Conflict-solving orientation and goal management:
Effectiveness of opening messages in interpersonal conflict

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Interpersonal conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships. The effective management of conflict is critical to the quality of intimate relationships after one party has violated a relationship norm. This dissertation describes the development of a message analysis system that classifies conflict opening messages in terms of message conflict-solving orientation and message goal structure. An initial test of the viability of the message analysis system was conducted on confrontation messages (or conflict opening messages) that are used by a dating partner in the opening stage of a conflict interaction to initiate a conversation about the conflict after the other partner has violated a relationship norm. Conflict opening messages embodying different levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were created and examined for their effectiveness.

Employing a message perception paradigm, 419 undergraduate students who were currently in a dating relationship completed an online questionnaire in which they were randomly assigned to read one of eighteen conflict opening messages and report their perceptions of the effectiveness and outcomes of the message. The results indicated that conflict opening messages embodying higher levels of conflict-solving orientation and/or higher levels of goal structure were evaluated as more effective and more likely to result in conflict resolution and relationship enhancement than conflict opening message embodying lower levels of conflict-solving orientation and/or lower levels of goal structure. Participants’ perceived importance of identity goals was also found to affect
their evaluations of the conflict opening messages.

This investigation addresses the limitations in the literature of conflict management style, provides a more complete test of behavioral complexity theory, and adds to the understanding of features of conflict messages that are effective in conflict opening stages.
Dedication

To Dad and Mom. Your love is my motivation and strength. Thank you for being there for me as I went through an emotional roller coaster the past few years. Thank you for allowing me to take my own pace in becoming a more well rounded person. You have taught me to be honest and diligent by being an example. I love you and am proud to be your daughter.

To God be all the glory.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Conflict is a pervasive feature of social life. Its ubiquity has been identified by scholars across the disciplines to be an important problem for research. Urban planners, social and political theorists, for instance, study public disputes and deliberative practices (e.g., Forester, 2009). Legal scholars focus on the democratic and civil procedures for adjudicating differences, which has led to the establishment of Harvard’s Program on Negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 2011). Organizational scholars (e.g., Thomas & Pondy, 1977) focus on the features of bargaining, negotiation, and collaboration that facilitate organizational functioning. Social psychologists and communication scholars identify the features and outcomes of conflict for friends, couples and families (e.g., Gottman, 1994, 2011). The focus of this dissertation is the management of interpersonal conflict, particularly in romantic relationships. Its aim is to propose a message analysis system that classifies conflict opening messages based on two dimensions: conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. The dissertation tests this message analysis system by examining messages that are used in the initial stage of conflict interaction—the opening stage, in which a romantic partner for the first time engages another partner in a conversation about a perceived disagreement over behavioral norms within the relationship or situation.

Interpersonal conflict is embedded in close relationships (Donohue & Cai, 2014), and is strongly associated with people’s relational and life satisfaction. In a study of
2,000 Americans, Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) found that interpersonal problems were among the most common contributors to the unhappiness of people’s lives. The possibility and intensity of conflict has been found to increase as the intimacy of the relationship grows (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Coser, 1956), and if not managed well, is destructive to the relationship and individuals’ psychological and physical wellbeing (See Roloff & Soule, 2002, for a review).

Thus, understanding the management of conflict is important to relationship satisfaction. Communication is recognized to be an intrinsic feature of conflict, and is the central concern in the understanding of conflict management (Thomas & Pondy, 1977). Numerous studies have examined communicative behaviors in conflict management in personal relationships, such as roommate relationships, friendships and romantic relationships (Caughlin, Vangelisti, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013; Sillars & Canary, 2013). Research has consistently found that effective conflict management is of critical importance in maintaining satisfactory close relationships (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Gottman et al., 1998).

A number of theoretical frameworks have been employed to examine interpersonal communication in conflict management. Various ways of conceptualizing and categorizing different conflict management styles and strategies have been proposed (e.g., Canary, 2003; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Sillars et al., 1982). One of the most prevalent frameworks of conflict management styles has been Rahim’s dual-concern model which differentiates conflict styles on two dimensions (i.e., high or low concern for self, and high or low concern for others), that has resulted in five conflict management styles: avoiding, integrating, obliging, dominating, and compromising.
Scholarship using these conflict styles has contributed substantially to the study of interpersonal conflict management. However, it does have limitations. For instance, it fails to account for the fact that conflict messages are sometimes multifunctional, and can fit multiple categories. This insufficiency in the conflict style framework is manifested by the diverse versions and adaptations of the two-dimensional conflict style classification model over the decades (e.g., Canary, Lakey, & Sillars’ (2013) or Sillars & Canary’s (2013) systems of conflict strategic choices that varies by directness and competition-cooperation or valence; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung’s (2001) eight-style model that includes the five original styles along with three additional styles: emotional expression, third-party help, and passive aggression). The insufficiency of the conflict style framework is partly due to the fact that the conceptualization of conflict styles has employed a linear model of communication, which results in the framework only examining the general tendencies that an individual assumes in dealing with conflict, but does not specify message features and situationally-variable factors (Putnam, 2006). Other important dimensions such as emotion and identity that are intrinsically involved in conflict situations are ignored (Putnam, 2006).

To address some of these issues, some communication scholars have proposed that message analysis systems adopt rational models of message design that focus on the topoi involved in the focal context to examine more or less effective messages (Clark & Delia, 1979; O’Keefe & Delia, 1982; 1988; O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). This dissertation extends this line of research by proposing a message analysis system that summarizes features of conflict messages used by romantic partners to initiate a conflict conversation regarding a relationship transgression. The system proposed in this dissertation addresses
the limitations of the conflict style framework, and classifies conflict messages in terms of 1) the conflict-solving orientation (i.e., eristic orientation, conventional-confrontation orientation, or collaborative orientation) the message takes, and 2) the structure of goals that the message accomplishes (i.e., minimal goal structure, unifunctional goal structure, or multifunctional goal structure).

A multiple goals perspective is adopted in the research of this dissertation. This theoretical perspective assumes that all communication, including conflict communication, is goal-driven, and that communicative behaviors reflect efforts to manage multiple, often conflicting, goals of the communicator (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982). Specifically, this dissertation employed behavioral complexity theory in terms of employing a rational model and goal complexity in designing conflict opening messages (O’Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe & Delia, 1982, 1988). According to behavioral complexity theory, one way to conceptualize the sophistication of communicative messages is the degree of behavioral complexity reflected in the message, which indicates the degree to which the message address the concern for multiple goals and the way goals are expressed.

Based on behavioral complexity theory, messages that are more behaviorally complex are more sophisticated and more effective than messages that are less complex. Because conflict messages embodying a collaborative conflict-solving orientation engage the other party in a dialogue to co-create and re-construct the social situation in which both parties’ goals are aligned and conflict can be easily resolved, these messages are expected to be more complex, thus more effective, than conflict messages embodying a conventional-confrontation conflict-solving orientation (which do not re-construct the
situation but appeals to conventionally defined social/relational rules, roles and expectations to persuade the other party that one’s own viewpoint is the correct position), and conflict messages embodying an eristic conflict-solving orientation (which employ negative emotional expression or coercion to gain immediate behavioral compliance from the other party). Similarly, because conflict messages embodying a multifunctional goal structure attend to multiple interactional goals such as identity goals and relationship goals, as well as the instrumental task goal of the conflict situation, these messages are considered to be more behaviorally complex and more effective than conflict messages embodying a unifunctional goal structure (which only attend to the instrumental task goal of the conflict situation but do not address identity and relationship goals), and conflict messages embodying a minimal goal structure (which do not attend to any clear goal relevant to the situation).

To test the message analysis system, evaluations of the effectiveness of conflict messages embodying different levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were collected and compared, and perceived message outcomes on conflict resolution and relationship impact were tested. This study focused on the opening stage of conflict interactions, and attention was given to confrontational messages that romantic partners use in conflict openings—the message a partner uses in the initial confrontation stage of a conflict interaction to communicate to the other that “his or her behavior has violated or is violating a rule or expectation for appropriate conduct within the relation or situation” (Newell & Stutman, 1988, p. 271).

The opening stage of conflict interactions is an important topic in the research of effective conflict management. The way a conflict discussion is initiated is critical in
determining interaction outcomes on conflict resolution, and may have significant impact on relationship quality. In fact, Carrere and Gottman (1999), by observing newlyweds’ conflict interactions, found that communicative behaviors during the first three minutes of the conflict discussion accurately predicted divorce six years later. Communicative behaviors in conflict openings are critical to the success of conflict resolution (Benoit & Benoit, 1990; Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Reznik & Roloff, 2011). On the one hand, the opening stage of conflict interaction defines the nature of the conflict, and shapes subsequent communicative behaviors (Benoit & Benoit, 1990; Remer & Mesquita, 1990). Certain communicative behaviors in conflict openings tend to lead to conflict escalation, while other behaviors have the potential to decrease conflict intensity and facilitate successful conflict management (Benoit & Benoit, 1990). On the other hand, communicative behaviors enacted in conflict openings are also associated with actors’ beliefs about whether the conflict is resolvable (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Reznik & Roloff, 2011), which is a better predictor of relationship quality than the frequency of arguments (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Therefore, the understanding of the nature of conflict openings, and a classification of communicative messages in terms of different levels of effectiveness in conflict openings are of theoretical and practical value in the understanding of conflict management.

Given the importance of the conflict opening stage, one would think that conflict opening research is extensive, but it is not extensive and is largely fragmented (Benoit & Benoit, 1990), as most conflict research focuses on conflict behaviors or styles over entire conflict interactions or episodes. To address this gap in the literature of
interpersonal conflict management, this dissertation aims to test the message analysis system exclusively on conflict messages used in the opening stage of conflict interaction.

Outline of the dissertation

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, topics relevant to the dissertation study from the interpersonal conflict literature are reviewed. The chapter ends with a discussion of the problems with the existing interpersonal conflict literature, and proposes the aims of the study. The specific conflict context for this study is also identified.

Chapter 3 first reviews and summarizes existing research relevant to conflict openings and then reviews the framework formed for the current study. The hypotheses are proposed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 4 describes the method used in the study, including the development of stimuli, data collection procedures, and instruments.

Chapter 5 presents the findings resulting from the analyses of the hypotheses.

Chapter 6 discusses the study’s findings and provides theoretical and practical implications. The strengths and limitations of this study are examined, and directions to future research are discussed.
Chapter 2: Interpersonal Conflict Research

Communication scholars interested in conflict have generally focused on identifying the features of conflict and effective conflict management practices. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to provide a general landscape to the interpersonal conflict literature from which to situate this dissertation study. It begins by reviewing the prevalent definitions of conflict and follows by reviewing four areas of research: (a) conflict frequency and topics in dating relationships, (b) conflict behaviors, orientations and patterns, (c) linkages between conflict behaviors and outcomes, and (d) interpretive approaches to conflict. A final section reviews problems and gaps in these literatures that point to the conceptual framework and the specific focus of this study.

