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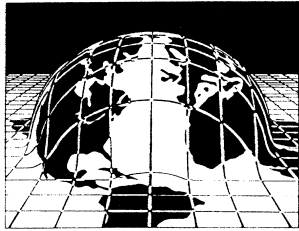
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PERSPECTIVE

A New Look at Conflict Management in Work Groups

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Members of work groups are highly interdependent and often share incompatible values, objectives, and opinions. As a result, conflict frequently arises. Given the profound impact of conflict on group effectiveness, scholars have sought to identify strategies that can mitigate its downsides and leverage its upsides. Yet research on conflict management strategies has accumulated inconsistent results. In this Perspectives piece, we argue that these inconsistent findings can be resolved if scholars take a more expansive view of the consequences of conflict management strategies: whereas existing research considers how individual strategies influence a single group conflict type (relational, status, process, or task), we consider the impact of individual strategies on all four conflict types. After building a typology by organizing strategies according to the conflict type that each is best equipped to manage, we argue that the strategies most appropriate for managing one type of conflict may systematically backfire by escalating other conflict types. For example, the adoption of a superordinate identity is likely to resolve relational conflict, yet exacerbate status conflict. In addition to uncovering these instances of “negative spillovers,” we shed light on the rarer phenomena of “positive spillovers,” which occur when conflict management strategies resolve conflict types they were not originally designed to influence. By highlighting how individual conflict management strategies influence multiple conflict types—often in contrasting ways—this Perspectives article reconciles conflicting findings and redirects the literature by providing scholars with new recommendations on how to study conflict management in work groups.

Keywords: conflict management; diversity; group conflict; group processes and performance; process conflict; relational conflict; status conflict; task conflict; work teams

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Introduction

Members of work groups are highly interdependent, operate within tightly coupled social systems, and frequently have incompatible aims. As such, conflict often arises. Work group members conflict in their relationships, their claims to status, their beliefs about how responsibilities should be allocated, and their approaches to solving problems (Weingart et al. 2015). Given that conflict has a profound impact on team functioning (Jehn 1995), there is widespread interest in how it can be managed effectively. Indeed, efforts to bind seemingly intractable schisms stretch back to the beginning of research on conflict (Walton and Dutton 1969). In the modern era, conferences and books have been aimed exclusively at understanding how to manage conflict, and some individuals devote their entire careers to neutralizing conflict (Kressel and Dean 1989). Perhaps more

indicative of its importance is that conflict management represents a core obligation even for those who do not specialize in it. To illustrate, Mintzberg (1971) observed that 30% of the responsibilities of managers involve resolving conflict. As a consequence of its timeless and essential role, conflict management constitutes a significant area of study in research on work groups (Behfar et al. 2008, Greer et al. 2008).

In spite of—or perhaps partly because of—their prevalence, theories on conflict management rarely overlap. Myriad paradigms exist, yet few linkages between them have been developed (Behfar et al. 2008, Blake and Mouton 1981, Greer et al. 2008, Kressel and Dean 1989, Thomas and Kilmann 1974, Tinsley 2001). Consequently, the status quo is a body of literature that is heavily populated, yet inadequately integrated. This would not be problematic were it the case that disparate

theories reinforced each other, or, at a minimum, did not contradict one another. But this is not the reality—particularly for research on conflict management strategies, which are circumscribed behaviors or interventions enacted to resolve group conflict. Superordinate goals have been effective bridging devices in some instances (Sherif 1958) but not in others (Deschamps and Brown 1983). Increased contact between combative members has been helpful in some instances (Gaertner et al. 1994) but not in others (Hewstone and Brown 1986). Boundary spanning has worked well in some cases (Tushman and Scanlan 1981) but not in others (Fleming and Waguespack 2007). Indeed, nearly a dozen conflict management strategies have accumulated equivocal results (Brewer 2007, Dovidio et al. 2007, Fiol et al. 2009).

To help explain these inconsistencies, we reassess the way researchers have examined the impact of conflict management strategies on the four distinct group conflict types (relational, status, process, and task). Whereas existing research typically considers the effect of individual conflict management strategies on a single conflict type, we take a more expansive view by considering the impact of individual strategies on *multiple* conflict types—an important advance given that different conflict types co-occur much more often than they do not (de Wit et al. 2012). After building a typology by organizing three dozen conflict management strategies according to the conflict type they are best equipped to resolve, we introduce a theoretical framework that helps identify a number of occasions when the strategies that most effectively manage one type of conflict may systematically backfire by escalating a different form of conflict. As one example of this type of “negative spillover,” a strategy to allow different members to share decision-making responsibilities may decrease status conflict by boosting a sense of fairness, yet increase process conflict by muddying the group’s hierarchy and causing more members to quarrel over who should perform what role. To substantiate our arguments, we chronicle a series of studies that have yielded findings that are inconsistent or run counter to the expected effects of a variety of strategies, explaining how our identification of negative spillovers can help resolve these conundrums. In addition to considering how a conflict management strategy can unexpectedly hinder forms of conflict it is not designed to influence, we examine the flipside of the coin: instances of “positive spillovers,” which occur when a conflict management strategy unexpectedly *benefits* a form of conflict it was not designed to manage. In sum, considering the impact of conflict management strategies on multiple forms of conflict uncovers a variety of spillovers that represent both critical boundary conditions and untapped opportunities.

Existing theories do not provide a clear framework for understanding how individual conflict management strategies influence nontargeted forms of conflict.

Much research on conflict management examines general orientations (e.g., collaboration versus competition) rather than specific strategies (e.g., superordinate goals). Accordingly, these theories do not provide a platform for understanding the consequences of specific strategies (Pruitt and Rubin 1986, Thomas and Kilmann 1974). As noted above, some research has investigated the use of individual strategies (Richter et al. 2006, Ronay et al. 2012) and even multiple strategies at the same time (Behfar et al. 2008), thereby considerably advancing theory on conflict management. However, this research has examined the effect of each strategy on either a single type of conflict or a general indicator of conflict that does not differentiate between distinct conflict types. In a departure from the existing literature, the central argument of our Perspectives piece is that the effectiveness of conflict management can be better understood by considering how individual strategies can each impact multiple forms of conflict—often in contrasting ways. In the discussion we highlight additional ways that our theory redirects the literature on conflict management. The upshot of our integrative effort is a framework that provides scholars from various backgrounds a more holistic sense of the consequences of conflict management.

A Typology of Conflict Management Strategies

Given that the objective of conflict management strategies is to set conflict to an optimal level for group effectiveness, the strategies that serve as the focal point of an analysis of unintended effects should be those that initially set their targeted form of conflict to the most optimal level. According to Doty and Glick (1994), typologies are useful devices for identifying these types of “ideal” strategies. To understand how strategies can trigger optimal amounts of each conflict type, we needed to take two steps, both of which are consistent with Doty and Glick’s (1994) guidelines for typology construction: (1) identify how many conflict types there are as well as the optimal amount of each, and then (2) identify how strategies can set each conflict type to its optimal amount.¹ In statistical terms, the first step relates to determining the optimal amount of each dependent variable (each form of conflict), while the second step relates to identifying how the predictor (each strategy) sets each dependent variable to that amount. After conducting these two steps, we followed Doty and Glick’s (1994) recommendation to take a third step: identifying specific examples of the ideal form of each strategy. These three steps are represented in Table 1, columns A–C.

