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9 A Competence-Based Approach to the Study of Interpersonal Conflict

(1994), IN D.D. CAHN
ED. CONFLICT IN
PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
PP. 183-202. HILLSDALE,
NJ: LAWRENCE ERLBAUM
ASSOCIATES

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Although conflict is ubiquitous, it is almost unanimously disliked. Conflict encounters seem capable of lowering people to their most base instincts, and, yet, out of conflict we often derive our most productive achievements. But how people transform the tensions of conflict into productive messages and outcomes evades simplistic thinking or prescriptions. Such are the paradoxes of interpersonal conflict. The purpose of this chapter is to show that competent management of interpersonal conflict requires an awareness of various factors that affect people's impressions of each other and of their conflict messages. To accomplish this objective, we present a rationale for examining conflict from a competence-based approach. We then discuss what precisely is meant by competence, and how it functions in conflict management. Next, we explore the assertiveness literature for clues about competence in conflict management behaviors. We then review the research that has direct implications for the study of conflict and competence. We conclude this chapter by presenting avenues for future research.

Why a Competence-Based Approach?

There are several reasons to utilize a competence-based approach to investigate conflict management behaviors. First, focusing on issues of competence unburdens us from making generalizations about the use of skills. Sillars and Weisberg (1987) demonstrated how ambiguities and structural complexities during conflict resist generalizations about what constitutes "effective" conflict management skills. For example, some texts advise people to use "I-statements" (e.g., "I feel you make fun of me when

you talk in that tone of voice." Although the use of I-statements can inhibit the use of escalating messages, such is not always the case. Indeed, using I-statements can be just as inflammatory as not using them (e.g., "I think you're a horse's ass"). Prescribing such skills does not adequately represent competence in managing interpersonal conflict. Instead, a competence-based approach relies on the parties' assessments of what they consider competent in given contexts. Accordingly, we describe quality communication from the participants' point of view in lieu of generalizations about skillful conflict behaviors.

Second, and related to this, we can examine conflict in terms of the criteria that participants judge as important. Researchers have examined several components of communication competence, including adaptability (Duran, 1992), conversational involvement (Cegala, 1981), and empathy (Redmond, 1985). Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) identified two relatively inclusive criteria, appropriateness and effectiveness. Appropriateness concerns upholding the relational and situational expectations, and effectiveness refers to the ability of the communicator to achieve his or her goals in the conversation.

Third, in conflict situations, the focus on perceptions of behaviors reveals the values people attach to those behaviors. In other words, people interpret behavior and allow or disallow such behaviors to affect them. At the relational level, perceptions of competence filter the effects of behavior on relational characteristics. There is not a mechanistic causal link from behavior to outcome; instead, people evaluate those behaviors in their assessments of competence.

The concept of competence offers a heuristic approach to conceptualizing conflict processes. However, the construct of competence itself is highly complex, and requires clarification.

A Conceptualization of Competence

Competence in interaction has been conceptualized in a multitude of ways (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Competence, broadly speaking, is a synonym for either quality or ability. That these are not exact synonyms for each other reflects a fundamental definitional problem. Competence is a coin with two sides: skill and impression. On the one side, researchers and teachers have traditionally been interested in the objective behavioral traits, skills, or abilities that comprise competence. In this vein, competence consists of identifiable capacities a person possesses that enable him or her to perform to a specified level of observable proficiency to obtain a goal. On the other side, competence has more recently been redefined as a subjective evaluation of the quality with which someone performs (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The reason for this change was that all human

interaction is contextual, and, therefore, a given behavior may be evaluated as competent in one context, but incompetent in another. It is not the behavior itself that is competent, but its evaluation in a particular context that constitutes the location of the construct.

This definitional debate has been active for some time (e.g., McCroskey, 1982; McFall, 1982; Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg, 1983; Wiemann & Bradac, 1985). However, most theorists have settled on appropriateness and effectiveness as inclusive, valid, and useful criteria. Appropriate interaction avoids the violation of valued rules, norms, or expectancies in a given context or contexts. This does not presume that an interactant is merely being polite or conforming, since rules can be broken in the process of negotiating new rules. Effective interaction obtains valued outcomes, objectives, or goals. This does not presume that a person is entirely conscious of the ends being sought, because the opportunities of any given interaction are often evolutionary, and, at other times, relatively mindless or inaccessible to conscious articulation. The combination of these two criteria provides for a very useful conceptualization of optimal, or competent, interaction.