Interpersonal Conflict in Intimate Relationships

Definitions of Interpersonal Conflict

In her opening chapter of the *Sage Handbook of Conflict Communication*, Linda Putnam (2006) observes that academic research on conflict and conflict management in the Communication discipline substantially increased in the 1970s, with most definitions of conflict coming from interpersonal or organizational researchers. For example, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) define interpersonal conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals (p. 23).” Putnam and Poole (1987) similarly defined conflict as “the interaction of interdependent people who
perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who sees the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals (p. 552).” Barki and Hartwick (2001) defined conflict as “a phenomenon that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals (p. 198).” By synthesizing different conceptions of interpersonal conflict, common characteristics of interpersonal conflict are: partners in an interdependent relationship, the existence of disagreement (or incompatible), the interference of goals, and emotional arousal. These characteristics have been employed in both research and teaching definitions (e.g., Pruitt & Rubin, 1987; Thomas, 1976; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

**Conflict Frequency and Topics**

Classic conflict theories have stressed the inevitability of social conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Simmel, 1955), so researchers have sought to determine the extent to which conflict is a normal event in relationships. Yet data on the frequency of conflict, particularly in dating relationships, is not extensive. Employing diary methods, Lloyd (1987) and Fitzpatrick and Sollie (1999) have found that dating couples averaged 2-3 disagreements per week, while community samples of married couples reported “unpleasant disagreements” of only 1-3 disagreements a month (Kirchler et al., 2001; McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992). Braiker and Kelley (1979) found that conflict frequency increased as couples moved from casual to serious dating, after which conflict frequency stabilized; similarly, Lloyd and Cate (1985) found that as commitment and relational interdependence increased, so did conflict frequency (also see Sprecher & Felmlee, 1993). The frequency of conflict is seen as an important predictor of relational...
outcomes in both dating relationships (Cramer, 2000; Surra & Longstreth, 1990) and marital relationships (Caughlin & Huston, 1996).

Interpersonal conflict in intimate relationships typically involves specific topics or issues that partners routinely disagree about. Research categorizing the topics and issues of conflict in romantic relationships has proceeded in several ways. Much of this research has been conducted with married couples to learn the specific topics over which spouses disagree, including household labor, money and possessions, jealousy/possessiveness, sex, and children as the most often named issues (Gottman, 1979, 1994; Mead et al., 1990). Other researchers have proposed categorical schemes to organize and understand these conflict issues. For example, Canary (2003) proposed nine sites of conflict potential: identity management, aggression, frustration, lack of fairness, incompetence due to ignorance, incompetence due to egocentric motives, relationship threat, predispositions, and general learned responses. Each conflict potential site has a set of sub-categories that incorporate many topics that have been used in research. Similarly, Kelley and associates (Kelley et al., 1978; Braiker & Kelley, 1979) have classified conflicts over three dimensions: specific and concrete behaviors, relational rules and norms, and conflicts over personality traits.

Another method used to categorize conflict topics has been to employ a two-category system: disagreement/disfavor about behaviors (e.g., transgressions, expectation violations) and disagreement/disfavor about ideas (e.g., differences in political views, ideologies) (Newell & Stutman, 1988). This distinction was redefined by Johnson (2002) as the difference between personal issues and public issues in interpersonal argument. Public issues concerns disagreement on issues outside of the partners’ relationship (e.g.,
policies, welfare, ideologies), with behavioral implications (e.g., voting) that do not have immediate and direct influence on everyday functioning of the relationship (Johnson et al., 2007). On the other hand, conflict over personal issues focus on issues closely related to the interpersonal relationship of the partners. These issues often concern partners’ behaviors within the relationship, such as relationship transgressions and expectation violations (e.g., lying, infidelity, insensitivity, division of household chores). This dissertation focuses on conflict over personal issues, because partners are more interdependent on these issues, at least one partner’s goals are interfered with, and the lack of resolution often has an adverse impact on the participants’ relationship (Newell & Stutman, 1988).

**Relationship Transgressions**

One theme that can be found most of these observations and descriptions of conflict in intimate relationships is that conflict often involves violations of partners’ expectations or relationship rules/norms, which is often called “relationship transgressions” (Metts, 1994; Roloff & Cloven, 1994). Metts and Cupach (2007) reviewed a series of studies in which participants were asked to describe an event involving their romantic partner or friend engaging a relationship transgression (Metts, Morse, & Lamb, 2001; Metts, Pensinger, & Cupach, 2001). They discovered nine categories of transgressions: lack of sensitivity (thoughtless, disrespectful, and inconsiderate behavior), disregard for primary relationship (not privileging the primary romantic relationship), inappropriate interaction (inappropriate behaviors, especially during conflict interaction), lack of concern, responses, broken promises, extra-relational
involvement, relational threats confounded by deception, deceptions/secrets/privacy, and abrupt termination of the relationship.

Jones and colleagues (2001), in a chapter about interpersonal transgressions, also reviewed a body of literature on aversive social processes and identified five major categories of behaviors that threaten relationship quality and continuity: rejection and hurt, jealousy, expressions of anger, deception, and infidelity. Similar findings resulted from participants in Roloff, Soule and Carey’s (2001) study, who were asked to recall and describe an event involving a relationship transgression in their relationship. Content analysis of these descriptions revealed five categories of relationship transgression behaviors: giving the relationship a low priority, insensitive/inconsiderate behavior, infidelity, dominating behavior, and lack of openness/honesty. Cameron, Ross, and Holmes (2002) also identified a similar list of transgressions. Their content analysis of participants’ report of relationship transgressions yielded ten categories of negative behaviors: inconsiderate behavior, neglecting the partner, violating partner’s desired level of intimacy, threat of infidelity, infidelity, broken promises, verbal aggression, violent behavior, unwarranted disagreement, and overreaction to partner’s behavior.

Some studies have also shown that that not all transgressions are of equal severity (Kowalski et al., 2003; Metts, 1994). For example, infidelity and deception are considered to be traumatic to relationships, while other violations such as insensitive behavior, forgetting birthdays, and giving priority to other relationships are considered to be less detrimental (Cionea, 2012). This dissertation focuses on these minor transgressions. On the one hand, minor relationship transgressions tend to happen more frequently in the everyday functions of romantic relationships than severe transgressions
(Cionea, 2012). The repeated occurrence of these minor transgressions can aggravate partners’ negative reactions (Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005; Kayser, 1993), and may be as aversive as severe transgressions (Kowalski, 2000), resulting in relational distancing (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). On the other hand, much past research has focused on studying severe relationship transgressions, while less is known about communicative behaviors in conflict interactions about these minor violations (Cionea, 2012). Therefore, this dissertation examines the features of messages that are used to initiate conflict interaction about these less severe transgressions.

As can be seen from the above studies and chapters, several categories of negative behaviors have emerged as repeated themes that are considered to cause relationship transgressions and rule violations, such as neglecting the relationship, or giving the primary relationship a low priority and engaging in insensitive behaviors. In a recent study, LaBelle, Booth-Butterfield, and Weber (2013) asked participants to indicate on a scale or nominate an instance in which their romantic partner or friend had “done something that caused them emotional pain” (p. 225). They found that among all the types of negative behaviors, neglecting and insulting the participant were ranked top 2 and top 3 of the most frequently reported negative behaviors. In order to increase the generalizability of analysis, this dissertation contextualizes conflict interactions among these two relationship transgression situations: neglecting the relationship (or giving the primary relationship a low priority) and engaging in insensitive behavior. These two types of transgressions have been found to be common in romantic relationships, seen as minor relationship transgressions, and to frequently instigate interpersonal argument in
romantic relationships (Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002; Metts & Cupach, 2007; Roloff, Soule, & Carey, 2001).

Conflicts Styles and Strategies

Conflict communication behaviors can be described as broad styles or strategies, and specific patterns and acts (Sillars & Canary, 2013). This section reviews the literature of theorizing about conflict styles and strategies, and proposes the study of this dissertation from identifying the limitations in this line of literature.

Conflicts Styles and Strategies

In the study of interpersonal conflict, conflict handling styles and strategies have been theorized and categorized in a variety of ways. Putnam (2013), in a recent review chapter, synthesized the conflict study literature and identified four models scholars have employed in the study of conflict: the dual concern model, the integrative and distributive negotiation model, the intergroup conflict model, and the mediation competency model. Among the four, two models have been particularly relevant to the study of interpersonal conflict styles and strategies: the dual concern model, and the negotiation model.

The dual concern model. The earliest conceptual schemes to classify conflict handling behaviors include Follett’s (1940) five-style classification and Deutsch’s (1949) simple competition-cooperation dichotomy. Follett identified five styles that individuals often use when dealing with conflict: domination, integration, avoidance, suppression, and compromise. Deutsch argued that the behaviors individuals adopt in dealing with conflict vary on a single dimension ranging from competition to cooperation. The latter simple dichotomy was soon criticized (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Ruble & Thomas, 1976;
Smith, 1987) and replaced by a series of two-dimensional conceptual schemes (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

The first two-dimensional conceptual model, or dual-concern model, was introduced by organizational conflict researchers, Blake and Mouton (1964), who argued that conflict in an organization can be managed in different ways, based on whether the manager has high or low concern for people (i.e., a first dimension) and high or low concern for production (i.e., the second dimension). From these two dimensions five styles of conflict management were identified: forcing (low concern for people and high concern for productivity), problem solving (high concern for both people and productivity), withdrawing (low concern for both people and productivity), smoothing (high concern for people and low concern for productivity), and compromising (moderate concern for both people and productivity). These styles were very similar to those identified by Follett (1940). Other examples of two-dimensional conceptual schemes include Thomas’s (1976) five styles (i.e., competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising) based on the dimensions of assertiveness (high or low) and cooperativeness (high or low), and Rahim’s (1983, 1992) five styles (i.e., dominating, integrating, avoiding, obliging, and compromising) based on the dimension of concern for self (high or low) and the dimension of concern for others (high or low). The five-style model based on Rahim’s two conceptual dimensions of concern for self and concern for others were later expanded by Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, and Yee-Jung (2001) to an eight-style model with three additional styles: emotional expression, passive aggression, and third-party help (Oetzel, et al., 2003).
The negotiation model. Another line of literature that classifies conflict management behaviors examines skills and strategies used in negotiation. Negotiation can be broadly defined as “a particular type of conflict in management—one characterized by an exchange of proposals and counter proposals as a means of reaching a satisfactory settlement” (Cahn & Abigail, 2007, p. 117), or an interpersonal decision-making process involving two or more parties who hold incompatible interests to engage in give-and-take interactions to find solutions (Putnam & Jones, 1982; Putnam & Roloff, 1992; Thompson, 2005). In 1965, based on classic studies of labor-management negotiation, Walton and McKersie proposed a behavioral theory of labor negotiation, which identified four bargaining sub-processes: distributive bargaining, integrative bargaining, attitudinal structuring and intra-organizational bargaining. The negotiation literature has typically relied upon two particular processes among the four: distributive and integrative processes.

Distributive negotiation is sometimes referred to as zero-sum bargaining, in which the negotiation is perceived to have a fixed-sum and value, and the negotiators aim to maximize their individual gains at the expense of the others, thus gaining the “largest share of a ‘fixed pie’” (Putnam, 2013, p. 11). It is considered a win-lose process. Negotiators start the bargaining with their positions located at two ends of a continuum, and the goal is to find a solution in between that is as close to one’s own position as possible. This process is seen to have a direct and competitive orientation (Canary, 2003). Tactics used in a distributive process include making extreme offers, bluffs, threats, acting hostile, power play, or manipulation (Raiffa et al., 2007; Roloff, Putnam & Anastasiou, 2007; Roloff, 2008).
On the contrary, *integrative* negotiation involves negotiators see themselves as having a joint problem and some shared interests. It is seen as a win-win process, or principled negotiation (Fisher & Ury, 2011). The situation is perceived to have variable-sum and value, and both parties create value to maximize joint gain and achieve mutual goals (Lewicki, Saunders, & Baux, 2006). Instead of trying to compete for best positions on each single issues as in distributive process, this process involves parties identifying common goals over a single issue, or looking for trade-offs across multiple issues, which “leave both parties better off than if they dealt with each separately” (Kochan & Lipsky, 2003, p. 16).