Process of Typology Construction

Developing Categories: Determining the Optimal Amount of Each Conflict Type. Scholars have converged on the notion that there are four types of conflict.

Table 1 Typology of Conflict Management Strategies

A	B	C
Conflict type	How differences are addressed	Examples that most closely represent ideal conflict management strategies
Relational	Reducing differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopting a superordinate identity (Gaertner et al. 1989) • Adopting a relational identity (Hogg et al. 2012)
	Tolerating differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pro-diversity valuation (Homan et al. 2007) • Intergroup contact (Gaertner et al. 1994)
Status	Reducing differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiation (Pruitt and Carnevale 1993) • Adopting egalitarian norms (Pereira et al. 2009)
	Tolerating differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimizing status differences (Anderson et al. 2012) • Affirming the status of other members (Bendersky 2014)
Process	Reducing differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rotating responsibilities (Behfar et al. 2008) • Job sharing (Sherwyn and Sturman 2002)
	Tolerating differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subordination (Weick and Roberts 1993) • Sportsmanship (Organ 1988)
Task	Establishing a moderate amount of differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundary spanning (Tushman and Scanlan 1981) • Gatekeeping (Friedman and Podolny 1992)
	Tolerating differences to a moderate extent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minority dissent (Peterson and Nemeth 1996) • Devil's advocacy (Cosier and Rose 1977)

Notes. Of the 36 examples of strategies uncovered in our literature review, the examples in this table most closely corresponded to the ideal characteristics of each of the categories and subcategories of strategies. See the online appendix for a detailed description of how we determined the two best examples for each subcategory. Although the two examples shown for each subcategory may highlight slightly different aspects of the subcategory's ideal type, together they triangulate on the essential properties of their correspondent subcategory. Of the 36 examples of strategies, the number assigned to each subcategory was as follows: reducing relational differences, seven; tolerating relational differences, six; reducing status differences, five; tolerating status differences, five; reducing process differences, three; tolerating process differences, three; establishing a moderate amount of task differences, four; tolerating task differences to a moderate extent, three.

Relational conflict ties to incompatibility in identity, ideology, values, and interpersonal style (Jehn 1995). *Status conflict* pertains to attempts to undermine the hierarchical position of others or establish hierarchical differentiation (Bendersky and Hays 2012).² *Process conflict* involves disagreement in how roles and responsibilities should be assigned (Behfar et al. 2011, Jehn 1997). Finally, *task conflict* relates to “disagreements among group members about the content and outcomes of the task being performed” (de Wit et al. 2012, p. 360). Relational, status, and process conflict are generally detrimental for work group performance (Bendersky and Hays 2012, de Wit et al. 2012). In contrast, several lines of evidence point to the likelihood that moderate amounts of task conflict improve performance when the other forms of conflict are dormant. A number of studies have found a curvilinear effect between task conflict and performance, such that teams perform best with moderate amounts (Jehn 1995, De Dreu 2006, Farh et al. 2010). Reinforcing these findings, a meta-analysis by de Wit et al. (2012, p. 370) found that task conflict is positively related to team performance until it reaches high levels, at which point it is negatively related to performance. This evidence is consistent with the logic that groups need to strike a balance between dissension and consensus to perform effectively. Although some disagreement about how to approach the task will lead teams to more deeply consider various perspectives

and recombine ideas in novel ways, an excessive amount of prolonged task conflict may undermine the ability for members to winnow down ideas and converge on common solutions. In this way, “even if task conflicts can generate more creative decisions, too much task conflict can hurt their implementation by limiting consensus” (Jehn and Bendersky 2003, p. 206). Consequently, the primary categories of our typology (see Table 1, column A) are built on the assumption that relational, status, and process conflict should be minimized, whereas task conflict should be kept in moderation.

Developing Subcategories: Determining How Strategies Set Each Conflict Type to Its Optimal Level. Doty and Glick (1994) recommend that each primary category in a typology be evaluated according to the same properties. To identify the properties of conflict that need to be managed for all four conflict types, we sought to uncover themes of conflict that are universal.³ Thus, we turned to how conflict, in its most basic form, has been conceptualized. A phrase that reflects the two words that appear most often in 10 of the most influential conceptualizations of conflict is *incompatible differences* (Behfar et al. 2011, Boulding 1963, De Dreu and Beersma 2005, Deutsch 1973, Jehn 1995, Pondy 1967, Pruitt and Rubin 1986, Rahim 2011, Simmel 1955, Weingart et al. 2015). It is useful to closely inspect both words that comprise this phrase to identify the most basic ways to manage conflict.

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Given that one word (“differences”) indicates the *existence* of a property and the other word (“incompatibility”) indicates the way this property is *assessed*, group members can manage conflict with two basic types of actions. First, the very existence of differences can be minimized. To the extent that differences are reduced in the first place, it is not possible for them to be assessed as incompatible. Second, differences can continue to exist yet members can view them as tolerable rather than incompatible; that is, rather than viewing differences as destructive, they can be assessed as necessary for group functioning. To represent these two actions, we use *reducing differences* and *tolerating differences* as integrative themes for our typology. In the case of task conflict, which should be kept in moderation rather than eliminated, we suggest that moderately strong differences should be established and members should be encouraged to tolerate differences to a moderate extent. Together, these two themes (1) increase the precision of each of the four categories (organizing potential) and (2) serve as common distinctions that cut across each of the four categories (integrative potential). Since these two themes apply to each of the four conflict types, our typology has a total of eight subcategories (see Table 1, column B).

Assessing How Well Specific Conflict Management Strategies Fit Each Category and Subcategory. Finally, we sorted specific examples of conflict management strategies that have been studied in the literature according to how effectively they directly manage each of the four forms of conflict as well as whether they involve reducing or tolerating differences. We performed an extensive search of academic journals that publish research on group conflict management using a variety of search parameters. See the online appendix (available as supplemental material at orsc.2016.1085) for a complete description of this search process. Altogether, our search based on these parameters culminated in 36 examples of conflict management strategies, such as the adoption of superordinate identities (Fiol et al. 2009) and egalitarian norms (Pereira et al. 2009). These examples of strategies have largely been studied separately, and most of them have yet to be integrated within a common framework. We then adapted guidelines from Doty and Glick (1994) to assess the extent to which each example directly influenced each of the conflict types and validated this assessment by asking two management scholars to independently code the strategies using the same procedure we used. See the online appendix for a complete description of this coding and validation process.

As we unpack each of the eight subcategories of conflict management strategies in our typology below, we emphasize examples that most closely correspond to ideal forms—that is, those that set conflict types to their most optimal levels through the reduction or toleration of differences. Although some instances of conflict are so

intractable that no strategies can mend them (Fiol et al. 2009), these exemplar strategies are likely the best suited to do so. See Table 1, column C, for two exemplar strategies for each subcategory. We focus on more than one exemplar strategy for each of the eight subcategories to provide richer descriptions and illustrate core properties via triangulation; that is, although the examples of each ideal type of conflict management strategy have surface-level distinctions, they are united by the reality that, for a given conflict type, they either reduce differences or prompt members to tolerate differences.

The eight grey cells that appear on the diagonals of Table 2 indicate the optimal effects of each of the eight subcategories of conflict management strategies for their targeted conflict types.

Strategies That Attenuate Relational Conflict

Relational conflict involves incompatible differences in identity, values, beliefs, or preferences. The most pernicious instances of this conflict type involve ideological rifts—divisions based on sacred values (Bendersky 2014, Wade-Benzoni et al. 2002).