If appropriateness and effectiveness are crossed as dimensions, then they create a grid with four cells. A person who is inappropriate and ineffective violates rules and fails to obtain desired outcomes. Such a person's interaction is minimizing in orientation (e.g., to block out the sound of a neighbor's loud music, you turn up your own stereo). A person who is appropriate but not effective does nothing wrong, *per se*, but also attains no valued objectives through interaction. This person is merely sufficing (e.g., you try to ignore the neighbor's loud music and hope it will soon cease). A person who maximizes is effective but inappropriate; this person achieves valued outcomes, but at the cost of violating standards of decorum, consensus, or relational preference (e.g., you confront your neighbor with, "Who the hell do you think you are? Turn down the stereo or I'll have you evicted!"). In contrast, a person who is both appropriate and effective is optimal by achieving valued ends while maintaining the integrity of the relational context (e.g., you tell your neighbor that the loud music prevents you from working, and you ask that it be turned down). Of course, these examples are prototypical representations.

THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF COMPETENCE IN CONFLICT

The relevance of this grid to conflict should be immediately apparent when it is overlaid on the ubiquitous two-dimensional model of conflict orientation (Blake & Mouton, 1964; see Fig. 9.1). Competing, or distributive,

valued personal objectives. Unless the parties understand that conflict episodes handicap the attainment of both appropriateness and effectiveness, then they may become perplexed in their experiences of conflict. But if one takes into account that being competent involves negotiating in such a way as to optimize both parties' appropriate and effective responses (which conflict makes difficult), then understanding of conflict messages and productive outcomes may increase. Knowing how conflict and competence interrelate should also enable more productive management of conflict interactions.

Competence may function in a variety of ways in interpersonal conflict situations. Its role depends, in part, on whether competence is conceptualized as an ability or as an evaluative impression. As an ability, competence facilitates the enactment of behavior that is likely to produce positive conflict outcomes. As an impression, competence can serve as a cognitive process. Each of these is briefly considered next.

Competence as Antecedent to Conflict Management

When competence is viewed as an ability, it operates as an antecedent condition to conflict interaction that affects the process and outcomes of conflict. The competent communicator is characterized by several traits that enhance effective communication, including behavioral flexibility (Duran, 1992), assertiveness (Galassi, Galassi, & Vedder, 1981), and confidence (Conger, Wallander, Mariotto, & Ward, 1980). These traits, in turn, tend to be positively associated with productive conflict outcomes. Similarly, traits such as high need for achievement, low need for dependence (Utley, Richardson, & Pilkington, 1989), and an internal locus of control (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988) appear to facilitate cooperative strategy use.

Individuals who view themselves as competent communicators also possess positive self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., Rubin, Martin, Bruning, & Powers, 1993). That is, competent communicators tend to believe that they are capable of performing behaviors that are effective in producing desired outcomes. Thus, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs (Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990): A belief in the likelihood of success, based on a history of success in conflict situations, is likely to breed further success.

Competence as Outcome of Conflict Management

It is also useful to conceptualize competence as an interpersonal impression (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). In this vein, competence in conflict is consistent with the cognitive-exchange focus described by Cahn (1992). Viewed as an evaluative impression, competence can obviously be concep-

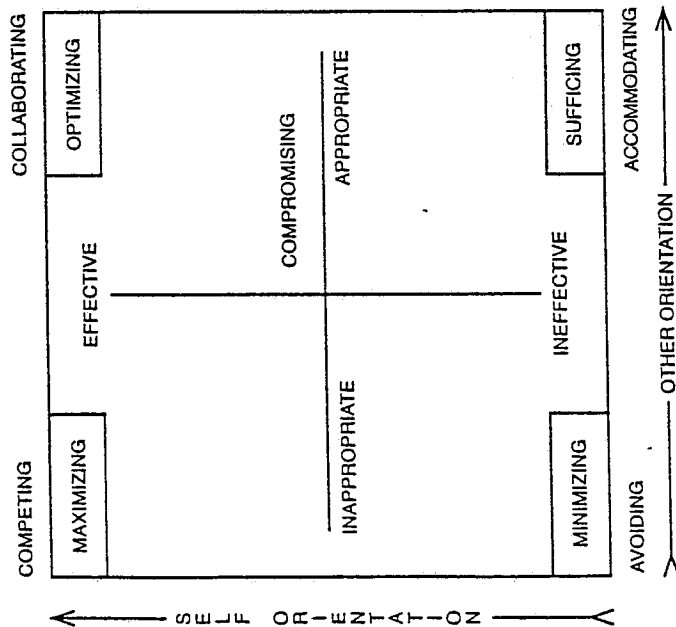


FIG. 9.1. Overlay of competence dimensions onto conflict dimensions.