This process involves a collaborative orientation, in which resources are shared to generate more value for both parties (Putnam, 1990). Tactics in an integrative process include joint decision making, expressing mutual concern, problem-solving, or honest and open information exchange (Raiffa, et al., 2007; Roloff, et al., 2003; Roloff, 2008). The Harvard Negotiation Project (HNP) has also shown that a principled negotiation process can be established through several principles: focusing on interests rather than positions, separating people from the problem, inventing options for mutual gain, and insisting on using objective criteria (Fisher & Ury, 2011).

According to Putnam (2013), distributive and integrative negotiation processes have served as the “foundation for communication strategies and tactics in…interpersonal conflict” (p. 11). Extending from the literature in negotiation, interpersonal communication scholars proposed three particular models of conflict resolution: distributive, integrative, and avoidant processes (e.g., Canary & Cupach, 1988; Putnam &
Wilson, 1982; Sillars et al., 1982). These three types of conflict management have been described in different ways by conflict researchers and include varying tactics.

Sillars (1980a), in a study of roommate conflict, developed a coding system (i.e., the Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme; Sillars, 1986) that classifies verbal tactics in interpersonal conflict in terms of distributive, integrative, and avoidance categories. Sillars and colleagues (1982) characterized distributive tactics as “verbally competitive or individualistic behaviors”; integrative tactics as “verbally cooperative behaviors or statements that pursue mutually favorable resolution of conflicts”; and avoidance tactics as “statements that deny the presence of conflicts, shift the focus of conversations, or communicate about conflicts indirectly and ambiguously,” that “minimize explicit discussion of conflicts” (p. 83). These three conflict resolution processes were theoretically absorbed into Sillars and Canary’s later proposed models that classify conflict tactics in terms of directness-cooperation dimensions (Canary, Lakey, & Sillars, 2013) or in terms of directness-valence dimensions (2013).

Along the same line, Cupach et al. (2010) has illustrated distributive tactics as threats, coercion, criticisms, defensiveness, and sarcasm, and integrative tactics as mutually defining the problem, seeking areas of commonality, and negotiating fair solutions, and avoidance tactics as withholding complaints or acquiescing (p. 51). Some research on conflict styles has also reduced the traditional five conflict styles to three or four, by sometimes absorbing compromising into integrating, and accommodating into avoiding (Donohue & Cai, 2014). Putnam and Wilson, (1982) in their survey of undergraduate students, teaching assistants and organizational employees, also identified three general categories of conflict management behaviors: control, solution-oriented,
and non-confrontation strategies, which, although labeled differently, are somewhat similar to the descriptions of the distributive, integrative, and avoidance tactics.

**Recent Development of Conflict Styles and Strategies**

The conflict styles and orientation scholarship has produced substantial insights about the outcomes of particular conflict styles/orientations. However, over the years potential problems with this body of research have been identified and the conceptual schemes of conflict styles have undergone various modifications and development. Researchers have produced critiques and identified other dimensions to reorganize these conflict tactic lists. An example is Canary’s (2003) organization of strategic choices along the dimensions of *directness* and *cooperation*. These two new dimensions can incorporate a number of distinct conflict strategies previously identified (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Direct and competitive conflict management strategies include blaming, confrontative remarks, and invalidation, while tactics of direct and cooperative strategies include analytic, conciliatory and descriptive remarks and problem-solving. Several meta-analyses of interpersonal conflict studies have also yielded various re-conceptualized dimensions for classifying conflict strategies. For example, Woodin (2011), in her meta-analysis of 64 studies of 5,071 romantic couples, identified *intensity* (high to low) and *valence* (positive to negative) as two conceptual dimensions and proposed five behavioral categories: hostility (high intensity and negative affect), problem solving (low intensity and positive affect), withdrawal (low intensity and negative affect), distress (moderate intensity and affect valence), and intimacy (high intensity and positive affect).
Another observation about the traditional dual-concern model of conflict style was that particular conflict resolution strategies and tactics play multifunctional roles in negotiation and conflict management, which makes it difficult to accurately assign categories to particular conflict strategies. For instance, while problem solving and flexibility typically enact integrative processes and threats often enact distributive processes, strategies such as information sharing, arguments and concessions have been observed to play multiple functions in conflict exchanges (Putnam & Wilson, 1989; Roloff, Tutzauer, & Dailey, 1989). To address this issue, Sillars and Canary (2013), while keeping the four categories of strategy originated from the two-dimensional framework, have reclassified these practices and others into a fifth category—polysemic strategies (communication acts that may fit multiple categories, due to the likelihood of multiple interpretations and meanings).

To sum up, the studies of conflict styles and strategies have contributed significantly to the understanding of conflict behaviors. However, the conceptualizations of conflict styles and strategies still suffers from a few problems, which will be further discussed in later sections of this chapter. The primary goal of this dissertation is to propose a conflict message classification system that can address the problems and research gap in the literature of conflict styles and strategies.

**Conflict Behaviors and Conflict Outcomes**

Whether or not particular conflict behaviors facilitate conflict resolution and preserve relational quality has been a consistent question for conflict communication scholars. Empirical evidence for the effects of conflict behaviors can be organized into
four groups: conflict resolution, relational satisfaction, relationship stability, and physiological arousal and interpersonal violence.

**Conflict resolution.** Research on conflict/disagreement resolution has generally found a positive relationship between partners’ constructive conflict behaviors and conflict resolution. Early on Christensen (1987) found a positive relationship between positive communication patterns and resolved differences. Johnson and Roloff (2000a) found that relationally confirming behaviors during arguments (e.g., expressing affection and relational commitment) were positively associated with perceived resolvability of the conflict. Collaborative or integrative behaviors are also predictive of constructive conflict resolution (e.g. Sillars, 1980a), while competitive or distributive behaviors predict conflict escalation (Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1991; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). The use of avoidance strategies have been found to be negatively related to conflict resolution (Sillars, 1980a).

**Relational outcomes: satisfaction.** Another outcome of interest in interpersonal conflict has been individuals’ relationship satisfaction and stability (e.g., divorce, breakups) (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). Studies on marital/relational satisfaction have consistently shown a relationship between increased destructive communication behaviors or patterns in conflict and decreased marital/relational satisfaction. For example, negative behaviors (e.g., complaints, defensiveness, hostility) are correlated with relationship distress (for reviews see Fincham & Beach, 1999), and a decline in relationship satisfaction over time (Gottman, 1979; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Negative reciprocity such as reciprocal disagreements (Canary, Weger,
& Stafford, 1990), exchange of complaints (Gottman, 1994), and mutual confrontation (Ting-Toomey, 1983) are predictive of relational dissatisfaction.

On the contrary, constructive conflict behaviors have been found to predict positive relational outcomes. Karney and Bradbury's (1995) meta-analysis suggests that couples’ positivity predicted increases in marital satisfaction. Satisfied partners engage in more constructive or accommodative behaviors during conflict than partners in dissatisfied relationships (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998; Vangelisti, 2013). Johnson and Roloff (2000a) have found that positive behaviors such as expressing affection and relational commitment were negatively related to the perceived harm of arguing about the relationship. Kurdek (1994) also found that compromise and negotiation were positively associated with relational satisfaction, and personal attacks and losing control of oneself were negatively associated with relational satisfaction.

In terms of conflict resolution styles, studies have shown that dissatisfied couples are more likely to reciprocate competitive behaviors (Gottman, 1994; Schaap, 1984), while couples in satisfying relationships are more likely to exhibit integrative acts during arguments (Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1983). Canary and Cupach (1988), in their survey of romantic partners, found that a partner’s use of distributive tactics was directly associated with decline in relational trust, while the partner’s use of integrative tactics indirectly affected increase in relational trust, intimacy, and relational satisfaction. Canary and Spitzberg (1989) have also found that integrative strategies predicted more positive relationship characteristics (i.e., trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and intimacy), distributive strategies predicted more negative relationship characteristics, and the association between conflict strategy and relationship
characteristics was mediated by the partner’s communication competence. Conflict avoidance has generally been found to be negatively associated with relational satisfaction (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Kurdek, 1995). However, this avoidance-relationship satisfaction association is more complex and may be moderated by a number of factors (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

Relational outcomes: stability. Fewer studies have examined the relationship between conflict behaviors and relationship stability. Studies in this area suggest that negativity during conflict predicts divorce—at least over periods of a few years (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; McGonagle, Kessler, & Gotlib, 1993). The most notable model of negative conflict behaviors and relationship dissolution is Gottman’s Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in marriage, which describes four destructive styles of communication that can accurately predict divorce: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1994). McGonagle, Kessler, and Gotlib (1993), in their longitudinal study of marriage, found that negativity in arguments (e.g., cruelty/intensity, lacking in mutual appreciation) predicted divorce among couples married less than 8 years. Negative communication patterns such as the demand/withdraw pattern (particularly wife-demand/husband-withdraw) have also been found to predict divorce within the first 7 years of marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). The lack of positive affect (e.g., positive expressions) during arguments and in communication in general among couples was found to be the most predictive factor of divorce after the seventh year of marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Behaviors reflecting competitive conflict styles, both direct and indirect, have been found to be used more by distressed couples than non-distressed couples. Gottman’s
research program (1979, 1994) has documented the role of complaining or criticizing, showing contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling on increasing negative attributions and withdrawal. He found that unstable couples were more likely to produce a 1:1 ratio of positive to negative behaviors, while stable couples produced a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative behaviors. In predicting changes in relationship stability over a 1-year period, Kurdek (1994) has similarly found that the use of compromise decreased the likelihood of relationship dissolution, while the use of personal attacks increased the likelihood of relationship dissolution.

Physiological associations and aggression. Conflict behaviors in relationships also have implications for individuals’ physiological responses and interpersonal violence. According to Levenson and Gottman (1983), patterned exchanges of negative affect between couples “activate physiological systems and produce parallel patterning of physiological response between the couples” (p. 588). Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues (1993) have found that negative or hostile behavior during marital conflict is related to greater decreases on four functional immunological assays, including “natural killer cell lysis, blastogenic response to two mitogens, and the proliferative response to a monoclonal antibody to the T3 receptor” and greater reductions in the percentage of macrophages (p. 394). Malarkey and colleagues (1994) have also found that hostile behavior during marital conflict was predictive of decreases of prolactin and increases in epinephrine, norepinephrine, and adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH). In contrast, Robles et al. (2006) found that supportiveness during highly negative interactions in marital conflict was associated with greater decreases of wives’ ACTH and cortisol levels. The findings from these studies suggest that destructive behaviors in conflict
interactions are likely to inhibit adaptive physiological responses to interpersonal conflict.

