that Participant 7 said at the time that they were looking out for S2 and their niece by having them spend more time together without S1. This means that Participant 7 defined S1 as absent, and themselves as present by spending more time with the others that were

affected by the conflict.

With Participant 5, the conflict scenario they had in mind when describing themselves was also the opposite of the conflict party. They saw the conflict party as dominating and aggressive, and since they do not agree with the conflict parties' actions, they separated themselves from them and defined themselves as accommodating to conflict, and overall friendly to others.

These examples, which vary across congruency and dissonance, support the theory of relational dialectics because people will connect with or reject others based on how they want to define themselves. Looking at the way respondents describe their conflict styles and how they describe their interactions in conflict provides examples of how they come to understand themselves in relation to others. These interviews have revealed that when people narrate their conflict style while recalling a specific memory in their life, they tend to view the actions of the conflict party as less favorable than they view themselves.

HEADING 5

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study provided me with takeaways for my research questions, presented implications for conflict research and pedagogy, and also some limitations.

Takeaways & Implications

For RQ1, "How do respondents perceive their conflict styles?" I learned that they generally perceive their conflict styles as cooperative and assertive. The majority of respondents chose *collaborating* and *compromising,* both containing cooperativeness and assertiveness, which are productive amidst conflict. Then during the second conflict-style question, which was about how respondents believe others view their conflict style, the answers increased among the unproductive styles such as *accommodating, avoiding,* and *dominating,* which have elements of uncooperativeness and unassertiveness.

The FAE explains why people may view their conflict style as productive and positive compared to others' view of their conflict style. Respondents display the FAE in conflict because they do not consider the context of the overall situation, but only the current behaviors of the conflict party in comparison to their own needs. Only considering the conflict parties' behavior at the moment, without including the context of the situation, and focusing on one's own needs within the context, may motivate an individual to perceive their conflict style as overall productive and positive. People in conflict generally see the conflict party as a roadblock to their goals, causing them to become defensive about their needs which can cause them to only focus on themselves.

I would therefore suggest that when we teach conflict in communication classes, we reveal to students this bias and invite them to reflect more favorably on others. In short, to be

more compassionate. Bosses may be cognizant and reflective that others perceive them more negatively than they perceive themselves, and they may be biased to see their employees as less cooperative than they really are. In short, we could all benefit from a bit of self-awareness in how we perceive the self and others in conflict.

For my RQ2, "How do respondents narrate their conflict style when recalling a specific conflict episode in their life?" Participants define their style in comparison to the conflict party, which is often described as the opposite of their conflict style. I have described this as consistent with relational dialectics because of the contradictory nature of statements as they relate to the identity of the person. For example, "I am good in conflict; others are not so good/others do not see me as good." For example, during the interviews, Participant 7 defined their conflict style in the survey as collaborating (cooperative, assertive), and then told me a story about a time when they were avoiding a conflict (uncooperative, unassertive). They described the conflict party as absent and inattentive by not spending enough time with the family, then described their own actions as present and attentive by spending more time with the family without the conflict party.

Another example was Participant 5 defining their conflict style as accommodating in the questionnaire and interview and then describing the conflict party as dominating. The characteristics of the dominating party were defined as "overpowering" and "arguing" while describing themselves as "friendly" and "people person" in the same interview. Both participants are two examples representing all my interviews where people in conflict tend to see the conflict party as the opposite of themselves and is an influence when narrating their conflict styles recalling a specific conflict episode in their life.

Lastly, for RQ3 I asked, "How do their stories align with the perception of their style?" There were some responses that I coded as contrasting in their self-perception. I noticed in my

results that the participants who had contrasted results usually self-reported as a productive conflict style with elements for cooperativeness and assertiveness and then described others' views of themselves as more uncooperative and assertive, and/or gave an example in the interview of a destructive conflict. For example, Participant 2 described their and others' view of their conflict style as accommodating and then told me a story about a conflict where they described themselves as "verbally aggressive" and "taking action." Another individual, Participant 6, described themselves as compromising; yet, during the interview, shared a story where they used the words "persuasive," "center of attention," and "wanted to work out in my favor" when describing their actions in the conflict. These stories align with the perception of their style depending on the self-awareness one may have, as well as how much effort is exerted to understand and connect to the conflict party.