behavior is very similar to a maximizing orientation, in which the finite interpersonal resources are sought regardless of the consequences to others. Avoiding would often be characteristic of an interactant who can neither fulfill expectations for behavior nor obtain valued ends. A person overly concerned with appropriateness to the exclusion of self-interests is likely to accommodate to others. A person who seeks a middle ground between self and other interests, in turn, is likely to compromise between the two, thereby being somewhat effective and somewhat appropriate. However, the now traditional ideal of "win-win" conflict management is very similar to the notion of appropriate and effective interaction. Appropriateness ensures that care is shown to the other parties' interests and expectations, while effectiveness represents a pursuit of the self's interests.

The integration of these two grids also emphasizes the perspective that competence places on conflict. Conflict is not problematic simply because it is unpleasant, although it is also often unpleasant. It is problematic because conflict management is difficult to conduct competently. Specifically, parties in conflict may believe that the other person is pursuing a goal that frustrates their own. This simultaneously violates expectations regarding the interaction and reduces the likelihood of both parties achieving their

tualized as a communicative outcome in its own right (Jones, 1989). As a judgment of the quality of the communicative process, competence is an indicator of the relatively constructive or destructive nature of conflict behavior. It serves as a proxy for the affective reaction to the conflict communication; that is, perceived competence of a partner's communication is an indication of one's own communication satisfaction (Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984). For example, Cupach (1982) studied the relationship between self-reported conflict tactics and one's own communication satisfaction, as well as the partner's communication satisfaction. For both self and partner, satisfaction was more positively associated with cooperative conflict tactics than with either competitive or avoidant tactics.

Competence as Intervening Variable In Conflict Management

Intervening factors may either mediate or moderate the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables. As a mediating variable, competence functions as an interpretive screen between conflict behaviors and outcome variables. As a moderating variable, competence interacts with the conflict behaviors to affect outcome variables.

Research reveals that competence functions as a mediator between conflict behavior and episodic and relational outcomes (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). As a mediating influence, positive outcomes in conflict are brought about because a partner's behaviors are interpreted as relatively competent. Negative outcomes occur because behaviors are seen as relatively incompetent. In this light, conflict behaviors produce constructive or destructive outcomes only indirectly, through the perceptual frame of competence assessments (of those same conflict behaviors).

To illustrate how competence operates as a mediating variable, consider an example of two friends: Bill and Sandra. During a conflict episode between the two, Bill perceives Sandra handling the conflict. Bill makes a judgment about Sandra's communication. If he thinks she is appropriate and effective, he will likely judge her conflict communication to be competent. To the extent that Sandra is judged to be competent, Bill derives positive outcomes. He feels relatively good about Sandra. In the longer term, the perception of competence likely translates into positive thoughts and feelings about the relationship, such as trust and relational satisfaction.

Competence also functions as a moderator variable, stressing how biases and distortions in perception can modify the impact of behaviors on outcomes. Thus, if Sandra is "objectively" collaborative and integrative in her conflict behaviors, but Bill has a negative opinion of Sandra because of a previous episode, he may perceive her behavior in the present episode to

be relatively incompetent, or at least as less competent than it otherwise might have been. As a consequence of the negative perception regarding Sandra's competence, some outcomes are likely to be less positive than they might otherwise be, in spite of Sandra's best "constructive" behavioral efforts. Sandra's behavior, by itself, is not sufficient to predict Bill's outcomes (and in an extended model, Sandra's outcomes). Rather, Sandra's behavior, in conjunction with Bill's perception of Sandra's episodic competence, will jointly affect the conflict outcome.

Competence, therefore, can play any of three basic roles in conflict episodes: antecedent, consequent, and intervening. Which role is stressed obviously depends on one's conceptualization of competence and the types of questions being asked. To examine some of the questions that have been asked of competence in the conflict literature, the two most relevant domains of research (i.e., assertiveness and interpersonal conflict) are reviewed.