Conflict behaviors have also been studied in relationship to interpersonal violence. Some negative reciprocity has been found to distinguish dissatisfied couples who are violent from those who are nonviolent. According to Smith, Vivian, and O’Leary (1990), violent couples were most likely to engage in high levels of negative reciprocity, and couples who failed to reciprocate positive messages were also more likely to report interpersonal violence. Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, and Gottman (1993) have also found a link between the wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern and the wife’s verbal aggression and husband’s physical aggression. There is also evidence that the husband-demanding/wife-withdraw pattern may be associated with spousal abuse (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002).

In sum, studies of outcomes of conflict behaviors have found that partners’ behaviors in conflict are important in predicting conflict resolution, and are predictive of relationship satisfaction and stability. Understanding the features of more or less effective conflict messages is helpful in deepening our knowledge of constructive conflict communication.

Problems and Gaps in Interpersonal Conflict Style Research

The substantial problem that cuts across many issues in the development of conflict style and strategy classification systems concerns the conceptualizations of conflict styles. Recent studies of conflict behaviors have advanced many other interaction forms in conflict management, which cannot be sufficiently organized by the conflict style framework. For instance, in grounded theory research Nicotera (1993) identified an
additional dimension of disruptive emotional valence (i.e., whether the emotional valence of the conflict behaviors was disruptive or nondisruptive to the relationship), which is not easily handled by the previous 2-dimensional conflict style systems. Other theorists and researchers have also identified other interaction forms that are valuable in conflict management, such as debate, dialogue, and deliberation (Forester, 1999; Stewart, 2013), each of which is not easily categorized within the conflict styles framework. Part of the reasons of the insufficiency of conflict style framework is due to the fact that most of these models have implicitly employed linear or simple systems conceptions of communication to study conflict behaviors. This approach to communication only examines general behavioral tendencies rather than specific message practices, and treats communication in conflict as a variable that directly influences conflict management outcomes by structuring the conflict and determining the tactics individuals use in managing the conflict (Putnam, 2006). According to Putnam, this approach is insufficient to address important emotional and identity dimensions that characterize conflict situations, and fails to account for the fact that conflict messages, through the way they are expressed, can fit multiple categories (2006).

**Interpretive Approaches to Conflict**

As a remedy to this problem, many scholars have adopted interpretive approaches to conflict, which focus on the communication practices and processes that constitute conflict (Putnam, 2006). Such work has focused, for instance, on the linguistic and conversational practices that sustain conflict, or the symbolic uses of narrative and metaphor, rather than general schemes of behaviors. Given that interpretive approaches focus on the way interaction forms and discourse practices develop conflict within the
context of relationships, this approach has been useful for expanding knowledge about conflict resolution. By adopting this approach in a general way to interpersonal conflict, this dissertation aims to re-conceptualize types of message that are used in conflict management, and propose a new message analysis system to classify conflict management messages.

Before introducing the message analysis system, this section will first explain three particular limitations with the study of conflict styles that this new message analysis system is going to address. The traditional linear or system conceptions of communication in conflict results in two major problems with the conceptualizations of conflict styles, especially the distributive and collaborative conflict styles: 1) the conceptualizations of distributive processes in different models of conflict strategies combine too many different types of influence (e.g., persuasion, negotiation, power-play), and 2) the conceptualizations of distributive and collaborative styles fail to pay attention to other interactional goals (besides the instrumental goals of conflict interaction, e.g., solving the conflict) individuals in conflict situations may try to accomplish through the use of different conflict styles or strategies. This section of the chapter reviews these limitations and then proposes the new conflict message classification system that addresses these issues.

**Diverse Types of Distributive Conflict Modes**

One issue with the conceptualizations of distributive conflict management is that its conceptualizations imply diverse combinations of different types of influence, such as persuasion, negotiation, power-play (or coercion), confrontation (or conventional
regulation), and manipulation, each of which involves different ways of managing conflict and distinct types of communication practices.

As an example, the negotiation model of interpersonal conflict prescribes that the distributive process involves dividing resources among the parties and maximizing one’s own “share of the pie” (e.g., Liu & Wilson, 2011; Pruitt, 1983; Walton & McKersie, 1965). This conceptualization of distributive strategy prescribes that conflict be solved through negotiation, making trade-offs, and sometimes manipulation and power-play. Another example is the distributive style conceptualized in the dual-concern model, which suggests that a distributive strategy reflects one’s high concern for self and low concern for others, and one achieving one’s individual goals at the expense of the other’s goals (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983), which can be enacted through a host of communicative practices, such as power-play, manipulation, and/or persuasion. In interpersonal communication research, the distributive strategy was also used to label a group of different types of communication practices. For example, Sillars (1980a, 1980b) conceptualized the distributive strategy as making negative evaluations of the other and seeking behavioral change from the other, which may involve social confrontation, regulation and persuasion to legitimize one’s evaluations of the other. Wilson and Waltman (1988) conceptualized a control strategy that people use to manage conflict by arguing and demanding for their positions, which can also be enacted by power-play and/or a certain degree of unskilled persuasion.

All of these different types of influence are conceptualized to be under the umbrella of distributive conflict management. Because of this diversified conceptualizations, it is difficult to categorize and characterize concrete communicative behaviors/messages that
are more or less effective in managing conflict distributively. In order to do so, one needs to first partial out the specific type of influence one wants to analyze within the umbrella of a distributive strategy.

In general, conceptions of distributive style or strategy often confound three specific types of influence processes: a reasoning/persuasion-based distributive process in which one uses situation analysis, arguments, reasoning, and persuasion to advocate for the best position, or one’s own position; a negotiation-based distributive process in which one maximizes one’s own gain by bargaining, exchanging proposals, and seeking concessions on a single issue (Roloff, 2014; Roloff, Putnam, & Anastasio, 2003; Walton & Krabbe, 1995); and an expressive eristic process in which concessions are gained through expressions of negative emotions, coercion, threat, and verbal aggression (the term eristic was borrowed from Walton and Krabbe’s concept of dialogue orientation, which entails an eristic dialogue orientation an individual may take in dealing with conflict—using quarrels and antagonistic verbal exchanges to gain accommodation or a temporary agreement; Walton & Krabbe, 1995). Though sometimes categorized into the compromise conflict style, the negotiation-based distributive process also involves competition over resources and yields win-lose outcomes (Lewicki, Saunders, & Barry, 2006), characteristic of distributive conflict management. These three processes all yield win-lose outcomes; however, they are distinct distributive approaches, and may result in different outcomes on conflict resolution and interactants’ relationship (Roloff, Putnam, & Anastasiou, 2003). For the scope of one study, this dissertation only focuses on two of these three distributive processes: a version of the reasoning/persuasion mode of distributive conflict management and the expressive eristic mode of distributive conflict
management. The negotiation mode of distributive conflict management, as another important mode of distributive influence, should also be examined in future studies.

A call to differentiate conventional persuasion-based mode and expressive eristic mode of distributive orientations. Traditional conceptualizations of distributive conflict styles have not differentiated varieties such as a reasoning/persuasion mode of influence and the express eristic mode of influence. Coding schemes and scale items measuring distributive conflict styles based on these conceptualizations often include tactics such as reasoning, argument, and persuasion, as well as threats, coercion, and aggression (e.g., the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument, Putnam & Wilson, 1982, and Rahim’s Organizational Conflict Inventory-II, Rahim, 1983). The association between measured distributive strategies and relational outcomes can lead one to conclude that distributive strategies, in general, are always destructive. However in their analysis of skilled negotiators, Roloff, Putnam, and Anastasiou (2003) differentiated unskilled and skilled forms of distributive strategies, and found that unskilled distributive negotiators used a set of distinct strategies (e.g., using verbal aggression) that were different from skilled forms of distributive strategies (e.g., using irrefutable arguments). Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995) also referred to certain conflict tactics as “belligerent and manipulative forms of influence” (p. 126). Confounding these two distinct forms of distributive strategies may lead to the omission of potential merits of skilled distributive negotiation and hinder a better understanding of effective conflict resolution. In order to overcome this limitation, the new conflict message analysis system needs to differentiate a version of a conventionally rational, persuasion-based distributive orientation and the expressive, eristic distributive orientation.
This differentiation between reasoning/persuasion-based distributive process and eristic distributive process is supported by empirical research. For example, Walton and Krabbe (1995), in their proposition of dialogue orientations, differentiated between a persuasion dialogue orientation (i.e., reaching an agreement/resolution through arguments) and an eristic dialogue orientation (i.e., gaining an accommodation through eristic verbal exchanges and quarrels) in dealing with conflict. Walton and Krabbe suggest that a persuasion dialogue orientation is distinct from an eristic dialogue orientation, and enacts different communicative goals. Walton and Krabbe also proposed several other types of dialogue types, such as a negotiation dialogue orientation in dealing with conflict, in which a settlement is reached by parties bargaining with each other and making trade-offs. Although this dissertation only deals with the persuasion distributive process and the eristic distributive process, the negotiation-based distributive process and negotiation dialogue orientation in conflict management should also be discussed in future studies. Similarly, research in regulative communication has also found that people use different message design logics to gain compliance in conflict situations (O’Keefe, 1988), such that some people use conventional design logics (e.g., gaining compliance by appealing to social rules and relationship expectations violated by other, and some people use expressive design logics (i.e., gaining compliance by expressing one’s unedited critical thoughts and negative affect). In a grounded theory analysis of open-ended data on descriptions of conflict, Nicotera (1993) also found that assertive behaviors (i.e., behaviors that emphasize one’s own viewpoint and invalidates the other’s viewpoint, but done in a calm way without anger or rancor) and aggressive behaviors (i.e., behaviors
that emphasize one’s own viewpoint and invalidates the other’s viewpoint, but done in a hostile, threatening manner) are two distinct behavioral categories.

These theoretical propositions and studies all suggest that people use two or more types of conventional influence—conventional regulative influence involving confrontation reasoning and an expressive, eristic control—when trying to regulate the other’s behaviors during conflict, and these two paths of influence tend to enact different communicative goals. Thus, it is important to differentiate these two processes when classifying effective and ineffective conflict management behaviors and messages.

Particularly, this dissertation focuses on a particular type of persuasion-based conflict management process—a conventional-confrontation orientation, in which the conflict is framed in terms of violations of conventionally defined social/relationship rules and expectations, and one seeks to advance one’s own objective by persuading the other that one’s viewpoint is the conventionally or socially correct position. This particular approach to conflict is often found in relationship transgression situations (e.g., Bingham & Burleson 1989; O’Keefe, 1988; Newell, & Stutman, 1988). This conventional-confrontation orientation, as well as the eristic orientation, will be further explained and discussed in the next chapter about the theoretical framework of this study.

A Call to Account for the Structure of Goals a Conflict Strategy Accomplishes

Another issue with conflict styles and strategy research is that it fails to pay attention to the role of other interaction goals (besides the instrumental goals of conflict interaction, e.g., solving the conflict) in conflict exchanges, such as relationship- and identity-related goals. For example, Roloff and his colleagues (2003) noted that effective negotiators recognize the need to create good working relationships in negotiation.
Scholars working in other areas, such as serial argument research, have also recognized that skilled conflict management includes preserving interpersonal relationships and identities of the parties involved (Bevan et al., 2007). However, the existing conflict styles literature has no conceptual framework for describing the way different sets/types of multiple goals are managed in conflict resolution.