Based on the above takeaways, this study shows there are useful implications of this study, specifically as they relate to our conflict experiences. One of the overall implications of the results is that people are not always compassionate when describing a conflict experience. We should seek self-reflection and compassion. As mentioned by Wilmot and Hocker (2018), conflict does not need to be a negative experience. Understanding conflict and broadening one's perspective from their own to both parties' wants and needs can help make the conflict more productive rather than focusing on only the self.

Given that all the students that participated in my study were enrolled in at least one communication course, compassion can be taught across the communication curriculum when conflict is discussed or when students share conflict episodes in their stories. Highlighting how they position themselves and others in the stories may build self-awareness. In these classes, students are already focused on building their communication skills. I believe compassion and

empathy in conflict is a talent that one can build over time. I would recommend faculty review Dr. Gingrich-Philbrook's "Compassionate Communication" course materials and identify ways to incorporate examples in other courses.

Another skill that can be taught in communication courses is effective and accurate storytelling. If I reinterviewed the participants and spoke to them about the study and their answers, I would present them with their answers and ask their thoughts, especially the participants that contradicted themselves. I would ask them more about the context they were in for the conflicts they saw themselves as a part of and ask them to think of other possibilities for resolving the conflict. This is a teaching strategy that could be used in classes.

Lastly, my findings can help other researchers elevate their arguments for FAE, relational dialectics theory, and compassionate communication research. I hope that future research on this topic examines the different contexts of each conflict, such as relationship type (e.g., family member, romantic partner, and stranger,), and surveys and interviews with both conflict participants instead of only one. As I noted in my review of the literature, qualitative research on this topic is still underrepresented.

Limitations

My study was created for my research project to complete a master's degree, so the questionnaire and interviews were designed for a small sample. I exceeded my goal for the questionnaire by getting 71 responses; however, more interviews could have given me more information to compare with the other participants. The interviews were also only about 10 minutes each, which only allowed me a superficial view of a participant's opinion and involvement in a conflict. However, this study was designed for a small sample, and shorter interviews that observe the participant's self-reported actions of everyone involved were exactly

what I aimed for. I also gave my full attention to the eight participants that participated in an interview, which allowed me to fully dissect each interview and look at every detail within the time I was completing my research project.

Another limitation was not being present during the conflict that participants were describing in their responses. Participants could have described the conflict inaccurately to make it appear in their favor. However, I was aware that participants may not have described the conflict the way it happened, and I was not observing whether they were competent in the way they resolved the conflict. I intentionally did not tell them what I was observing in their stories because I wanted them to present the information and describe themselves the way they wanted to. I was trying to compare what one person describes themselves as, what they believe others view them as, and the story of their behavior in a conflict. I do not believe the interviewees knew what it was I was looking for and I believe they answered mostly honestly because they shared vulnerable information with me.

HEADING 6

CONCLUSION

I learned from this study that individuals focus more on their point of view and define their actions compared to others during conflict. This gave me more insight into what sparked my curiosity about this subject in the first place, which was wondering why some people do not define themselves accurately compared to describing a conflict they were involved in. Compassionate communication replaces the negative take on conflict with a positive take on how conflict is experienced, described, and oriented. Being a communication studies major, I have exercised the notion of accepting conflict as inevitable, because it is prevalent in every relationship. Also, I have learned that conflict resolution takes both parties and that it can evolve relationships. I believe everyone should take a communication conflict course at least once in their life, because of how that knowledge has helped me. Learning about conflict and compassion can help people understand that conflict does not need to cause one to be avoidant or dominant. I hope people can take away compassion and some knowledge about conflict from my study.

Working on a research report to complete my master's has also taught me a lot about myself. When I started graduate school, I was terrified of failing and intimidated by how intelligent everyone was. I had to drop out of both of my first English 101 and English 102 courses when I was in community college because the writing was too hard for me, so one can imagine my anxiety when attending 500-level courses that required hefty research papers. I often thought about dropping out because my first year was an incredibly challenging adjustment from my undergraduate degree. Fortunately, my cohort, instructors, and advisor all supported me and lifted me up on my hardest days. They saw the best in me. I do not believe I could have done it

without the encouragement from those around me, and for that I am grateful.

Now that I am approaching the end of my research report, I feel my writing has improved and that I have a stronger grasp on how to write effective research papers. I can produce clearer ideas and cohesive arguments. My research skills have also improved using the university database and Google Scholar. Most importantly, I learned to believe in myself and trust the process of learning something outside of my comfort zone.