RESEARCH ON ASSERTIVENESS AND COMPETENCE

Assertiveness has been actively researched since the 1960s. Although it has been defined and conceptualized in a number of ways, assertion is generally viewed as an interactional orientation that involves a defense of basic human rights, honest emotional expression, and functionally reinforcing communication in problematic situations (e.g., Galassi, Galassi, & Vedder, 1981; Rakos, 1991). As a strategy, assertive behavior has fairly consistently been differentiated from the two alternative interactional orientations of passive and aggressive behavior. The strategy of assertiveness involves the skilled expression of one's desires, feelings, and/or rights without violation of those of the other parties involved. Aggression, in contrast, is some form of expression without regard for the rights of others. Passivity is typically a form of withdrawal from the interaction, or a failure to express one's own interests. This tripartite scheme has been consistently supported in the research (Bakker, Bakker-Rabdau, & Breit, 1978; Hedlund & Lindquist, 1984).

That assertiveness is closely related to interpersonal conflict is obvious, and yet the conflict literature has largely ignored its relevance. There are two reasons why the two literatures deserve integration. First, the distinctions among assertive, aggressive, and passive behavior are virtually identical to the common division of conflict behavior into integrative, distributive, and avoidant strategies, respectively (Sillars, Coletti, Perry, & Rogers, 1982). Second, assertion can be often viewed as a form of incipient conflict, or "conflict waiting or about to happen." Assertion is most relevant to situations in which people must resolve a problematic interper-

sonal situation in which personal preferences are weighed against those of the other parties.

Assertiveness is also closely intertwined with notions of competence. First, the structure of assertion is the accomplishment of personal objectives in a manner that accounts for the interests of other involved parties. This is almost identical to the notion of interaction that is effective and yet appropriate. Indeed, some time ago, Galassi, Galassi, and Vedder (1981) strongly recommended scrapping the construct of assertiveness in favor of the construct of social skills and social competence. Second, numerous studies of assertiveness utilize designs in which behaviors are manipulated or coded and then related to impression outcomes such as appropriateness (e.g., Lewis & Gallois, 1984) or competence (Crawford, 1988; Kelly et al., 1982; Kern, Cavell, & Beck, 1985; Zollo, Heimberg, & Becker, 1985). Although competence in these studies is often labeled a factor concerning task expertise, it is also usually analyzed along with a factor of social attractiveness.

Assuming that most assertion is a form of incipient conflict, the assertiveness literature yields three basic conclusions in relation to competence. First, when viewed by uninvolved third parties, assertive behavior is generally viewed as more competent than passive behavior, which, in turn, is viewed as more competent than aggressive behavior. However, second, for conversational partners, assertive behavior is often seen as more productive but less likable and satisfying than passive behavior, and both are viewed as more competent than aggressive behavior (Delamater & McNamara, 1991; Kelly et al., 1982; Lowe & Storm, 1986; Sereno, Welch, & Braaten, 1987; Zollo, Heimberg, & Becker, 1985; for reviews, see Delamater & McNamara, 1986; Gervasio & Crawford, 1989). It appears from this research that assertion is seen as normatively competent, but is not optimally competent in the relationship. We think this is because most assertion places priority on effectiveness rather than appropriateness of interaction.

Third, there is a fair amount of evidence, though somewhat mixed, that the findings noted previously are moderated by sex, relational context, and form of assertive message. Specifically, both men and women appear to be more forgiving of men being assertive than of women being assertive (Crawford, 1988; Lowe & Storm, 1986; Wilson & Gallois, 1985; cf. Levin & Gross, 1984). People also appear to be more forgiving of an assertive friend than an assertive stranger (Gormally, 1982; Lewis & Gallois, 1984). In addition, when empathic or consideration clauses are added to the assertive message, in which the other party's interests are overtly acknowledged, the negative impact of assertion is often reduced (Kern, Cavell, & Beck, 1985; Sereno, Welch, & Braaten, 1987; Wildman & Clementz, 1986; cf. Levin & Gross, 1984, 1987). Other factors, such as nonverbal behaviors

used with the assertive message (Rose & Tryon, 1979), may also moderate the link between assertive behavior and perceived competence.

In summary, the research indicates that assertion and passivity are both functionally mixed tactics in response to problematic interpersonal encounters. Assertion appears to be effective, but often at the cost of interpersonal attraction, and, perhaps, harmony. Passivity is often attractive, but obviously not very effective in terms of short-term goals of the interactant. However, the literature is very consistent in displaying that aggressive behavior is judged as incompetent by virtually everyone.