Traditional conceptualizations of distributive and collaborative conflict styles often prescribe a fixed set of goals a conflict style or strategy accomplishes. For example, the conception of distributive style in Rahim’s (1983) dual-concern model suggests that distributive style reflects a high concern for self, and a low concern for the other. This implies that only one’s own instrumental goals (i.e., self gain in the conflict situation) and probably one’s own identity goals are accomplished through this conflict style. However, it is possible that a distributive style can also accomplish multiple goals simultaneously. For example, a person may strive to advance his/her own viewpoint and desired solution, while at the same time use positive expressions (e.g., being polite, making apologies, giving compliments) to enhance the other’s identity and preserve a the relationship with the other. In this situation, this person, through a distributive conflict style, is not only accomplishing his own instrumental goals and identity goals, but also accomplishing relationship goals and the other’s identity goals.

Similarly, the conception of a collaborative style in the dual-concern model prescribes that, through a mutual dialogue, the collaborative style always accomplishes both parties’ mutual goals (high concern for self, and high concern for the other). In fact, some less sophisticated collaborative strategies are only able to accomplish mutual instrumental goals, while other more sophisticated collaborative strategies through
integration may also accomplish mutual identity and relationship-related goals. The conceptualization of the collaborative style did not capture this complexity in goal structures.

There is a limited literature on conflict resolution that has explicitly differentiated conflict strategies and goal sets it can manage, and few studies have examined specific message features that express different conflict strategies and goal structures. To address this literature gap, the new message analysis system needs to differentiate the conflict-solving orientation the message takes and the structure of goals the message accomplishes. Wilson (2014) has recently advocated and called for developing such a framework.

In summary, research on conflict styles and strategy suffers from several limitations. In order fill this literature gap, this study employs a *multiple goals perspective and behavioral complexity theory* to propose a message analysis system that intersects 1) conflict-solving orientations that differentiates two forms of distributive orientations and 2) structures of goals accomplished to classify conflict messages. The next chapter starts with a review of a particular communicative context under which this conflict message analysis system will be conceptualized and tested—the opening stages of conflict interactions. Then the chapter reviews the multiple goals theoretical framework based on which this message analyses system is constructed and proposes the message analysis system. The role of goal importance is also reviewed. The chapter in the end proposes the study’s research questions and hypotheses.
Chapter 3: Conflict Openings, Theoretical Framework, and Hypotheses

This study focuses on the initial moves expressed in a conflict interaction, when an actor for the first time engages another actor in a conversation about a perceived disagreement over behavioral norms within the relationship or situation. Such conflict interactions would be considered, employing Goffman’s terms, “focused interactions” in which actors express “moves” within turn exchanges. Here moves are considered to be “everything conveyed by an actor during a turn at taking action” (Goffman, 1967, p. 20).

Initial moves in a conflict interaction have been referred as an “opening” (Benoit & Benoit, 1990), an “initial argumentative episode” in serial argument research (Johnson & Roloff, 2000a), “initiation” in the conception of the social confrontation episode (Newell & Stutman, 1988), the “first step” of interpersonal confrontation rituals (Cahn, 1990), or the “confrontation stage” in the pragma-dialectic model of argumentative discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984).

The study of communicative behaviors in conflict openings has both theoretical and empirical value, because the opening phase can shape subsequent communicative behaviors and interaction outcomes. Benoit and Benoit (1990) contend that conflict openings provide “the first clues regarding the nature of the conflict” that can shape the communication episode, since the communicative tactics used can affect perceptions of the other’s appropriateness and effectiveness (p. 171). Reznik and Roloff (2011) find that communication moves enacted during this initial stage are predictive of actors’ beliefs.
that conflict can be resolved. The importance of conflict openings is perhaps most strongly supported by Carrere and Gottman’s (1999) research on newlyweds’ conflict interactions. Carrere and Gottman had 124 newlywed couples discuss a problem they reported was a source of continuing discussion. The interactions were coded at three minute intervals for the number of positive (e.g., interest, validation, affection) and negative (e.g., domineering, whining, disgust) affect states expressed or displayed. Six years later, Carrere and Gottman found that the couples who had divorced, compared to the couples who remained married, had expressed significantly more negative emotions and fewer positive emotions during the first three minutes of the conflict discussion they had six years earlier.

Although the understanding of conflict openings is of critical importance in interpersonal conflict management, the research literature on conflict openings is limited. Majority of research studies focused on measuring conflict styles or behaviors over entire conflict interactions or episodes with self-report behavioral scales. The conceptual and research literatures that have focused on opening moves are largely fragmented across topics and approaches (Benoit & Benoit, 1990). Still, a review of several relevant lines of research can serve to identify the key issues and dilemmas that are conventionally recognized as part of the opening phase of conflict resolution.

This chapter first reviews literature relevant to conflict openings, and then reviews the theoretical perspective of this dissertation. A conflict message classification system is then proposed, followed by the explanation of the research foci and hypotheses.
Research on Social Confrontation and Conflict Openings

This section of the chapter reviews the literature about conflict openings, or the initial stage of social confrontations. Studies that are relevant to the structures and scripts of conflict openings, and studies concerned with the behavioral choices, decisions, and dilemmas relevant to conflict openings are selected for this review.

Benoit and Benoit (1990) have examined openings in conflicts between roommates and romantic partners. They established that four types of openings are often associated with arguments: insults, commands, accusations, and refusals of requests. In a later study, they (Benoit & Benoit, 1990) categorized these four openings as aggravated openings, and examined them in comparison to mitigated conflict openings (i.e., requests, reaffirmations, indications of shared responsibility, and refusals with a reason). The results indicated that each of these four aggravated openings was judged to be less appropriate and effective than any mitigated opening. Benoit and Benoit (1990) argued that the use of mitigated instead of aggravated conflict openings should reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation and increase chances of successful conflict management.

Another line of research that focuses on conflict openings was developed by Newell and Stutman in their description of the social confrontation episode (1988). Using symbolic interactionist and speech act theories, they conceptualized social confrontation as conflict management over social rule or norm violations within the relationship or situation. From an analysis of undergraduates’ recalled experiences with confrontations, as well as undergraduates’ role-played confrontation interactions, Newell and Stutman found that social confrontation conversations are organized around five decision-tree issues that structure the moves in the confrontation episode. In particular, they found that
the social confrontation episode begins with an initiation, in which a confronter expresses to the other that his/her behavior is not legitimate, or appropriate. The confronter’s conventional aim is to express and legitimize that the confrontee has broken a social rule, undergird by the assumption that both actors agree on what is considered to be appropriate behavior in the situation. Communication actions typically involve the confronter expressing disagreement or dissatisfaction, giving reasons to warrant his/her claims, and sometimes making attributions of causes or responsibilities (Newell & Stutman, 1988).

Newell and Stutman’s (1988) study suggested that the key issue involved in initiating a social confrontation is expressing directly or indirectly that the other’s behavior is inappropriate. This is consistent with social interaction research findings on reproaching. Reproaching refers to the speech acts that involve a person raising questions about reasonableness or worth of another’s actions. Tracy and Robles (2013) have found that reproaches include expressing dissatisfaction, describing problematic actions, and trying to get the other to change (i.e., using expressive, representative, and directive speech acts). In an analysis of conversational accounts Cody and McLaughlin (1985) found that reproaches typically assume four types, which can be interpreted to be direct rebukes (e.g., “You shouldn’t have borrowed my car without asking”), requesting an account (e.g., Why did you leave your job?”), implying superiority (“I just don’t have time to watch TV”), and expressing surprise or disgust (“That’s gross!”; Tracy & Robles, 2013, p. 93). Some research studies have identified the effectiveness of types of reproaches. For instance, in an analysis of criticism, Tracy, van Dusen and Robinson (1987) found that effective criticism took the recipients’ point of view, addressed smaller
problems, was complimentary, and provided details about how the other could improve. Ineffective criticism was more likely to use profanity, altercast the other into negative characteristics, and predict simplistic negative consequences for the other.

A behavioral dilemma is involved in reproaches. Rawlins (1992) observes that reproaching is part of the dialectic of judgment and acceptance that is a challenge in friendship, which Stewart (2013) observes is also part of dating relationships. On the one hand, friends and couples are expected to accept and support one another. But on the other hand, friends and couples value openness in advising, criticizing and helping the other improve or ensuring that one’s own aims and desires are not thwarted by the other’s actions. Because of this dilemma, expressing a reproach is considered by some researchers to be complex. In an analysis of British everyday telephone conversations, Edwards (2005) found that complaints are often indirectly expressed to emphasize people’s subjective investment in the complaint or the situation; for instance, complainers mitigated the complaint’s seriousness by laughing or focusing on buffer topics before expressing the complaint, or they announced how they were affected prior to expressing the complaint. In an analysis of Chinese Malaysians, Lee and Hall (2009) also found that reproaches are not typically done directly, but through a distinct speech act, called thou soo, that is focused on resolving the problematic issue.

Studies on conflict scripts provide additional knowledge about the expectations people have about how conflict conversations likely begin. Miller (1991) explored scripts for friendship conflicts over broken promises, cumulative annoyances, criticisms, rebuffs, and illegitimate demands. For broken promises, cumulative annoyances, criticism, and illegitimate demands, most people anticipated that the confrontation would begin with a
question, but for rebuffs the confrontation would begin with an accusation. With the exception of a broken promise, participants expected the issue to be resolved. Fehr, Baldwin, Collins, Patterson and Benditt (1999) examined scripts for anger in conflicts among dating couples. Their sample reported that the most anger came from conflicts involving a betrayal of trust, followed by rebuffs, criticism, negligence and cumulative annoyance. Both males and females reported that anger would likely initiate conversation. Participants also indicated that they expected their partners to reciprocate with positive/constructive actions if they engaged in positive behaviors during conflict.

Another approach to understanding conflict openings has been the pragma-dialectic theory of argumentation, the normative model and program of research by Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, and their colleagues (1984, 1992, 2004). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst advanced a model of critical discussion that consists of four stages in resolving differences of opinion. The model consists of a confrontation stage in which disagreement manifests itself; an opening stage in which initial commitments to the discussion are identified; the argumentation stage in which parties defend their stances with argumentation; and the concluding stage in which the parties determine if a particular standpoint needs to be withdrawn. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst contend that the confrontation stage is ideally composed of participants expressing their standpoints, accepting or rejecting those standpoints, and asking for or providing definitions, amplifications, and explications (called usage declaratives). They note that declaratives used in the confrontation stage can reveal if the disagreement is spurious, while expressing standpoints to enable the parties to understand the nature of the disagreement.
Finally, Remer and Mesquita (1990), in their chapter on confrontation skills, have proposed a six-stage interpersonal confrontational process that delineates the critical skills associated with successful conflict management. The six stages are: preparation, lead-in, confrontation, active listening, negotiation, and follow-up. The preparation stage mainly involves confronter’s cognitive activities (e.g., appraisal of the situation and relations) before the actual confrontation or the actual interaction. The actual interaction starts from the second stage—the lead-in stage. This stage consists of the confronter’s statements to usher the confrontee into the conversation and prepare the confrontee for the confrontation stage. These “lead-in” statements may include affirmation of the relationship, acknowledgement of one’s own discomfort in engaging confrontation, and suggestions for how the interaction be structured. This lead-in stage is relevant to how the conflict is perceived and how it will be represented for resolution (Witteeman, 1988). If handled well, the lead-in stage can reduce confrontee’s resistance and set the stage for satisfactory conflict resolution (Papa & Pood, 1988). The confrontation stage involves the actual statement of the problem. Remer and Mesquita contend that communication behaviors in these two stages are essential for constructive conflict resolution. The conflict opening situations that will be examined in this dissertation reflect these two stages (i.e., the lead-in and confrontation stages) of the confrontation process.