Reducing Differences. Rather than one party influencing the other to “come to the other side” via persuasion, the most effective strategies for reducing differences often involve pushing parties to “meet in the middle.” One representative way to achieve this is via the ladder of inference, in which members critically analyze why they have a particular ideological belief (e.g., a belief about the role of women in the workplace) (Ross 1994). By revisiting the assumptions that underlie their ideologies, conflicting parties may be open to converging on certain beliefs. Other approaches to addressing relational conflict involve reducing *perceived* differences by leveraging the flexibility inherent in one of the dominant mechanisms of cognition: categorization. Members can use recategorization, decategorization, and cross-categorization to reshape their understanding of how they are related to other members by developing more inclusive social categories (Brewer 2007, Gaertner et al. 2000). Even if objective characteristics cannot be changed (e.g., two Native Americans and two Hispanics will always belong to different racial categories), members can choose which categories are salient as social markers. Given that social categories are seen as proxies for values and beliefs, more inclusive categories can convince members that they are not divided by deep personal schisms. Perhaps the most well-known example of such a categorization-based strategy is a superordinate identity (Fiol et al. 2009), a concept similar to a common ingroup identity (Gaertner et al. 1993). In the same vein as a superordinate goal (Sherif 1958), a superordinate identity is a broad social category that is shared by those who are in conflict and do not otherwise sense a common bond (Dovidio et al. 2009).

Table 2 Effects of Conflict Management Strategies on All Conflict Types

	Strategies appropriate for managing relational conflict		Strategies appropriate for managing status conflict		Strategies appropriate for managing process conflict		Strategies appropriate for managing task conflict	
	Reducing differences	Tolerating differences	Reducing differences	Tolerating differences	Reducing differences	Tolerating differences	Establishing a moderate amount of differences	Tolerating differences to a moderate extent
Effect on relational conflict	1 Attenuates	2 Attenuates	3 No effect	4 Attenuates	5 No effect	6 No effect	7 Escalates	8 Escalates
Effect on status conflict	9 Escalates	10 Escalates	11 Attenuates	12 Attenuates	13 Attenuates	14 Escalates	15 Escalates	16 No effect
Effect on process conflict	17 No effect	18 No effect	19 Escalates	20 Attenuates	21 Attenuates	22 Attenuates	23 No effect	24 No effect
Effect on task conflict	25 No effect	26 Increases above optimal amount	27 Sets above or below optimal amount	28 Establishes optimal amount	29 No effect	30 No effect	31 Establishes optimal amount	32 Establishes optimal amount

Notes. Theory relevant to the eight diagonal cells (with green text and grey background) is presented in the section that introduces the typology. Theory relevant to the negative spillovers (the nine cells with text in red) and the positive spillovers (the four cells with text in dark blue) is presented in the section on spillovers. We reference the number in the upper right-hand corner of the relevant cell when articulating our arguments for each spillover effect. In our explication of spillovers, we expound on the “no effect” cells (those with black text).

A distinct, but related, concept is a relational identity. This strategy focuses attention on the uniqueness evident in the relationship between different members rather than a broader category to which members belong (Hogg et al. 2012). By focusing on a common bond, perceived differences in identity are minimized.

Tolerating Differences. Rather than influencing group members to meld with others, approaches that involve tolerating differences push members to appreciate and—when possible—value those who possess different identities, beliefs, and backgrounds. An example is pro-diversity valuation (Homan et al. 2007). Similar to mutual positive distinctiveness (Cramton and Hinds 2004), this tactic involves establishing a norm of interaction that places a premium on how differences in beliefs and ideologies are interpreted. This strategy calls for seeing differences as valuable for authentic self-expression rather than viewing them as deserving of rebuke or derogation. As with multiculturalism (Richeson and Nussbaum 2004), pro-diversity valuation can mend rifts by triggering a mentality in which individuals learn from those with different backgrounds. Another way to encourage members to understand and tolerate others’ differences is through direct exposure to those differences through contact (Gaertner et al. 1994). Such exposure is thought to reduce prejudice because actors get to know each other as individuals rather than as group members. Individuals who get to

know outgroup members on a personal basis are likely to stop stereotyping them within minutes (Blair 2002). This is similar to the principle of open communication (Behfar et al. 2008). At a more basic level, these approaches share much in common with perspective taking (Batson et al. 1997), which can lead empathy to supplant antagonism.

Strategies That Attenuate Status Conflict

Status conflict involves incompatible differences in access to, or interest in, hierarchy-defining resources. This includes power and authority, but is especially likely for status because it is more easily transferrable than other hierarchical characteristics (Hays and Bendersky 2015).

Reducing Differences. Negotiation can be used to redistribute resources that define hierarchies (Pruitt and Carnevale 1993).⁴ Since (1) most negotiations involve valued resources and (2) valued resources drive social hierarchies, it is possible that low-status parties can negotiate to reduce differences related to status conflict. Although those who are already in privileged positions often gain disproportionately from negotiations (which could enhance status differences rather than reduce them), subordinate members can position themselves to reduce status-based differences when they align into coalitions, thereby gaining power in numbers (Mannix 1993). Another way to reduce hierarchical differences is through the establishment of egalitarian norms (Pereira et al.

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2009), which can lead to a balancing out of a variety of cues that send status signals (De Dreu and West 2001). Egalitarian norms can “flatten” teams in a number of respects, including how members are recognized, the order in which they speak during meetings, how long they speak in meetings, and how they dress.

Tolerating Differences. Given that nearly all groups have some type of formal or implied hierarchy (Magee and Galinsky 2008), members can be encouraged to view hierarchical differences as necessary. This can be done by legitimizing the group’s hierarchy (Halevy et al. 2011). According to status characteristics theory (Wagner and Berger 1993), members can draw on formal cues or signals (e.g., job titles, office layout) to display signals that a hierarchy is appropriate, legitimate, and important for the success of all group members (Berger et al. 1998, Tinsley 2001). Rather than leading to resentment of the hierarchy, this can lead to dominance complementarity, whereby even subordinate members derive comfort from the functionality and order that hierarchy provides (Anderson and Kilduff 2009, Anderson et al. 2012). Similarly, status conflict may be smoothed over when dominant members justify the processes that put hierarchies in place. This is tantamount to procedural justice (Lind and Tyler 1988). For example, members can curb resistance from a subordinate bloc of research assistants who have been stripped of decision rights by suggesting that the work group should restrict decision making to a select few individuals in order to preserve efficiency. Another way to tolerate status differences is via status affirmation—“giving face” to others by displaying recognition and appreciation for their social standing (Bendersky 2014).

Strategies That Attenuate Process Conflict

Process conflict involves incompatible differences in how members believe roles and responsibilities should be allocated and procedures implemented (Behfar et al. 2011).

Reducing Differences. Strategies that reduce differences associated with process conflict operate primarily by more evenly distributing responsibilities—that is, who does what. The differences that lead to process conflict can be reduced, for example, through job sharing, which involves dividing specific responsibilities equally among group members (Sherwyn and Sturman 2002). Another avenue involves rotating responsibilities so that (1) different work group members perform distinct functions at any one given time, but (2) each member fulfills each responsibility at some point (Behfar et al. 2008). A related way to encourage members to reduce differences is to promote dynamic delegation. Klein et al. (2006) found that senior leaders on trauma resuscitation teams allowed junior members to guide the team in a particular phase of the resuscitation process if they had the appropriate skill set. The role of a junior member acting as the primary expert, however, was only temporary; senior members could redelegate authority as circumstances evolved

in what may be thought of as a “dance of delegation.” In this way, the status hierarchy was preserved, yet roles remained somewhat fluid and dynamic, thus making it an appropriate strategy for reducing differences related to process conflict.