RESEARCH ON CONFLICT AND COMPETENCE

Communication Strategies and Outcomes

People choose to work with the other, work against the other, or work away from the other (e.g., Davitz, 1969), and they adopt communication strategies reflecting these choices. Strategies refer to the general approach people use to achieve an interaction goal, whereas tactics reference the particular behaviors that institute the strategy (Newton & Burgoon, 1990). Hence, in our view, conflict behaviors are manifested in three strategies: integrative (working with the partner), distributive (working against the partner), and avoidant (working away from the partner). Similar three-factor schemes have been identified in other studies as well (e.g., Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Rands, Levinger, & Mellinger, 1981; Sillars, 1980; Spitzberg & Marshall, 1990). Integrative behaviors are manifested in such actions as seeking areas of commonality, exchanging information, attempting to understand the other, and compromising. Distributive behaviors are displayed in competitive actions such as threats, intimidation, criticism, and counterproposals. Avoidant behaviors attempt to detract attention from the conflict, and they range from direct denials to topic evasions. These strategies are enacted both verbally and nonverbally (Newton & Burgoon, 1990).

Research suggests that people are more satisfied with integrative tactics and less satisfied with distributive and avoidant tactics (e.g., Belk & Snell, 1988; Fitzpatrick, Fallis, & Vance, 1982; Sillars, 1980). In addition, integrative tactic use has been positively linked to relational satisfaction and stability, while distributive behaviors have been found to reflect relational dissatisfaction. For example, Ting-Toomey (1983) found that people in dissatisfied marriages engage in supportive and confirming sequences and avoid the complain-defend and confront-defend sequences that dissatisfied couples enact. Similarly, Margolin and Wampold (1981) found that nondistressed couples, relative to distressed couples, engaged in higher rates of

"problem-solving," neutral, and positive verbal and nonverbal behaviors. There is also strong evidence that satisfied couples not only share more positive and less negative communication (e.g., Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Markman, 1981), but also display lower rates of negative reciprocity (e.g., Billings, 1979; Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Gottman, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 1983).

If relational satisfaction, relational stability, and marital adjustment are considered desired outcomes of competent communication, then the literature varies greatly in its picture of competent conflict behaviors. Filsinger and Thoma (1988) found that relationships with high levels of female interruption at time one had lower stability and satisfaction five years later. This can be interpreted as a competence issue, given that interruptions are normatively considered as incompetent (Wiemann, 1977). Gottman and Levenson (1992) observed that long-term stability in marriages is sustained by a "balancing" of positive and negative interaction, in which the ratio of positive behaviors to negative behaviors is consistently higher than in unstable relationships. And although adaptability is often viewed as competent, Nicotera (1991) found that people who use single tactics, rather than those who use multiple tactics, are more satisfied. It may be that competent interactants either know what works best and stay with that tactic, or they tend to change tactics only when they are dissatisfied. However, Koren, Carlton, and Shaw's (1980) study of nondistressed couples showed that they were more likely than distressed couples to use responsive communication, indicating some occurrence of adaptation. In a paradoxical result, Roloff and Cloven (1990) found that both the number of expressed conflicts as well as the number of unexpressed (or latent) conflicts are negatively related to relational satisfaction. Collectively, it appears that distributive behavior is commonly associated with relational maladjustment, but beyond this finding, the existing research offers little consistency in the picture of what constitutes competence in conflict.

Perhaps the most extreme form of distributive conflict behavior is physical violence, yet the research on the effect of violence on relational satisfaction is surprisingly mixed. In their review of violence studies, Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) found that "in roughly six of every ten relationships that did not terminate, the violence is reported to have had no effect on, or to have actually improved the relationship" (p. 14). Across three separate studies of relationship violence, a third of relationships reported that the relationship improved after the occurrence of violence (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Makepeace, 1981). In light of such findings, it is understandable when Holtzworth-Munroe et al. (1992) reviewed several data sets and found that "Across the studies, up to one third of the nondistressed husbands had been violent toward their wives during the

course of their relationship and approximately 10%-20% had been violent in the past year" (p. 86). The point worth noting is that people do not necessarily view violence as incompetent or unidirectionally related to relational outcomes.