**Summary: Key Issues and Dilemmas in Social Confrontation and Conflict Openings**

Taken together, these lines of research suggest that conflict openings minimally involve a social actor who expresses a stance of dissatisfaction and asserts the nature of the other’s problematic actions, and sometimes queries and specifications about the
stances expressed by the other party. Integrating the existing research, four issues organize the conventional tasks for conflict openings: Individuals in social confrontation express directly or indirectly that the other’s behavior is inappropriate, they provide reasons to warrant these claims, they sometimes make attributions of causes/responsibilities, and they try to get the other to change (e.g., Newell & Stutman, 1988; Tracy & Robles, 2013).

Individuals during social confrontation face the dilemma between expressing and legitimizing that the confrontee has broken a social rule (Newell & Stutman, 1988) and the need to show support and acceptance toward one another (Rawlins, 1992; Stewart, 2013). The importance of balancing this dilemma was indicated by Benoit and Benoit’s (1990) findings that using mitigated instead of aggravated conflict openings tended to reduce the chances of conflict escalation and increase the likelihood of successful conflict resolution. However, less is known about how the judgment-acceptance dilemma, relationship aims, and identities of the participants are integrated into conflict opening moves. Less is known, too, about how different moves expressed in conflict openings affect recipients’ perceptions and responses.

The current study addresses this gap by proposing a system to analyze features of messages that can be used by people in relationships to initiate conflict conversations about problematic behaviors, and by focusing on responders’ perceptions and reactions to the conflict opening messages that embody various message features. Given that the focus of this dissertation is on transgressions in dating relationships, conflict openings likely need to manage a judgment-acceptance dialectic that is determined by the need to protect one’s own needs and aims while at the same time accepting and supporting the
other person. In this dissertation, the terms “messages,” “conflict openings,” and “openings” are used interchangeably. This study adopts a multiple goals perspective in constructing the message analysis system. The following section is dedicated to a review of this theoretical perspective.

**Multiple Goal Theories in Interpersonal Communication**

One major approach to the study of interpersonal communication has been to employ a multiple goals perspective. Scholars who have developed multiple goal perspectives have generally sought to identify differences in messages by identifying goal structures in contexts, messages and message producers that are associated with indices of effectiveness. This multiple-goal framework has been used to study communication from psychological perspectives (for reviews, see Berger & Palomares, 2011; Dillard, 1997; Wilson, 2007; Wilson & Feng, 2007), as well as discourse-level perspectives (Craig, 1986; Tracy & Coupland, 1990; Sanders, 1991). The themes of study employing the multiple goal framework in approaching communicative goals and message production include Dillard’s (1990, 2004) Goals-Plans-Action Model; cognitive editing (Hample & Dallinger, 1987, 1990, 1992); conversational constraints (Kellerman, 2004); constructivist theory (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982; O’Keefe, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1997); identity implications theory (Wilson, Aleman, Leatham, 1998); multiple goals theory of personal relationships (Caughlin, 2010); conversation dilemmas (Goldsmith, 2004); interactional dilemmas (Tracy, 1997), and the psychological processes underlying goal formation, goal inferences, and linkages between goals and actions (e.g., Greene, 1997). Multiple goals perspectives have been applied in many domains, such as in responses to problematic events (Samp & Solomon, 1998, 1999, 2005); serial arguments (Bevan,
Hale, & Williams, 2004); conflict strategy judgments (e.g., Caughlin, & Scott, 2010), and interaction goals in negotiation (e.g., Liu, 2013).

**Common Assumptions of Multiple Goals Perspectives**

Most multiple goal perspectives share several assumptions. First, they assume that communication is goal-directed (Berger, 2007), which implies that people engage in communication in order to achieve certain end(s). Personal aims are frequently referred to as communicative goals, or “desired end states for which individuals strive” during interaction with others (Berger, 2007, p. 50). For example, people often use communication to influence others, to manage one’s own and one’s partner’s identity, and to create/maintaining a particular kind of relationship (Clark & Delia, 1979).

Another common assumption of multiple goal theories is that individuals attempt to pursue multiple goals simultaneously in a communication interaction. Communication often involves multiple purposes (Berger, 2007). For example, when a person’s most salient goal is to provide support, he/she may also be concerned with how he/she is viewed by the other and what kind of relationship he/she has or wants to have with the other.

A third assumption of multiple goals theories is that communicative goals can conflict with each other (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982). On the one hand, an individual may have conflicting goals simultaneously. For example, a person’s goal of seeking help from others may conflict with his/her goal of appearing competent and independent. On the other hand, an individual may have communicative goals that are in competition with those of another individual. A common example may be one person seeking compliance
while the other resists that compliance (Wilson, 2002). One may need to contend with various obstacles to achieving one’s goals (Roloff, 1987; Keck & Samp, 2007).

Based on these assumptions, multiple goal perspectives suggest that communicative behavior can be understood as a strategic response to the multiple goals existing in the communication situation. The effectiveness of communication is a reflection of ways of balancing these (sometimes conflicting) goals in messages. This perspective has been used to examine features of effective messages in a variety of functional communication domains including social support (e.g., Goldsmith, 2004), regulative communication (e.g., Kline, 1991), compliance-gaining (e.g., Wilson, 2002), persuasion (e.g., Dillard, 1990), and relationship development (e.g., Caughlin, 2010).

**A Multiple Goal Model of Communication**

Most perspectives on multiple goals can be traced to a particular constructivist theoretical statement (Clark & Delia, 1979). Clark and Delia integrated tenets from symbolic interactionist theory, communication theory, and developmental psychology to advance the contention that any interaction involves participants defining the situation in terms of an instrumental objective, interpersonal objectives that create or sustain a desired relationship, and identity objectives that involve sustain desired images for self and other (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Weinstein, 1969). Goals become communicative goals when achieving them requires a person to communicate and coordinate with others (Clark & Delia, 1979). Identity aims include general positive and negative face wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987), as well as situated identity aims (McCall & Simmons, 1978). These issues shape situational definitions and aims that can form the working consensus in an interaction, and sometimes issues themselves can be become the subject of
discussion. Beliefs about identities and relationships can affect a speaker’s choice of strategies and obstacles to achieving the instrumental goal. Socio-cultural definitions of the situation and the participants’ roles also produce constraints as to what practices appear best to express in the interaction (Clark & Delia, 1979).

Clark and Delia (1979) also discuss ways of constructing coding schemes that can capture the way message practices enact lines of argument designed to overcome situational obstacles or create desired identities and relationships. Communicative behavior reflects the strategic balance of these three types of goals, with emphasis given to each type of goals determined by the specific situation. Although one goal tends to dominate in a communicative situation (e.g., the instrumental goal to influence the other’s behavior in a persuasive situation), Clark and Delia argued that all of these three types of goals are usually present to some degree in every communicative situation.

O’Keefe and Delia (1982, 1985, 1988) as well as Delia, O’Keefe & O’Keefe (1980) have elaborated on Clark and Delia’s essay, proposing that “messages can be seen as the product of multiple communicative intentions and message design as the product of reconciling multiple objectives in performance” (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982, p. 52). They contend that existing constructivist coding systems have implicitly captured ways that speakers recognize, reconcile and integrate multiple aims and obstacles residing in the situation. O’Keefe and Delia (1982) further theorized that when faced with complex goals, people have three general strategies of managing these goals when constructing a message: selection (giving priority and expression to one single goal and ignoring other potential goals), separation (pursuing competing goals in temporally or behaviorally separated aspects of a message), and integration (reconciling competing goals through
message designs which simultaneously accomplish multiple goals). They argued that behaviorally complex messages (e.g., those with goal integration or separation) are theorized to be more efficient, effective and appropriate than less behaviorally complex messages (e.g., those with goal selection).

**Findings of the Multiple Goal Model**

Over the years there have been three types of tests of this model of multiple goal management. An initial test was advanced by O’Keefe and Shepherd (1987, 1989) who analyzed dyadic discussions and found that as expected the separation goal management strategy was negatively associated with interpersonal success, but that the integrative goal management strategy was positively associated with interpersonal success. O’Keefe’s later development of message design logic theory (1988) embedded differences in goal structures within expressive, conventional and rhetorical message design logics. Tests of message design logic theory have found that rhetorical and conventional design logics in regulative messages and disclosure response messages (embodying integration and separation goal management strategies, respectively) are more effective than expressive design logic messages that minimally manage interpersonal and identity goals (Caughlin et al., 2008; O’Keefe & McCormack, 1987). Bingham and Burleson (1989) conducted a similar test of the effectiveness of different goal management and message design logics in sexual harassment messages, and found that messages that were able to accomplish multiple goals were more relationally effective than messages either accomplish only the task goal or messages that fail to address a clear goal. Other tests of multiple goals have found that the combination of face, relationship and instrumental
goals are effective in managing conversations that are difficult, such as end of life decisions (Scott & Caughlin, 2014).

A second type of test of the multiple goal management model has been to determine if multiple goal management is related to more developed social cognitive systems. Consistent with expectations, O’Keefe and Shepherd (1987, 1989) found that the cognitive complexity of interactants was associated with the use of integrative goal management; similarly, O’Keefe (1988) analyzed regulative messages and found that highly complex speakers were more likely to use messages that utilized a rhetorical design logic and the integrative goal management strategy. Kline (1991) has also analyzed regulative messages and found that highly complex message producers produced more identity and interpersonal goals, and also produced messages that explicitly used relational and identity message features in their arguments about the issue and their proposed remedy.

A third test of the goal management model comes from studies that have identified ways of expressing multiple goals in messages. Goldsmith and her colleagues (Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006; Goldsmith, Bute, & Lindholm, 2012), for instance, have studied conversations between spouses regarding lifestyle changes needed by one partner who had experienced a cardiac event. Their focus has been to identify the dilemmas that are experienced when individuals attribute conflicting meanings to talk or when spouses interpreted their conversation differently, and then to discover the ways individuals manage those dilemmas. In the case of lifestyle change talk, Goldsmith et al (2006) discovered three conversation dilemmas: supportive talk may be heard as unwanted attempts at control and criticism; not wanting to feeling obligated to talk, but
recognizing that talk is interpreted as caring; and that engaging in supportive talk may conflict with partners’ desire not to dwell on illness. Goldsmith and her associates (2012) also discovered three ways of managing the meanings and dilemmas of lifestyle change talk. The found strategies mapped precisely onto the three goal management strategies postulated by O’Keefe and Delia (1982): selection, separation and integration of goals. Specific practices include rationing talk (i.e., reducing the amount of talk), saying it nicely (to protect identities and emphasize rapport), and framing the talk cooperatively (so that the talk no longer threatens identities or relational definitions).