Tolerating Differences. Strategies that promote the toleration of process-based differences raise members’ awareness of, and appreciation for, how they must assume distinct roles for the group to function properly. When members are prompted to consider the functionality of the entire group during task implementation, they are less likely to disagree about how their personal contributions can and should fit within the group. For example, Weick and Roberts (1993) found that an awareness of differentiation and specialization boosted coordination, thereby minimizing process conflict. Weick and Roberts (1993) termed this mentality “subordination” because it reflected an awareness of the importance of putting the group’s functioning before one’s own immediate interests. A similar example is sportsmanship—an attitudinal intervention that can increase members’ appreciation for the reality that they must occupy certain roles or invest an extreme amount of time during task implementation for their group to work effectively (Organ 1988).

Strategies That Optimize Task Conflict

Task conflict involves disagreements among group members about the content and outcomes of the task being performed. To optimize task conflict, ideal conflict management strategies are those that establish a moderate amount of these differences or lead members to understand the value of expressing these differences to a moderate extent.

Establishing Moderately Strong Differences. Work team members often cluster into distinct task-based subgroups according to their expertise (Bezrukova et al. 2009, Carton and Cummings 2012). Since different subgroups are likely to approach the task in divergent ways, they can provide a team with a generative middle ground such that the number of solutions the team considers is neither so small that it stifles healthy disagreement nor so large that it leads to a protracted debate (Bezrukova et al. 2009). However, subgroups can become isolated from one another, causing differences among them to become so extreme that teams struggle to converge on solutions. Teams can reduce this risk by employing boundary spanners—members who keep lines of communication open between subgroups (Gibson and Vermeulen 2003). By proactively culling information from members of one subgroup and sharing it with members of other subgroups (Tushman and Scanlan 1981), boundary spanners prevent subgroups from becoming secluded from one another and thus help teams establish what Gibson and Vermeulen (2003, p. 202) term a “healthy divide.” In this way, individuals who span subgroup divides ensure that different

subgroups do not approach the task in ways that are so disparate that they are irreconcilable (Lau and Murnighan 2005). Boundary spanning is not far afield from brokering (Chen et al. 2008) and gatekeeping (Friedman and Podolny 1992), which preserve the ability for members to develop unique solutions in small clusters while fostering the flow of high-quality information between these distinct clusters.

Tolerating Differences to a Moderate Extent. One way to promote a moderate amount of task conflict is to strike a balance across different phases of the task, such that teams avoid task conflict early on and then embrace it later on (Diehl and Stroebe 1987). Since task conflict often consists of members critiquing each other's ideas, individuals who witness ideas being "shot down" may hesitate to introduce divergent viewpoints (Stasser and Titus 1985). Thus, preserving a stage early in the team's life cycle when task conflict is weak encourages members to be more involved in the initial idea generation process. However, the work group must eventually winnow ideas down to a few implementable solutions; this requires task conflict. Indeed, teams that experienced little task conflict early in a project and a relatively large amount of task conflict late in the same project performed best in a study by Jehn and Mannix (2001). Teams can ensure that they experience a sufficient amount of task conflict in the latter phases of team work by encouraging members with minority opinions to challenge the group to consider alternative perspectives (Peterson and Nemeth 1996). Similarly, a member can be assigned to be a devil's advocate and be tasked with advocating for solutions that run counter to what the majority of the team prefers (Cosier and Rose 1977). These tactics create a norm of openness that prevents the team from converging on solutions without sufficiently considering alternative points of view (Janis 1982, Stasser and Titus 1985).

Spillovers

Although the logic in our typology suggests that it is clearly worthwhile to employ strategies that are ideally suited to manage one type of conflict, we posit that many of these strategies can escalate other (nontargeted) types of conflict—potentially causing more harm than if no attempt at conflict management was made at all. In addition to these "negative spillovers," we suggest that there will be some instances of "positive spillovers," which occur when the beneficial reach of a conflict management strategy is broader than prior research has indicated.⁵ Our consideration of negative and positive spillovers underscores our paper's central thesis, which is the importance of taking a more expansive view of conflict management by understanding the effect of individual strategies on multiple conflict types rather than only the individual form of conflict they are best suited to mitigate.⁶

Since conflict types co-occur more often than one type exists in isolation (de Wit et al. 2012), negative spillovers are most likely to arise when a strategy exacerbates another preexisting form of conflict. When multiple conflict types co-occur, members are susceptible to confusing *manifest conflict* (or overt conflict) and *underlying conflict* (Raven and Kruglanski 1970). Manifest conflict relates to surface-level signals; however, these signals often look similar for the different conflict types. Members may think that all surface-level behavior stems from one form of conflict when, in actuality, multiple forms are evident. For instance, Murnighan and Conlon (1991, p. 177) observed that even though bickering about how to play a musical piece between members of a string quartet appeared "at first glance" to be conflict about the task at hand, "many of these conflicts were less substantive than they appeared." In a deeper analysis of these groups, Murnighan and Conlon (1991) found that members sometimes negatively evaluated the ideas of others because of deep and long-lasting interpersonal friction. Thus, whereas it first appeared that only task conflict existed, in reality both task conflict and relational conflict were co-occurring. We suggest that the confusion between manifest and underlying conflict may explain not only when negative spillovers occur, but also when positive spillovers occur: an intervention can serendipitously resolve a preexisting conflict type that was not the target of the intervention even if members fail to detect it. In addition to considering the occasions when strategies act on preexisting forms of conflict, we consider occasions when members employ a strategy that unexpectedly *triggers* a form of conflict that was not already apparent. In this way, conflict management strategies can actually be the cause of conflict co-occurrence.

The mechanisms that explain how spillovers occur can best be understood by examining how two different types of conflict can be interdependent. There are six combinations of conflict types (relational/status, relational/process, relational/task, status/process, status/task, and process/task). We examined each of these combinations to determine whether the act of reducing or tolerating differences associated with the targeted conflict type may indirectly influence the nontargeted conflict type by shaping factors—including attitudes (e.g., how members compare themselves to others), behaviors (e.g., communication patterns), and self-defining features (e.g., status associated with certain roles)—that underlie the nontargeted conflict type. We propose that four of the conflict combinations (relational/status, status/process, status/task, and relational/task) are characterized by specific forms of interdependence that lead to spillovers, such that attempts to manage one conflict type will systematically increase or decrease the other conflict type (see the off-diagonal cells in Table 2). We use our typology as a foundation for our analysis because the distinction between reducing and tolerating differences allows us

to precisely identify when and how strategies associated with one conflict type escalate or attenuate another conflict type. We then explain why spillovers are unlikely to result from the remaining two combinations of conflict types (relational/process and process/task), thereby accounting for the cells in Table 2 for which we suggest that a given conflict management strategy will likely have no effect on another conflict type. Although our aim is to build theory that holds across most groups in most situations (Weick 1999), certain factors are likely to occasionally condition these effects. We explore some of these possible contingencies in the discussion.