Moving forward, I hope that readers can take away from my study some knowledge about conflict styles, such as what each style means and how they respond in conflict. I hope readers can also take away some insight into using compassion while recalling a conflict episode they were involved in. Lastly, I hope to grow and learn from this study to apply to my own behavior.

REFERENCES

Adams, R. E., & Laursen, B. (2007). The correlates of conflict: Disagreement is not necessarily detrimental. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, 445–458. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.siu.edu/10.1037/0893-3200.21.3.445

Adkins, R. (2006). Conflict management styles quiz. *Elemental Truths*, 3545–3551.

Argyle, M., & Furnham, A. (1983). Sources of satisfaction and conflict in long-term relationships. *Journal of marriage and the family, 45*(3), 481–493. https://doi.org/10.2307/351654

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, M. Holquist, ed., C. Emerson and M. Holquist, Trans., University of Texas Press.

Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.

Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-perception theory. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, *6*(1) 1–62. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60024-6

Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The managerial grid*. Gulf Press.

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Canary, D. J., & Cupach, W. R. (1988). Relational and episodic characteristics associated with conflict tactics. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *5*, 305–325. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407588053003

Canary, D. J., Cupach, W. R., & Messman, S. J. (1995). *Relationship conflict.* SAGE Publications.

Canary, D. J., Cupach, W. R., & Serpe, R. T. (2001). A competence-based approach to interpersonal conflict—A test of a longitudinal model. *Communication Research, 28,* 79–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/009365001028001003

Canary, D. J., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1989). A model of the perceived competence of conflict strategies. *Human Communication Research, 15,* 630–649. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1989.tb00202.x

Dost-Gözkan, A. (2019). Adolescents' conflict resolution with their parents and best friends: Links to life satisfaction. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28,* 2854–2866. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01465-x

Fisher, R., Ury, W., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes* (3rd ed.). Penguin Publishing Group.

Gilbert, D. T., & Malone, P. S. (1995). The correspondence bias. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(1), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.1.21

Guerrero, L. K. (2020). Conflict style associations with cooperativeness, directness, and relational satisfaction: A case for a six-style typology. *Negotiation & Conflict Management Research, 13,* 24–43**.** https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12156

Huang, L. L. (2016). Interpersonal harmony and conflict for Chinese people: A yin–yang perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7,* 847. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00847/full

Kurdek, L. A. (1994). Conflict-resolution styles in gay, lesbian, heterosexual nonparent, and heterosexual parent couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 705–722. https://doi.org/10.2307/352880

Lakey, S. G., & Canary, D. J. (2002). Actor goal achievement and sensitivity to partner as critical factors in understanding interpersonal communication competence and conflict

strategies. *Communication Monographs, 69*, 217–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750216542

Lathren, C. R., Rao, S. S., Park, J., & Bluth, K. (2021). Self-compassion and current close interpersonal relationships: A scoping literature review. *Mindfulness, 12*, 1078–1093. https://link-springer-com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/article/10.1007/s12671-020-01566-5

Laursen, B., & Hafen, C. A. (2010). Future directions in the study of close relationships: Conflict is bad (Except when it's not). *Social Development, 19*, 858–872. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2009.00546.x

Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, J. G. (2016). *Theories of human communication* (11 ed.). Waveland Press.

Marsela, A., DeVos, G., & Hsu F. L. K. (Eds.). (1985). *Culture and the self*. Tavistock.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*, 224–253. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224

Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (2010). Intercultural communication and dialectics revisited. In Nakayama, T. K., and Halualani, R. T. (Ed.), *The handbook of critical intercultural communication* (pp. 59–83). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Martin, J. N., and Nakayama, T. K. (1999). Thinking dialectically about culture and communication. *Communication theory*, 9, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203508534

Miller, G. R., & Simons, H. W. (1974). *Perspectives on communication in social conflict*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Paley, J. (2015). Compassion and the fundamental attribution error: A reply to Rolfe & Gardner. *Nurse Education Today*, *35*(3), 474-479. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2014.08.013

Putnam, L. L., & Poole, M. S. (1987). Conflict and negotiation. In F. M. Jablin, L. L. Putnam, K. H. Roberts, & L. W. Porter (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 549–599). Sage Publications, Inc.

Rahim, M. A. (1983). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, *26*, 368–376. https://doi.org/10.5465/255985

Rahim, M. A., & Minors, P. (2003). Effects of emotional intelligence on concern for quality and problem solving. *Managerial Auditing Journal*, *18*(2), 150–155.