How violence affects relational outcomes is likely to depend largely on the standards for competence and the manner in which violence occurs. For example, Margolin, John, and Gleberman (1988) found that physically aggressive couples could be differentiated from verbally aggressive, withdrawing, and nondistressed/nonaggressive couples in terms of husbands' higher rates of negativity and wives' escalation and then deescalation of negative behaviors (perhaps a demand-withdraw pattern). Additionally, Holtzworth-Munroe and Anglin (1991) found that violent men did not differ from nonviolent men in the competence of their responses to a number of relationally problematic situations, but they did produce less competent responses to particular situations involving rejection from their wives, jealousy, and challenges from their wives. It appears that subtle expectations and particular patterns of communication frame the enactment of violence, and that the competence of such activity cannot be determined a priori. This implies that competence involves judgments that do not inhere in the behavior itself.

This possibility has been addressed in a series of studies (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1987, 1989, 1990; Cupach, Canary, & Serpe, in progress). In these studies, integrative tactics have been consistently associated with competence. More specifically, integrative tactics have been associated with perceptions of partners' appropriateness, effectiveness, global competence, and communication satisfaction. On the other hand, distributive behaviors have been negatively linked to appropriateness, effectiveness, global competence, and communication satisfaction. Avoidance also has correlated negatively with competence and desirable relational outcomes, but the correlations have typically been fairly small (see also Smolen, Spiegel, Bakker-Rabaud, Bakker, & Martin, 1985).

Which strategy do people refer to when making assessments of the communicator's competence? The answer to this question varies according to the competence criterion under question. For example, Canary and Spitzberg (1990) found that judgments of specific appropriateness (i.e., the appropriateness judgments of particular segments or behaviors of the interaction) were more strongly associated with distributive behaviors, whereas judgments of general appropriateness (i.e., the appropriateness judgments of the entire episode) and effectiveness were more strongly linked to integrative tactics. In an experimental study, Canary and Spitzberg (1987) likewise found that distributive behaviors were seen as specifically inappropriate, and integrative behaviors were viewed as generally appropriate and effective. These findings suggest that people judge isolated

competitive messages apart from the overall manner in which the communicator behaved.

Avoidance tactics vary in their perceived competence, according to several factors. One factor is whether people value autonomy or confrontation (Sillars & Weisberg, 1987). Those who value autonomy likely perceive avoidance as highly functional, whereas those who value confrontation likely see avoidance as dysfunctional (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Fitzpatrick, Fallis, & Vance, 1982; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983). A second factor is who reports the avoidance. If the communicator assesses the merits of his or her own avoidance, it is probably evaluated more favorably than if the partner judges the communicator's avoidance (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Belk and Snell (1988) found that couples' use of bilateral avoidance was more associated with liking and loving and self-disclosure than when the avoidance tactic was unilaterally enforced (cf. Christensen & Shenk, 1991).

A Competence-Based Model of Conflict

A competence-based model of interpersonal conflict assumes that conflict messages are assessed according to competence criteria, and then these interpretations affect relational outcomes (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). One important set of outcomes is relational quality. Although most equate relational quality with satisfaction, we conceptualize quality as comprised of the feature characteristics of relationships; specifically, control mutuality, trust, and intimacy, in addition to satisfaction (for a similar typology, see Millar & Rogers, 1976). Control mutuality refers to sharing agreement on who makes the decisions in the relationship (Morton, Alexander, & Altman, 1976). Trust refers to risking oneself to the partner because the partner is believed to be honest and beneficent (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Intimacy refers to knowledge about the partner and liking what one knows (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

Do assessments of competence mediate the effects of conflict tactics on relational outcomes? The initial evidence suggests they do: Three studies utilizing structural equation modeling have shown that integrative and distributive conflict tactics affect relational outcomes primarily through competence evaluations (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Cupach, Canary, & Serpe, in preparation). Avoidance, which is relatively ambiguous as an appropriate or effective response, has a small negative effect on perceptions of competence when the partner's perceptions of avoidance are utilized, but not when the actor's self-reported conflict behaviors are used. Table 9.1 presents the general competence model represented in the three studies summarized here.

Three specific findings regarding this summary model merit comment.