Spillovers That Result from the Interdependence Between Relational and Status Conflict

To understand how reducing or tolerating differences that underlie relational conflict can influence status conflict and how reducing or tolerating status differences can influence relational conflict, it is useful to focus on the centrality of status for individuals' social identities. Although status is not a definitional component of relationships, the prospect of status loss is often interpreted as a threat to the self in relation to others (Marr and Thau 2014). As a result, people feel more vulnerable in their relationships when status differences are involved. Along these lines, although managing relational conflict by reducing the appearance of differences via a superordinate identity or other related strategies can bridge divides when different social groups have equal status, it may build antagonism among members of disenfranchised subgroups when there are status differentials. Low-status members become more aware of high-status members and are more likely to engage in negative upward comparisons. These members may also resent the idea that they should consider themselves a part of the same group as those who have high status, especially if low-status members have relied on a belief that their subgroup is unique to cope constructively with their lower social status (Hornsey and Hogg 2000). Additionally, low-status members may experience dissonance and frustration when they realize that the opportunity to build stronger interpersonal bonds through the adoption of superordinate and relational identities does not lead to equal access to hierarchy-defining resources. Consistent with these arguments, Saguy et al. (2009) found that high-status subgroups endorsed a superordinate identity that encompassed both their subgroup and low-status subgroups, whereas low-status subgroups (e.g., ethnic and racial minorities) focused on status differences between their subordinate subgroup and the dominant subgroup. Members of subordinate subgroups found it dispiriting that one social signal (the superordinate social category) indicated equality while another social signal (status) signaled inequality. Accordingly, we propose that reducing differences associated with relational conflict may increase status conflict (Table 2, cell 9).

Because of the centrality of status in social contexts, status conflict may escalate not only as a reaction to strategies related to reducing differences associated with relational conflict, but also in reaction to strategies involving the toleration of differences. Strategies such as open communication, pro-diversity valuation, and the contact hypothesis reduce barriers to communication, inducing members to get to know each other as individuals rather than relying on generalized stereotypes (Blair 2002). This, in turn, may reduce relational conflict. Yet this category of relational conflict strategies can backfire when status differences exist. When members are encouraged to think of each other differently and communicate with each other more openly, they become more aware of each other; that is, outgroup members become more salient. When high-status members become more top of mind for low-status members, low-status members may engage in more frequent and intense upward social comparisons (Dumas et al. 2013). Accordingly, they may stew over their lack of status and become more envious of high-status members than they were in the first place. Further compounding these problems is that low-status members may view strategies aimed at tolerating differences as misplaced and misguided because these strategies patch over disparities related to social hierarchy, which are viewed as sensitive and charged because they relate to a sense of social worth and the opportunity to control one's own fate (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Thus, low-status members may react to these conflict management strategies by undermining, rather than embracing, those who are more privileged (Dovidio et al. 2007).⁷ Moreover, just as relational conflict management strategies make low-status members more aware of high-status members, high-status members will become more aware of low-status members. This may amplify the tendency for high-status members to treat low-status members with less respect, further escalating status conflict (Amir 1969). In sum, we propose that tolerating differences associated with relational conflict may increase status conflict (Table 2, cell 10).

Whereas tolerating relational differences may escalate status conflict, tolerating status differences may have the opposite effect for relational conflict (i.e., conflict attenuation). The interdependence between individuals' status and sense of social worth presents members with a way to reduce interpersonal hostility by affirming an important component of others' social identities. As an example, in one study a form of relational conflict (ideological conflict) was reduced when participants were encouraged to affirm gains in status experienced by individuals who had an opposing political ideology (Bendersky 2014). This form of "giving face" reduced adversarial perceptions and buffered individuals against identity threat, making it more likely that they would compromise on a core personal belief. In this way, validating another member's social standing can be a catalyst for reducing ideological divides. Consequently, we expect that tolerating

status-based differences may attenuate relational conflict (Table 2, cell 4).

Spillovers That Result from the Interdependence Between Status and Process Conflict

Social hierarchy is often essential for effectively assigning and coordinating responsibilities, suggesting that status differences are useful for ensuring that teamwork remains efficient due to minimal process conflict (Magee and Galinsky 2008). In particular, hierarchy is useful for coordination because it reduces confusion about which members should assume different roles (Halevy et al. 2011) and provides a sense of order and predictability (Keltner et al. 2008). Thus, although hierarchy is not a definitional element of process conflict, steps that eliminate a clear hierarchy can be problematic. Toward this end, reducing status differences may escalate process conflict because a poorly defined hierarchy can cause more individuals to campaign for different ways to assign responsibilities. Delegation can thus become haphazard. For example, in a study of equity research analysts, Groysberg et al. (2011, p. 722) noted that small status differences are likely to lead to “too many cooks spoiling the broth.” A greater number of individuals believe they hold sway over the allocation of work, hampering the ability for responsibilities to be delegated smoothly. Hence, we propose the following potential spillover: reducing status-based differences may trigger process conflict (Table 2, cell 19). In contrast, tolerating status-based differences preserves a hierarchy within the team. Those with greater status can use their clout to assign responsibilities, and it is less likely that other members will attempt to interfere with their decisions (Magee and Galinsky 2008). This represents a positive spillover that follows from tolerating, rather than reducing, a status hierarchy. Specifically, we expect that tolerating status-based differences is likely to reduce process conflict (Table 2, cell 20).

However, if a team’s status hierarchy has not been established for legitimate reasons, then some members are likely to experience a sense of inequity. This can be problematic if teams attempt to manage process conflict by tolerating differences in roles and responsibilities via approaches such as subordination or sportsmanship. Although these approaches can reduce process conflict by clarifying how members who accept different roles benefit the work group, individuals who accept unfavorable roles may feel slighted, thereby escalating status conflict. They may understand that assuming an unfavorable role can benefit the group because the lack of role confusion improves the team’s ability to perform; however, they may feel disdain if their role signals diminished social standing. Indeed, employees who occupy a role that is low in status but essential for the functionality of a team are more likely to resent high-status members (Spector and Fox 2010). Individuals who set aside self-interest for the sake of the team’s overall efficiency are sensitive to

feeling exploited, and thus apt to interpret the actions of members in high-status roles as being excessively self-interested. Spector and Fox (2010) suggested that this makes employees more likely to undermine others’ status. Hence, we propose that ameliorating process conflict by tolerating differences may exacerbate status conflict (Table 2, cell 14).

Following the same logic for why tolerating process-based differences can enhance hierarchical tension, reducing process-based differences is likely to *defuse* hierarchical tension by balancing status cues throughout the group. For example, Behfar et al. (2008) found that rotating responsibilities promoted a sense of equity. Since each group member executed the same responsibilities at one point or another, the chance for members to feel exploited was minimized, lessening the potential for inequality. Although status conflict was not identified at the time of the study by Behfar et al. (2008), examining their finding through a prism informed by status conflict would suggest the presence of a positive spillover since a greater sense of equality corresponds with less hierarchical tension. In this way, we propose that reducing process-based differences may mitigate status conflict (Table 2, cell 13).