In sum, these studies have consistently found that messages that were able to achieve a number of goals were more effective than messages that either achieves only the task goal or messages that fail to achieve any clear goal. These findings provide the basis of employing the multiple goals perspective to characterize and categorizing conflict messages of different levels of effectiveness—in terms of the structure of the interactional goals the messages are able to achieve.

This dissertation employs the multiple goals perspective to propose a message analysis system. To be more specific, this dissertation utilizes a behavioral complexity theory in terms of a rational model of message design and goal complexity to propose a message analysis system that specifies features of conflict messages that reflect different types of goal structures when constructed using different conflict-solving orientations. The following section presents the detailed description of this message analysis system.

A System for Analyzing Conflict Messages

This section proposes a message analysis system that delineates features of conflict messages that vary along two dimensions: conflict-solving orientations and expressed
structures of goals. By crossing three types of conflict-solving orientations and three types of goal structures, a nine-level message analysis system is proposed. This dissertation also aims to test the message analysis system in its ability to differentiate conflict messages of various degrees of effectiveness. Messages were contextualized in specific conflict opening situations. Specifically, conflict opening messages that can be used by individuals in romantic relationships to confront their partners’ problematic behaviors were created based on the nine levels of the analysis system. These messages were then analyzed and compared for their perceived effectiveness. Message examples designed for a particular conflict situation (i.e., neglected relationship) are also provided in the system. See Table 3.1 for a detailed description of the message features and message examples.

**Conceptualization of Conflict-Solving Orientations**

When facing interpersonal conflict with one’s partner (e.g., when the partner engages in a relationship transgression), a person first makes the decision whether s/he should remain silent (i.e., engage in conflict avoidance) or s/he should signal her/his partner about the problem and try to resolve the issue (i.e., engage in confrontation). Once a person decides to engage in confrontation, there are different ways s/he can construct messages to introduce the problem and initiate a conversation with the partner. The features of messages that can be used by a person to confront her/his partner are conceptualized to reflect three types of conflict-solving orientations: *eristic* orientation, *conventional-confrontation* orientation, and *collaborative* orientation. These orientations refer to how individuals initiate conversations about perceived problematic events in their
relationships. The following section presents descriptions and explanations of each conflict-solving orientation.

**Eristic conflict-solving orientation.** As discussed in the previous chapter, traditional conceptions of distributive conflict management style often confound an expressive, eristic approach to conflict with types of rational, persuasive approaches to conflict. To address this issue, an eristic conflict-solving orientation is conceptualized.

*The eristic orientation* sees conflict as win-lose competition in which the goal is to win the fight and maximize individual values. This orientation approaches conflict with antagonistic reactivity and verbal aggression. Communication involves the individual expressing her/his current negative mental/emotional state and unedited thoughts (sometimes in the form of emotional explosion) in the hope that the other will understand what s/he thinks and feels, thus changing the behavior to appease the individual. The desired outcome of this orientation is the gaining of immediate compliance, provisional accommodation, or temporary settlement (Walton & Krabbe, 1995). This conflict-solving orientation can be considered a belligerent form of the traditional distributive conflict style (Canary, et al., 1995). Message features are characterized by hostile accusation, demands, expressions of intense negative emotions, and power-related threats. Some of the negative behaviors and affects expressed in this orientation, such as belligerence, domineering, and contempt may also be found in the category of “negativity” in Gottman’s Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF; Gottman, 2011) which categorizes individuals’ behaviors in a situation.

The eristic conflict-solving orientation shares many propositions with Walton and Krabbe’s (1995) eristic dialogue orientation in dealing with conflict, which also
emphasizes the goal of winning by the use of verbal exchanges and quarrels. Sillars and Canary’s (2013) also conceptualized a *direct and face-attacking* conflict management strategy, which labels tactics that can also be found to be characteristic of this eristic conflict-solving orientation. What is different is that the eristic conflict-solving orientation approaches conflict with more reactivity than spontaneity. In this case, a person is simply reacting emotionally to the other’s transgressions rather than composing a proactive action to approach the conflict situation. The reactivity manifested in conflict messages is also identified by O’Keefe (1988) in her conceptualization of the expressive design logic, which suggests that some people construct verbal messages only to express their “thoughts and reactions to others” (p. 84).

**Conventional-confrontation conflict-solving orientation.** Various persuasive approaches to conflict can be conceptually absorbed into a conventional-confrontation conflict-solving orientation. In a recent review chapter, Wilson (2014) argues that, in any situation, there are objectives that are conventionally considered to be relevant to that situation, or goals that are socially expected to be achieved in that situation. Conflict can be seen as hindrances of the achievement of conventionally-defined goals, or violations of social/relationship rules, roles, and expectations (Newell & Stutman, 1988). As discussed earlier in this chapter, socio-cultural definitions of a conflict situation and the parties’ social roles produce constraints on what communication practices are considered effective and appropriate in the situation (Clark & Delia, 1979). Given the conventionally relevant goals in a conflict situation (i.e., confront the problematic behavior and restore social/relational rules), a person may resort to communicative acts that are considered
situationally appropriate and relevant (O’Keefe, 1988). This serves as the basis for the conventional-confrontation conflict solving orientation.

The conventional-confrontation orientation sees conflict as resulting from at least one party’s failure in fulfilling social roles and relationship obligations. The goal of communication is to persuade the other that one’s viewpoint is the conventionally correct position, and change the other’s behaviors so that social/relationship rules can be restored and expectations be fulfilled. To accomplish this, an individual makes references to socially conventional rules and presents persuasive arguments to show the other that he/she has failed obligations and violated rules, roles and/or expectations, in an effort to change the other’s perspectives and enact his/her appropriate behaviors (Newell & Stutman, 1988). Instead of seeing conflict as simply a win-lose competition, this orientation seeks to reach agreement by refuting the other’s positions and advance one’s own positions and solutions to the issue. Communication features involves expressions of the other’s behavior as inappropriate, using reasoning, requests, and appeals to social/relational rules, roles, and values shared by the speech community to get the other to adopt one’s own view on the issue, and agree to employ one’s suggested solutions because of the reasons employed.

This conventional-confrontation orientation shares similar assumptions with the conventional design logic (O’Keefe, 1988) in that they both see communication as “played cooperatively according to socially conventional rules and procedures,” and both give recognition to the social and relational context of the conflict situation (p. 86). The conventional-confrontation orientation’s emphasis on persuasion echoes Walton and Krabbe’s (1995) normative dialogue framework, which proposes a persuasion dialogue
type that people sometimes use in dealing with conflict—by resorting to well-articulated persuasive arguments to change the other’s point of view in conflict situations. Walton and Krabbe also describe another dialogue type that is often used to deal with conflict—*the negotiation dialogue type*, which involves partner bargaining with each other in a social-exchange format to reach a settlement. This negotiation orientation to conflict management should be theorized in future research. For the scope of this dissertation, this study only focused on the conventional-confrontation orientation.

Traditional compromise and accommodation conflict styles can also find their place in the conventional-confrontation orientation. When social/relationship rules, roles, and expectations need to be re-negotiated, compromise and accommodation may be made when merited by effective arguments.

**Collaborative conflict-solving orientation.** A third way to approach conflict is through an interpretive approach, in which parties co-construct identities and interpretive frames of the situation that focuses on the communication practices and processes that constitute conflict (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). The *collaborative orientation* approaches conflict resolution with an openness to possible solutions (as compared to commitment to a particular action/solution in the eristic and conventional-confrontation orientations) and an adherence to mutual interests. It sustains a dialogue to promote understanding (Forester, 2009), and creates a climate of trust to help find a common definition of the problem (Gray, 2000). Emphases are given to potentials for collaboration to create value, and communication as a dyadic dialogue to co-construct meanings (Stewart, 2013).

A collaborative orientation maintains a neutral or positive evaluation of the partner and promotes mutual action to solve the conflict. It resorts to ways to link both parties’
objectives together, which often yield win-win outcomes and maximized joint benefits. In the initial confrontation, this orientation expresses initial questions about the parties’ goals to help the parties to begin the collaborative process. Communication practices often involve self-disclosure, asking questions, reasoning, expressing a commitment to mutual interests, and invitations for a dialogue in which mutual solutions are co-created by both parties.

This conflict-solving orientation echoes O’Keefe’s (1988) rhetorical design logic in that it considers communication as a way to define or re-define the situation. This orientation also shares some propositions of Walton and Krabbe’s (1995) normative dialogue framework in that individuals resort to information-seeking dialogue type (e.g., interview, consultation) when they lack information about the other’s interests and perspectives, and deliberation dialogue type (e.g., a means-end discussion) when the issue is seen as an open problem needing solution.

In initial confrontations, conventional-confrontation conflict opening messages express dissatisfaction and negative evaluations of the partner’s behaviors by pointing out the social/relational rules the behavior violates. Eristic conflict openings contain fewer arguments and reasoned analysis of the situation, and are more affectively toned and composed of more intensive negative expressions and condemnations of the partner. Collaborative opening messages express dissatisfaction with the situation but do not project negative evaluations of the partner, but instead encourage the partner to discloses her/his interests and invite the partner to jointly create a solution to the problem. In real-life situations, elements of a particular orientation may not be all present in a single
move, but are reflected in the features of confronter’s overall messages in the confrontation phase.

**Goal Structures**

As discussed earlier, the multiple goals perspective assumes that all communication is goal-driven, and that message production reflects people’s efforts in balancing multiple goals. This study adopts the symbolic interactionist conceptualization of communicative goals, particularly relying on Clark and Delia’s (1979) conceptualization of communicative goals and assumes that individuals in conflict situations seek to satisfy at least three major types of goals: instrumental goals, identity goals, and relationship goals. Instrumental goals are the specific conventionally recognized reasons for a conflict interaction. Based on the conceptualization of conflict-solving orientations, instrumental goals for the eristic orientation may involve negative expressions, dominance, and gaining immediate compliance; instrumental goals for the conventional-confrontation orientation may include pointing out the other’s wrongdoing and changing the other’s viewpoint; and instrumental goals for the collaborative orientation may include gaining understanding of the other’s point of view and facilitating mutual self-disclosure. Relationship goals refer to the type of relationship people want to achieve through the conflict interaction, such as the desire to maintain, increase or decrease intimacy or commitment. Identity goals refer to self-image and/or the image of other the person one wants to project/protect during and after the conflict interaction. Research has shown that people strive to achieve various types of goals including identity and relationship goals in conflict situations (e.g., Keck & Samp, 2007).
For instance, Stutman and Newell (1990) has confirmed that in conflict opening stages confronters strive to achieve various goals, including primary instrumental goals (i.e., expression of negative emotions, advancing positions, and/or creating space for mutual solutions), and secondary goals such as identity goals (e.g., appearing competent and likeable) and relational goals (e.g., preserving the relationship with the confrontee). These different goals often are in conflict with each other. For instance, a confronter’s goal of influencing the other may conflict with his/her goal of appearing personable and the confrontee’s goal of maintain autonomy. Therefore, a confronter faces the challenges of managing various and potentially conflicting goals when constructing conflict opening messages.