TABLE 9.1
Model of Conflict Tactics and Relational Outcomes, with Competence as an Intervening Variable

<i>Conflict Message Behaviors</i>	<i>Competence Assessments</i>	<i>Relational Outcomes</i>
Integrative tactics (+)	Appropriateness	Trust
Distributive tactics (-)	Effectiveness	Control mutuality
Avoidant tactics (+/-)		Intimacy
		Satisfaction

Note: A positive sign indicates that integrative tactics are positively associated with competence assessments of appropriateness and effectiveness; a negative sign indicates that distributive tactics are inversely associated with competence assessments. Avoidant tactics may be positively or inversely linked to competence perceptions in ways indicated in the text.

First, conflict behaviors, competence evaluations, and relational outcomes represent empirically as well as conceptually distinct phenomena (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Second, in one longitudinal study (Cupach, Canary, & Serpe, in preparation), conflict behaviors at time 1 predicted conflict behaviors approximately a month later, but conflict behaviors at time 1 did not predict relational features apart from the competence evaluations. Nor did the relational outcomes at time 1 predict subsequent conflict behaviors, contrary to our own speculation. This suggests that conflict patterns are stable. Finally, the standardized coefficients for the path between competence evaluations and relational outcomes have been moderate to large. The estimates have been .145 to .250 for single indicators in Canary and Cupach (1988), .662 for multiple indicators in Canary and Spitzberg (1989), and .451 for multiple indicators in Cupach, Canary, and Serpe (in progress). These findings reveal that competence judgments of conflict behaviors substantially affect relational characteristics. However, we should also be quick to point out qualifications to these findings.

Qualifying the General Findings

The positive tie between integrative behaviors and positive relational outcomes is qualified by several factors. Enacting integrative behaviors may not necessarily indicate harmony in the home. Gottman (1979), for example, reported that satisfied and dissatisfied couples alike reciprocate integrative behaviors. Gottman reported that lack of reciprocating negative behaviors is more discriminating of satisfaction than the reciprocation of positive behaviors. Moreover, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found that husbands' negative interaction behaviors (e.g., expression of anger) were inversely associated with satisfaction when measured at the same time, but negative behaviors were positively associated with increases in relational satisfaction measured three years later. In other words, although expres-

sions of anger may be seen as incompetent at the time of their use, in the long run anger may be seen as beneficial to the relationship.

Moreover, couple type affects how conflict behaviors are assessed. For example, Sillars Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1983) found that egalitarian (i.e., independent) couples' relational satisfaction was positively associated with negative emotional displays during conflict, but their satisfaction was inversely associated with neutral emotions. Independent couples appear to prefer any emotional exchange over neutrality. But, as mentioned, autonomous couples (i.e., separates) prefer blatant forms of avoidance, such as explicit denials of conflict ("No, nothing is wrong, I promise"; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983). Conflict behaviors thus appear to be valued differently in different kinds of marriages: Some couples value direct confrontation over most issues (i.e., independents), some value confrontation over important issues only (i.e., traditionals), and some couples value avoidance (i.e., separates).

The link between integrative behaviors and assessments of competence must also be qualified. Canary and Spitzberg (1990) found that partners agreed the least on whether one of them had used integrative messages during a conflict; correlations between actor and partner perceptions of actors' strategy use were strongest for distributive behavior, then avoidant, and then integrative tactics. It is likely that people expect others to treat them in a cooperative manner, and integrative behaviors are thus often perceived, though not necessarily enacted. Distributive or avoidant behaviors are more salient because their use is generally negative and unexpected (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984).

Another important qualification is that, because of the dyadic nature of conflict management, the partner probably projects his or her conflict behavior and experience onto the actor. Perhaps the most robust empirical generalization in the conflict literature is that people tend to reciprocate conflict behaviors (e.g., Burgraf & Sillars, 1987; Sillars, 1980). Moreover, satisfied couples tend to reciprocate positive behaviors, whereas dissatisfied couples tend to reciprocate negative conflict and for longer periods of time (Sillars, Wilmot, & Hocker, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1983). This reciprocation of behavior makes it difficult to determine how to assess one person's communication competence apart from the other's. In addition, during such exchanges one person likely reads into the partner's behavior his or her own feelings and attitudes (Wilmot, 1987). And because one's field of experience more readily focuses on the partner's communication behavior (Storms, 1973), one likely overestimates the partner's responsibility for the conflict due to the partner's negative actions. In other words, actors cannot see their own faces distort in anger or wince, or hear the disconfirmation in their own conflict tactics, but they can clearly see their partners' negative nonverbal affect displays and distributive verbal cues. Hence, the partner's

negative behaviors are more salient than their own and are judged more keenly. But when the partner acts as expected, with cooperation, then the actor more readily accepts responsibility for the conflict and assesses the partner's behaviors as competent (Sillars, 1980).

CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this chapter has been to show that competent management of interpersonal conflict requires an awareness of many factors and findings (often counterintuitive) that affect people's assessments of each other and their conflict messages. In light of the research issues and findings, we offer three avenues for future research.

First, we are interested in exploring the microstructures of conflict. Sillars, Wilmot, and Hocker (1993) reviewed five structural characteristics of conflict tactics: variety, or number of alternative messages used; continuity, or the number of issues discussed; symmetry, or the extent to which partners mirror each other's behaviors; stationarity, or the phases of conflict couples enact; and spontaneity, or the degree to which individuals monitor and censor their own actions. The Sillars Wilmot, and Hocker review suggested that the most competent management of conflict would involve a moderate level of each of these factors. That is, competence is likely to be associated with (a) a wide repertoire of conflict behaviors that focus discussion on the issues at hand; (b) extensive but not exhaustive discussion of important problematic issues; (c) matching of the partner's integrative actions, but not distributive actions; (d) phases that do not ensnare the relational partners; and (e) a balance between self-monitoring and free use of conflict tactics. These predictions are warranted for two reasons. First, there is a dearth of research linking perceptions of communicator competence to observations of microlevel conflict behaviors. Second, we could demarcate the precise forms of conflict behavior that most influence competence evaluations. For example, in two studies, specific appropriateness has been most affected by distributive tactics. At issue is what particular conflict behaviors are referenced when assessing specific appropriateness, and what did the communicator do to adapt, to recover, or to fail in transforming the specific inappropriate interaction into a more general appropriate interaction.

A second issue for future research stems from attributional processes during conflict. Specifically, partners quickly make attributions, including competence evaluations, given the actor's conflict behavior. Again, one reason for this is that people's field of experience is outwardly focused. It is possible to turn the communicator's field of experience inward by having the communicator view a video recording of his or her behavior in conflict

(e.g., Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980). One could compare those who view themselves on video with those who do not, using competence ratings of self and partner. Communicators who become more internally focused with the use of the video recording should offer harsher evaluations about self and kinder evaluations about the actor, versus those who remain externally focused.

A final consideration concerns the prospect of intervention. On the one hand, a competence approach typically suggests the possibilities of skills training and improvement of conflict processes (e.g., Patterson, Hops, & Weiss, 1975). However, such moves are conceptually (Sillars & Weisberg, 1987) and empirically (Jacobson, Follette, & Elwood, 1984) problematic. As a sobering indication of the need for better understanding the notion of conflict intervention, Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, and Killip (1992) found that after an educational workshop with high school students, males experienced as many undesirable attitude changes as desirable ones; that is, in several respects, males appeared to become more violent and prone to sexual aggression after undergoing an intervention program designed specifically to reduce this likelihood. Clearly, continued investigation of the role of competence in relational conflict is warranted.

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10 A Holistic Approach to Dispute Resolution at a Community Mediation Center

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In the local mediation office, the phone is ringing again. "Hello, is this the Mediation Center?" It's an angry voice, full of tension and belligerence.

"Yes, it is—how may I help you?" The intake coordinator is warm and friendly.

"It's that blasted dog next door. It's been barking all night for weeks! I've had barely 10 minutes of sleep since they got the dog! I finally said enough is enough, you know, and I called the police. They said they wouldn't do anything about it until I tried calling you people. What are you going to do about it? And whatever it is, it better be fast, because I can't take much more of this," says the exasperated caller.

"Have you tried calling your neighbor to talk this over?" the coordinator asks quietly.

"Are you crazy? He's not going to listen to me! I want this aggravation stopped!"

"You see," says the coordinator, "we're going to be calling your neighbor, and asking if he will meet with you to work out a solution. I need to know whether you've already spoken with him. It makes a difference in how we will approach him."

"Oh." The man's voice is quieter now, more thoughtful.

This is the way in which mediation intervenes in the conflict process. Mediation is a process that helps people resolve a conflict using a neutral third person. Mediation agencies are asked to intervene, just as the police are asked to intervene, in situations where there is doubt that the parties to a conflict can or will talk things through and reach a peaceful solution on their own.