Spillovers That Result from the Interdependence Between Status and Task Conflict

The interdependence between status and task conflict stems from the reality that social hierarchies shape the way information is exchanged and, likewise, patterns of information exchange can influence social hierarchies (Bunderson and Boumgarden 2010). In particular, strategies that aim to reduce status conflict by flattening hierarchies (e.g., egalitarian norms) can reduce the power of individuals who are in the best position to serve as boundary spanners between subgroups because they are less likely to have the clout necessary to play an outsized role in within-group communication (Chen et al. 2008). The reduced role of boundary spanners may cause a suboptimal amount of task conflict because subgroup boundaries either become so weak that the exchange of competing viewpoints becomes unconstrained or subgroups become isolated and disconnected—either of which would impair the ability for teams to experience a moderate amount of task conflict. As an illustration, consider the study by Adams et al. (2003). Whereas individuals responsible for managing conflict first sought to provide opportunities to negotiate finite resources, the researchers concluded that subgroups needed to work through differences in how they framed the problem they were facing. To effectively manage this task conflict, some members would need to have sufficient status to serve a more central role in the team as spanners. Yet reallocation of hierarchy-defining resources dilutes this clout. In short, we suggest that reducing status-based differences may set task conflict below or above an optimal level (Table 2, cell 27).

Just as attempts to manage status conflict can backfire for task conflict, strategies aimed at optimizing task conflict by establishing moderately strong differences can likewise backfire for status conflict. As noted earlier, moderately strong differences between subgroups exist when subgroups are linked by individuals who act as boundary spanners. When there is little status conflict, boundary spanners can help promote a moderate amount of task conflict by spanning subgroups that have distinct areas of expertise. However, when status conflict is prevalent, this type of linking can be problematic. Consider research on brokering. Theory on structural holes suggests that brokers are likely to build political capital as they span boundaries, thereby increasing their status (Burt 2009). This can exacerbate preexisting status-based tensions among members. Along these lines, Valley et al. (1992) observed that brokers were not trusted by other members because they could acquire an overabundance of power by hoarding information. If there is already tension between group members based on status differentials, then brokering is likely to enhance that tension even more (Valley et al. 1992). Indeed, Fleming and Waguespack (2007) found that brokering was viewed with suspicion because group members assumed that brokers inevitably accumulated too much clout, information control, and status. Thus, when viewed through a conflict lens, we suggest that establishing a moderate amount of task-based differences may exacerbate status conflict (Table 2, cell 15).

In addition to the negative spillovers that characterize the interdependence between status and task conflict, there is an opportunity for a positive spillover: when members tolerate status differences, task conflict can be optimized. Although hierarchy may stifle the sharing of ideas because low-status members are likely to defer to high-status members (Joshi and Knight 2015), feelings of affirmation and legitimacy that flow from tactics related to tolerating status-based differences may instill a sense of psychological safety (Edmondson 1999). When both dominant and subordinate members believe that their social standing is respected by other group members, they are likely to feel less vulnerable to “losing face.” Their defenses may be lowered (Bendersky 2014), making them more open to putting forth dissenting viewpoints. In all, the combination of hierarchy (which tends to suppress the exchange of opposing viewpoints) and psychological safety (which facilitates the exchange of opposing viewpoints) leads us to expect the following spillover: tolerating status differences establishes a moderate (i.e., optimal) amount of task conflict (Table 2, cell 28).

Spillovers That Result from the Interdependence Between Relational and Task Conflict

Although social communication (which underlies relational conflict) and task-related communication (which underlies task conflict) are conceptually distinct, it is often

difficult to disentangle them (Lau and Murnighan 2005). To the extent that individuals are positioned to freely share work-related knowledge, they are more likely to interact about personal matters, and vice versa. This increases the likelihood of spillovers between relational and task conflict. For instance, interventions that drive members to tolerate interpersonal differences via increased contact and the encouragement of self-expression can reduce the ability for task conflict to boost performance. As noted earlier, a moderate amount of task conflict is likely to occur when boundaries between subgroups are carefully managed. When subgroup boundaries are so permeable that most or all work group members interact freely and members feel less inhibited because a norm of self-expression has been established, members are likely to express their own viewpoints with little constraint. This is likely to cause task conflict to be so extreme as to be harmful (De Dreu 2006). Consider the worst performing and least satisfied work group in the Behfar et al. (2008) study of conflict management strategies. After adopting a policy of open communication (i.e., extreme contact), group performance surprisingly *worsened*. One member noted, “[w]e talk (and talk, and talk, and talk) until a consensus (or agreement that promises an end to talking) is reached” (Behfar et al. 2008, p. 180). A policy meant to reduce interpersonal friction backfired. Thus, we propose that tolerating relational differences can create too much task conflict (Table 2, cell 26).

As noted earlier, establishing moderately strong differences through strategies such as boundary spanning and gatekeeping streamlines communication between groups with different knowledge bases by channeling it through an individual (Friedman and Podolny 1992). In the presence of relational conflict, this can backfire because it creates a boundary between subgroups, partitioning communication patterns across time in a way that may lead to ingroup/outgroup formation. Along these lines, Lau and Murnighan (2005) found that strategies geared toward managing task conflict were not useful because conflict was seeded in faultlines created by social categories. On the occasions when members from different subgroups do interact, their thoughts may be dictated more by “us versus them” antagonism than an understanding of other subgroup members as individuals. As a result, we propose that establishing moderately strong task-based differences may escalate relational conflict (Table 2, cell 7).

Relational conflict can also be exacerbated by strategies aimed at tolerating task-based differences to a moderate extent. For example, minority dissent may be constructive for task conflict because it encourages group members to consider ideas that differ from their own (Peterson and Nemeth 1996), but it also may increase relational tension. Since task-related communication and social communication tend to become entangled, subgroups that form according to divergence in opinions on how to approach the task may shape informal communication patterns.

This may threaten the group's social harmony and cohesiveness. Furthermore, group members may begin to personally identify with their ideas, heightening the sense that task conflict has boosted relational tensions (Mucchifaina and Pagliaro 2008). The relationship between social and task-related communication may help explain why Curşeu et al. (2012) found that minority dissent optimized task conflict, but heightened relational conflict. In short, relational conflict may escalate when groups tolerate task-based differences to a moderate extent (Table 2, cell 8).

Combinations of Conflict Types That Are Unlikely to Be Characterized by Spillovers

Team members' roles (which underpin process conflict) can shape—and be shaped by—social communication (which underpins relational conflict) and knowledge sharing (which underpins task conflict) (Greer et al. 2008). This raises the possibility that strategies that attenuate process conflict could spill over to relational or task conflict and strategies that optimize relational and task conflict could spill over to process conflict. However, in line with our prior arguments, spillovers do not occur as a result of merely any potential form of interdependence between two conflict types. Rather, the act of *managing* one conflict type must influence the psychological states and interaction patterns of members in a way that systematically increases or decreases the other conflict type. Along these lines, our examination of the literature related to the combination of relational and process conflict did not surface evidence to suggest that such systematic patterns exist.⁸ Similarly, our examination of research related to the combination of process and task conflict did not surface evidence to suggest that spillovers will occur.⁹ Indeed, within both combinations of conflict types, the evidence suggests that conflict management strategies could both decrease and increase the other conflict type, indicating that there are unlikely to be consistent spillover effects.

Discussion

Our typology and theoretical framework shed light on how individual conflict management strategies systematically influence multiple conflict types. Although scholars have studied the impact of conflict management orientations (e.g., contention and collaboration) on different types of conflict (De Dreu and Van Vianen 2001, Lovelace et al. 2001), these theories do not provide a framework through which to understand when and whether a conflict management intervention might mitigate one form of conflict yet have an unexpected negative or positive impact on another. Furthermore, since these models have focused on general dispositions that people have toward conflict, they do not shed light on conflict management *strategies*, which are specific interventions that teams use to manage conflict (e.g., adopting a superordinate identity).