Rahim, M. A., Zhao, J. H., Yu, C. S., Chan. K. W., Kwok, W. Y., Alves, M. G., Lee, C. W., Rahman, M. S., Ferdausy, S., & Rene, V. W. (2002). A model of emotional intelligence and conflict management strategies: A study in seven countries. *The international journal of organizational analysis*, *10*, 302–326. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.siu.edu/10.1108/eb028955

Riaz, M. N., Batool, N., & Riaz, M. A. (2012). Emotional intelligence as a predictor of conflict management styles. *Pakistan Journal of Psychology*, *43*(1), 18–27.

Ross, L. (1977). The intuitive psychologist and his shortcomings: Distortions in the attribution process. *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 10, pp. 173–220). Academic Press.

Silvia, P. J., & Duval, T. S. (2001). Objective self-awareness theory: Recent progress and enduring problems. *Personality and social psychology review*, *5*, 230–241. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.siu.edu/10.1207%2FS15327957PSPR0503_4

Singelis, T. M., & Sharkey, W. F. (1995). Culture, self-construal, and embarrassability. *Journal of cross-cultural psychology*, *26*, 622–644. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.siu.edu/10.1177%2F0022022195026006007

Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). Thomas–Kilmann conflict mode instrument. Xicom.

Ting-Toomey, S., Oetzel, J. G., & Yee-Jung, K. (2001). Self-construal types and conflict management styles. *Communication Reports*, *14*, 87–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/08934210109367741

Van Doorn, M. D., Branje, S. J. T., & Meeus, W. H. J. (2008). Conflict resolution in parent-adolescent relationships and adolescent delinquency. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 28, 503–527.

Van Doorn, M. D., Branje, S. J., VanderValk, I. E., De Goede, I. H., & Meeus, W. H. (2011). Longitudinal spillover effects of conflict resolution styles between adolescent–parent relationships and adolescent friendships. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25, 157–161.

Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2018). Interpersonal conflict (10th ed.). McGraw–Hill.

APPENDIX A

Below are the questions that were asked in the SurveyMonkey questionnaire.

1. I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older, I am enrolled in at least one Communication Studies course, I consent to have my responses quoted directly, but anonymously, and give my voluntary consent to participate in this study.
    a. Yes
    b. No
2. Please list your first and last initials. (EX: John Smith would answer “JS”)
    a. [Text box]
3. Please list the last 4 digits of your phone number.
    a. [Text box]
4. What is your major?
    a. Communication Studies – General
    b. Communication Studies – Public Relations
    c. Other (please specify) [Text box]
5. What is your educational status?
    a. First year
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
6. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female

   c. Non-binary
   d. Prefer not to answer
   e. Other (please specify) [Text box]

7. From this list of conflict styles, what would you classify as your general approach when engaged in conflict?
   a. I am cooperative and assertive. I dig into an issue to find a solution that completely satisfies me and the other person
   b. I am moderately cooperative and moderately assertive. I attempt to partially satisfy both oneself and the other by finding a middle-ground position.
   c. I am uncooperative and assertive. I pursue my own concerns at the others expense.
   d. I am cooperative and unassertive. I neglect my own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person.
   e. I am uncooperative and unassertive. I neglect my own and others concerns by not addressing the issue.
8. How would others define your conflict style based on the options above? Explain.
   a. [Text box]

APPENDIX B

Below are the interview questions I asked during my study.

1. Tell me about yourself. How would you describe yourself?
2. Conflict is defined as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scare resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.” Can you think about a recent, non-traumatic interpersonal conflict that you were involved in? Not one you observed, but one where you and one or more parties were in conflict? For example, an argument with a friend over where to go to dinner, a roommate over who will clean the dishes, or a romantic partner over where you’ll vacation?
3. What is the relationship you have with the person(s) involved in the conflict? It can be family, relationships, friendships, work, etc.
4. Tell me about the conflict and what happened. As a reminder, please refrain from using personal identifiers such as names of other participants.
5. How did you respond in this conflict? In other words, how did you handle this conflict?
6. How would you describe the way they handled the conflict?
7. How would you describe the overall experience of this conflict?
8. Is there anything else you’d like to share that you feel is relevant?

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Monika Fudala

Mrfudala06@yahoo.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Science, Communication Studies, May 2021

Research Paper Title:
Observing the Personal Narratives Among Conflict Participants and their Responses to Conflict

Major Professor: Craig L. Engstrom