Yet various inconsistencies in the literature involve such strategies. Existing research that has investigated individual strategies (e.g., Richter et al. 2006, Ronay et al. 2012) or multiple strategies (Behfar et al. 2008) has examined how they each influence a single conflict type. In this way, whereas existing work has largely focused on the eight diagonal cells in Table 2 (shaded grey), we have expanded this focus to the 24 off-diagonal cells in Table 2 (with the white background). We conclude by considering how this more holistic approach advances research on conflict management and diversity.

Implications for Theory on Conflict Management

Through our expanded view of conflict management, we provide theory on how, why, and when strategies may be more or less helpful than previously assumed. Conflict management strategies ideally suited to resolve one conflict type may backfire for another conflict type by further escalating conflict or, in the case of task conflict, setting conflict at a suboptimal level. By shedding light on these negative spillovers, our typology provides a springboard for reconciling apparently contradictory findings. We reviewed nearly a dozen instances in the literature in which our identification of negative spillovers can help resolve unanswered questions related to when strategies work effectively and when they do not. Thus, while there are well-known boundaries to conflict management strategies, such as when differences may be so entrenched that active conflict management will not work, our theory raises a new set of boundary conditions. Additionally, by uncovering positive spillovers, our model highlights the surprising generalizability of certain strategies. In sum, a more holistic view of conflict management illuminates previously overlooked strengths and limitations of a variety of strategies. To appropriately account for these spillovers, we suggest that scholars test the effects of conflict management strategies on multiple conflict types rather than only the conflict type that the strategy is best equipped to mitigate. As scholars seek to construct models that are sensitive to spillover effects yet parsimonious (i.e., including as few variables and statistical tests as are necessary), they can use our predictions in Table 2 as a guide for which conflict types should be tested. In some instances, scholars should investigate the effects of conflict management strategies on all four conflict types, whereas in others instance they may only need to examine consequences for two or three of them.

We not only shed light on which spillovers are likely to occur, but also provide an integrated sense of the theoretical mechanisms that explain *how* they occur: via interdependencies among four pairs of conflict types. Three of these four interdependencies involve status conflict due to the centrality of status for people's social identities (Marr and Thau 2014) and the importance of social hierarchy for both preserving work flow (a function of process conflict) and maximizing work effectiveness (a function of task

conflict) (Halevy et al. 2011, Magee and Galinsky 2008). As such, attempts to manage status conflict can influence all other forms of conflict and likewise status conflict can be influenced by attempts to manage the other forms of conflict. The single form of interdependence that does not feature status relates to the strong correspondence between social communication and task-related communication. These two types of communication are difficult to disentangle insofar that employees who share knowledge are more likely to communicate informally. This explains why attempts to manage task conflict can escalate relational conflict and vice versa.

Our theorizing presents other opportunities. Scholars can use our arguments to identify when strategies are likely to exacerbate preexisting forms of conflict versus when they may unexpectedly trigger forms of conflict that did not already exist in the group. Strategies that trigger conflict types that do not already exist are problematic in all circumstances, whereas strategies that backfire by exacerbating preexisting forms of conflict are only problematic when conflict types co-occur. Our theory can also be used to understand more complex, multistage approaches that occur when teams enact strategies that escalate certain forms of conflict and then enact other strategies that offset these undesired repercussions. For example, if strategies used to manage relational, process, or task conflict escalate status conflict, then groups can respond by enacting strategies aimed at tolerating status differences. Since these strategies are unlikely to backfire (see Table 2, cells 4, 12, 20, and 28), groups can potentially avoid all fallout. Despite the promise of using follow-up strategies to patch over unintended escalation, a close inspection of our predictions in Table 2 suggests that there will still be instances when strategies lead to backfiring that is not correctable by employing follow-up strategies (e.g., when relational and task conflict occur in isolation or together). On these occasions, the “bad is stronger than good” effect would imply that the negativity derived from exacerbating a nontargeted form of conflict may outweigh the positivity derived from mitigating the targeted form of conflict (Baumeister et al. 2001). Thus, even if a strategy attenuates one form of conflict, its net effect may be detrimental. Hand in hand with these theoretical implications are important methodological implications. In particular, scholars should put a greater emphasis on longitudinal studies in order to account for multistage effects in which a conflict intervention strategy resolves one conflict type in the short term but then escalates or exacerbates a distinct conflict type in the long term.

Beyond the many implications drawn from illuminating the impact of conflict management strategies on multiple conflict types, our theory adds value by integrating an extensive variety of conflict management strategies within the same theoretical framework. Initial progress toward

this end was made by Behfar et al. (2008), who introduced an inductively derived taxonomy that sorted seven conflict management strategies according to the conflict type they are best suited to address. We built on this work by integrating three dozen strategies within a deductively constructed typology. In doing so, we highlighted the fundamental ways that conflict management strategies are similar to, and different from, one another. We illuminated two subcategories—reducing differences and tolerating differences—that can be used to understand the themes that unite and distinguish all conflict management strategies. As a result, our framework integrates research that remains loosely connected. This comprehensive integration of the literature provides the groundwork for a holistic depiction of the interconnections between conflict management strategies and conflict types. In this way, our typology provides common terminology and sheds light on linkages that have not previously been uncovered, paving the way for scholars from a variety of backgrounds to understand the surprising pitfalls of certain conflict management strategies and the untapped potential of others.

The Relationship Between Work Group Diversity and Conflict Management

Barclay (1991, p. 145) argued that “an emphasis on managing conflict requires a discriminating understanding of its causes.” The most widespread conceptualizations of conflict assume that conflict is rooted in differences, and the study of differences is the province of research on diversity. By distinguishing between two ways that differences can be addressed (reducing versus tolerating), we have provided a parsimonious way to understand how group diversity causes conflict. At a broad level, it would be useful to consider how the “tolerating” approach compares to the “reducing” approach. On balance, the “tolerating” approach compares favorably to the “reducing” approach, as the latter is likely to backfire more often than the former, especially with respect to status conflict (see Table 2). Moreover, approaches to reducing differences are often more costly than approaches related to tolerating differences. Whereas strategies related to tolerating differences involve altering members’ attitudes, strategies related to reducing differences (e.g., rotating responsibilities) often require flexibility in routines and structures. In many cases, the costs of the latter approach may be so high as to be prohibitive (e.g., it may be impossible to rotate responsibilities in work groups in which specialization is extreme). When these considerations are taken together, one reasonable conclusion is that approaches related to tolerating differences are generally superior. Yet there are reasons not to dismiss approaches related to reducing differences. For instance, these strategies are more penetrating; since conflict is seeded in differences, reducing or eliminating differences associated with relational, status, and process conflict may be more

permanent and therefore worth the extra cost on many occasions.

The effectiveness of reducing versus tolerating differences depends on the type of conflict that those differences cause. For example, regardless of whether status conflict exists in isolation or co-occurs with any of the other forms of conflict, members should enact strategies aimed at tolerating differences rather than reducing them (see the two columns in Table 2 relevant to managing status conflict). And regardless of whether process conflict exists in isolation or co-occurs with any other form of conflict, members should enact strategies aimed at reducing differences rather than tolerating them (see the two columns in Table 2 relevant to managing process conflict). In this way, the usefulness of reducing versus tolerating differences for diversity researchers is underscored by the reality that the relative merit of these two approaches depends on which conflict type emerges. Altogether, the distinction between reducing versus tolerating differences is (1) parsimonious because it clusters strategies within each conflict type according to only two fundamental themes, (2) integrative because it shows that this same basic distinction is relevant for each type of conflict, and (3) valuable because it helps further distinguish how each type of conflict should be managed.

Managerial Implications

Practitioners can develop a conflict management decision tree by extrapolating from our theory. First, teams should identify which conflict type(s) exist. To avoid misdiagnosis, members can use several cues at once. At first glance, the most straightforward approaches to diagnosing conflict may appear to involve a careful probing of each member's interpretations. Yet work group members do not always agree on which form of conflict is present—or whether conflict exists at all (Jehn et al. 2010). Thus, members can also focus on behaviors that distinguish one form of conflict from another (e.g., jockeying over resources is likely to be unique to status conflict). Additionally, members can make attributions about conflict type according to which member attributes are present (e.g., functional differences may predict task conflict) or even how those attributes are configured—for example, teams are likely to experience the greatest amount of relational conflict when members are split into two equal-sized identity-based subgroups (Carton and Cummings 2012, 2013). Once team members have diagnosed which conflict type(s) exist, they can use our theory to identify the general strategy (reducing differences or tolerating differences) that is most likely to avoid escalating nontargeted conflict types. If multiple conflict types coexist and the implementation of strategies will always lead to backfiring effects, then teams may be better served by reverting to passive forms of conflict management (Thomas and Kilmann 1974).

Future Directions

Future research should consider the possibility of interplay between reducing and tolerating differences, such that the use of one moderates the effectiveness of the other. For instance, tolerating status differences may not be as effective when status differences are extreme because subordinate members may feel disenfranchised. In these cases, high-status members may look to reduce status differences to some extent and only then enact strategies related to tolerating them. The potential interplay between reducing and tolerating differences re-raises an issue that we acknowledged previously: contingencies on our proposed effects. Toward this end, the broad scope of our theorizing led us to focus on effects that are likely to hold across most situations; however, scholars should be cognizant of the moderating role of factors such as task types, phases of teamwork, and group size. In a similar vein, scholars should adapt our model to situations in which the assumptions of our theory are likely to change. For instance, in certain instances it may be the case that some amount of process conflict is useful or that there is a positive relationship between task conflict and performance rather than a curvilinear relationship.

Conclusion

When members with different backgrounds, predilections, and expertise work in tandem, conflict is often an inevitable—and sometimes essential—byproduct of teamwork. But whether conflict represents a beneficial or a destructive force in work groups depends on how it is managed. Our Perspectives piece provides a new look at conflict management, helping to shed light on inconsistent findings by identifying when specific interventions are likely to be more beneficial than previously assumed as well as the surprisingly large number of situations when they may backfire. This analysis therefore serves as both an integrative effort and a cautionary tale. Group members should act with heed when attempting to manage conflict, for their good intentions might unexpectedly escalate it.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material to this paper is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2016.1085>.

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Endnotes

¹Outcomes of conflict management are most long-lasting when work group members participate in the implementation of conflict management strategies, because members remain oriented toward a common purpose (Hackman 1987). Thus, we distinguish conflict management from the overarching category of conflict *resolution*, which can involve controlling members or forcing their capitulation through formal systems. Hence, we do not consider actions such as arbitration, regulation, or the alteration of team composition by management.

²Consistent with the definition used by sociologists, status corresponds to numerous factors that underpin hierarchies, such as power, prestige, and authority. In this way, status conflict represents zero-sum exchanges in which individuals gain at the expense of others. Furthermore, since they are important for defining hierarchies, we assume that conflict involving resources represents status conflict.

³Since general orientations reflect the dispositions of involved parties (e.g., collaborative versus competitive) rather than ways that the properties of conflict itself can be addressed, we do not rely on theories of conflict management orientations to develop themes.

⁴Since (1) the possession of resources is a key characteristic of hierarchy and (2) discord over hierarchy is the distinguishing characteristic of status conflict, we position negotiation as more central to status conflict than other forms of conflict.

⁵It is important to further clarify the distinction between the direct effects covered in our typology and the indirect effects that we cover in our consideration of positive spillovers. By definition, a single conflict management intervention involves a narrow scope of actions or attitudinal changes, and thus is constrained with respect to its influence. The narrow scope of a given strategy leads it to typically only influence one conflict type directly. If a strategy has an effect on another conflict type, this effect is likely to be *indirect*—working through one of the interdependencies that we identify in the section on spillovers, such that a strategy first reduces one form of conflict, which then has positive downstream consequences for another form of conflict. Consistent with Doty and Glick's (1994) guidelines, this "positive spillover" for the second conflict type would not lead the strategy to be coded as an "ideal" strategy for that conflict type because the strategy does not directly influence the member differences that underlie it. Even if a different conflict management strategy can mitigate conflict indirectly, an indirect effect is more likely to be attenuated than a direct effect. This is likely why the strategies we code as positive spillovers have not been examined with respect to multiple forms of conflict; scholars may have assumed that they only have an effect on the targeted conflict type. Consequently, we discuss positive direct effects in the section introducing our typology and positive indirect effects in the section on spillovers.

⁶When developing our predictions, we do not limit ourselves to work produced by management scholars. Instead, we draw from a diverse array of literatures relevant to group conflict, including political science, anthropology, psychology and sociology. In doing so, we answer calls for a view of group conflict informed by a variety of disciplines that focus on groups (Jehn and Bendersky 2003, Mannix 2003). By casting such a wide net, our theory can more clearly contribute to groups scholars in all social science disciplines.

⁷Although we focus on attempts to influence the attitudes of all group members, these strategies may sometimes be directed exclusively toward high-status members. These strategies are still likely to backfire, however, because they reduce barriers to communication and cause low-status members to be more aware of high-status members, leading to negative upward comparisons.

⁸We do not predict spillovers for Table 2, cells 5, 6, 17, and 18. The following is a brief overview of the reasons why we do not posit these effects. Reducing differences in roles and responsibilities is likely to alter social communication patterns. This could reduce relational conflict by helping people cultivate new social bonds or increase relational conflict by disturbing the communication patterns that underlie existing relationships. Tolerating differences in roles and responsibilities could reduce relational conflict by causing people to appreciate each other more since members are doing what is best for the team, yet it could also increase relational conflict by entrenching people in fixed communication patterns and leaving some members alienated from others. Reducing relational differences could decrease process conflict by helping members respect each other's role preferences more, yet it could increase process conflict by leading people to be so tentative to avoid breaching their shared identity that they are unable to divide up tasks efficiently. Tolerating relational differences could decrease process conflict if it leads members to better take the perspective of others when determining who should take on each role, yet it could also increase process conflict since people may still have an inherent preference to work with those from their same social category.

⁹We do not predict spillovers for Table 2, cells 23, 24, 29, and 30. The following is a brief overview of the reasons why we do not posit these effects. It is difficult to predict how either establishing or tolerating task-based differences will influence process conflict, as the existence of boundaries between subgroups may provide a starting point for determining how to divide up roles yet render it more challenging to work through the nuances of implementation and coordination. Similarly, it is unclear how either reducing or tolerating differences in roles and responsibilities will influence task conflict. Whereas the existence of role-based differences may lead to fixed communication patterns in subgroups, it may also make some members feel more marginalized and less likely to participate.

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