According to O’Keefe (1988), a message can be identified by the number and type of goals it is designed to serve. Messages often reflect three different levels of goal structures: minimal, unifunctional, and multifunctional (O’Keefe, 1988). Minimal messages refer to the message in which the speaker pursues no clear goal. An example could be when the speaker is overwhelmed and disoriented by the situation or is only engaging in phatic communication (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 90). In such a situation, the message mainly contains incoherent thoughts and disorganized sentences that do not accomplish the primary instrumental goals of the interaction. In confrontation situations, a confronter may express his/her thoughts and feelings toward the situation, the partner, and the partner’s behavior, but intentionally or unintentionally fail to accomplish the instrumental goal of the confrontation relevant to the conflict orientation the confronter takes. For example, a person with conventional-confrontation orientation may be critical
of partner’s behavior but reluctant to issue a clear directive for how the partner should act out of a concern of a respect of the partner’s autonomy.

*Unifunctional messages* refer to messages in which the speaker pursues one dominant goal exclusively (O’Keefe, 1988). By pursuing only the primary instrumental goal at the exclusion of identity and relational goals, a conflict message is considered unifunctional. In confrontation situations, a confronter with an eristic orientation may choose to accomplish his/her instrumental goal (i.e., express negative emotions) at the expense of identity goals (e.g., saving the partner’s positive face) and relational goals (e.g., preserving a good relationship with the partner). This is reflected in the unifunctional message he/she produced, which contains direct condemnation of the partner’s behavior without any effort to preserve both parties’ identities and the relationship.

*Multifunctional messages* refer to messages in which the speaker pursues multiple (i.e., two or more), often conflicting, goals (O’Keefe, 1988). Messages that are able to address both the primary goal and secondary goals are categorized as multifunctional messages. In confrontation situations, this refers to messages that simultaneously accomplish the instrumental goal relevant to the conflict orientation along with identity and relationship goals. A person may construct confrontational messages in a way that not only conveys his/her dissatisfaction and the need to solve the issue, but also affirms the positive identity of his/her partner and the importance of the relationship with the partner. For example, a collaborative multifunctional message can redefine the situation rhetorically to create a premise for mutual action to improve the situation, and also boost the positive identities and the relationship of the parties. As for the conventional-
confrontation situation, a conventional-confrontation multifunctional message may still fulfill the primary task goal of confronting a partner’s behavior by directly criticizing the partner’s behavior, while at the same time using politeness strategies (e.g., making compliment, expressing affection, and confessing commitment to the relationship) to produce a positive identity for the partner and enhancing the relationship. These identity- and relationship-conforming behaviors are categorized as “positivity” in Gottman’s SPAFF observational system (Gottman, 2011) of individuals’ behaviors.

As speculated in earlier sections, since goal structure and conflict orientations are orthogonal dimensions, messages reflecting an eristic, conventional-confrontation, or collaborate conflict-solving orientations may have either a minimal, unifunctional, or multifunctional goal structure. By crossing the three conflict orientations with the three types of goal structure, a system of nine levels of conflict message differentiation is constructed. The detailed descriptions of the features of each type of conflict message are summarized in Table 3.1.

This dissertation will use this system to classify conflict opening messages, and test the perceived effectiveness of message reflecting different levels of the system. The next section proposes relevant hypotheses and research questions.
Eristic orientation: The eristic orientation approaches conflict with antagonistic reactivity and verbal aggression. Communication involves the individual expressing her/his current negative mental/emotional state and unedited thoughts (sometimes in the form of emotional explosion) in the hope that the other will understand what s/he thinks and feels, thus changing the behavior to appease the individual. The desired outcome of this orientation is gaining immediate compliance, provisional accommodation, or temporary settlement. Message features are characterized by hostile accusation, demands, expressions of intense negative emotions, and noncontingent threats.

1. Eristic Minimal Message

*Formal Features:* Messages marked with intense negativity. Contains few elements, unedited expressions of hostile or negative affect, and thoughts and/or negative evaluations of the partner that are disorganized and disconnected from the immediate situation. No clear moves are made to solve the problem. May include non-contingent threats, pronouncements, insults, accusations, litany of complaints, announcement of retaliation, or expression of intense negative affect or attitudes. Such elements typically violate the maxims of cooperation (be relevant, be truthful, be informative, and be clear). Conflict openings often contain insults, expressions of strong negative affect, and pronouncement of actions, while failing to link expressed dissatisfactions to partner’s specific behaviors.

Table 3.1 A system for analyzing conflict messages: conflict-solving orientations and goal structures with message examples (Condition: neglected relationship)
Example Message: I CAN’T BELIEVE IT HAPPENED AGAIN! I’ve had it. You are treating me like crap. You think everything and everyone is more important than me! What is your problem? I’m so sick of this. You always act like this. Your friends always come before me. What kind of a girlfriend/boyfriend are you?! You never think about me. You are so selfish. I’m not going to put up with it. You really make me mad.

2. Eristic Unifunctional Message

**Formal Features:** Messages are also charged with negativity. Contains expressions of hostile or negative affect and and/or negative evaluations of the partner.

Expressed dissatisfactions are linked to partner’s specific behaviors. No clear directives are made in order to solve the problem. May include direct criticism and/or rebuke of the partner’s views or behaviors, pronouncements of one’s own view and actions. Conflict openings often contain insults toward the partner, direct criticism of partner’s specific behaviors. May include noncontingent threats, accusations, litany of complaints, announcement of retaliation, attributions of responsibility, mentioning of past transgressions, announcement and justification of retaliation. Message elements are more contingent to partner’s specific behaviors and the immediate situation than eristic minimal messages.
|  | Example Message: I can’t believe it happened again! Why do you keep doing this to me? It’s always work, friends, work, friends. You never spend time with me. You are my girlfriend/boyfriend, but all you do is ignore me. I’ve had it. Everyone is more important than me. I waited all week only to find out you are ditching me for your friends. I need a girlfriend/boyfriend, not a stranger! You better do something different. I deserve better than this! |

| 3. | Eristic Multifunctional Message: |

|  | Formal Features: This type of messages is characterized with expressions of negative emotions with reduced harm to parties’ identities and relationship. Messages are also not as strongly affective as eristic minimal and eristic unifunctional, and expressions of hostile or negative affects are depersonalized. No clear directives are made in order to solve the problem. May include depersonalized criticism, pronouncements of one’s own view and actions. In conflict openings, messages contain vague thoughts toward the partner, depersonalized criticism of partner’s behavior, expressions of general dissatisfaction of the situation, while failing to give clear directives to solicit actions from the partner to solve the problem. May include litany of complaints and whining. |
Table 3.1 Continued

| Example Message: I can’t take it any more. I’m so upset. Most people can’t handle a person who always puts everyone else first but her/his partner. I’m so upset. It happens again and again. I’m losing my patience. Why does my girlfriend/boyfriend think everyone else is more important than me? I just don’t get it! I’m so tired of it. This is not what I had expected when we got together. I just don’t know how I can put up with it. |

| **Conventional-Confrontation Orientation:** The conventional-confrontation orientation expresses that the other’s behavior is inappropriate, and makes references to socially conventional rules, roles, and expectations, and presents persuasive arguments to show the other that he/she has failed obligations and violated rules and/or expectations. It seeks to reach agreement by refuting the other’s positions and advance one’s own position and solution to the issue. Communication features involves using reasoning, requests, and appeals to social/relational rules and values shared by the speech community to get the other to adopt one’s own view on the issue, and agree to employ one’s suggested solutions. |

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### Table 3.1 Continued

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<th>Conventional-Confrontation Minimal Message</th>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td><strong>Formal Features:</strong> Direct criticism of partner’s view and behavior, assertion of one’s own position, while stances and proposals not accompanied with elaborated reasoning. Makes minimal efforts to warrant one’s criticisms. Makes few concessions, while being ambiguous in attempting to enforce one’s position on the partner. Messages contain minimally structured use of the interaction practices listed under the conventional-confrontation unifunctional message description. In conflict openings, messages contain direct criticism of the partner, announcement of one’s disapproval of partner’s behavior, while containing no more than general directives in seeking changes in the partner’s behavior. May contain statements implying negative consequences of the problem, and denial of responsibilities.</td>
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<td><strong>Example Message:</strong> You know what, I’m really upset! You spend more time with your friends than with me! I can’t believe you are putting your friends before me, after all the sacrifices I have made for you. It’s really frustrating. I think you know what it means to be in a relationship. You don’t even want to spend time with me. I don’t think the relationship is going to work out this way.</td>
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<th>Conventional-Confrontation Unifunctional Message</th>
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<td>5.</td>
<td><strong>Formal Features:</strong> Direct criticism of partner’s view and behavior, and reasons to justify the criticism. Assertion of one’s own position and justification of one’s position. Provides a clear directive and reasoned position for partner to change his/her behavior. Provides justifications for one’s dissatisfaction and reasons for the directive. Engages in concessions or disclosure of circumstances underlying need for partner to change, but also produces refutations of partner’s position and evidence to reduce partner’s resistance in changing behaviors. Conflict openings often contain statements of the partner’s behavior as violating social/relational rules/roles, provide explanations of social/relational rules/roles, and give clear directive for partner to stop or change his/her behavior. May contain requests for partner to stop/change the behavior, justifications for requests (e.g., by reasoning how it is in line with the social/relational rules/roles), and refutations of partner’s potential excuses (e.g., by stating the negative consequences if the behavior is not stopped/changed). Contains few if any face-protection strategies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Example Message:</strong> Look, you spend more time with your friends than with me. I’m upset. After all the space I gave you when you were really busy with work, you are still putting your friends before me. Why be my girlfriend/boyfriend if you don’t even want to spend time with me? It seems all your effort is put into hanging out with your friends. You know it’s hard to keep this relationship going if we don’t see each other enough. You should set aside more time for us to be together.</td>
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<th>Conventional-Confrontation Multifunctional Message</th>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td><strong>Formal Features:</strong> Contains elements similar to conventional-confrontation unifunctional messages, but with face-protection strategies and statements reaffirming the parties’ relationship. Direct criticisms, arguments, accounts or justifications given for compromises made, explanations accompanied by redressive politeness forms (e.g., compliments, apologies) or moderated by mitigation forms (e.g., hedges). Conflict openings express dissatisfaction with the partner’s behavior, and supply reasons for dissatisfaction, request the partner to stop or change his/her behavior, with politeness strategies and/or mitigation forms. May contain elements to prepare the partner for the confrontation (e.g., telling the partner that one is going to confront the partner). May provide simple acknowledgement of different perspectives of the situation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Example Message:</strong> I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but you spend more time with your friends than with me. I never said anything, but I’m actually upset. I understand there’re not enough hours in a day to make time for everyone. But I feel left out when you always make plans with your friends instead of with me. I know friends are important to you, but people need to spend enough time together to keep their relationship going. So could you consider setting aside more time for us to be together?</td>
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Table 3.1 Continued

**Collaborative orientation:** The collaborative orientation sustains a dialogue to promote understanding, maintains a neutral or positive evaluation of the partner and promotes mutual action to solve the conflict. It resorts to ways to link both parties’ objectives together, which often yield mutually beneficial outcomes and maximize joint benefits. In the initial confrontation, this orientation expresses initial questions about the parties’ goals to help the parties to begin the collaborative process. Communication practices often involve self-disclosure, asking questions, reasoning, expressing a commitment to mutual interests, and invitations for a dialogue in which mutual solutions are co-created by both parties.

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<th>7.</th>
<th>Collaborative Minimal Message</th>
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<td><strong>Formal Features:</strong> Redefines the situation in a way to depersonalize the expression of conflict (e.g., express dissatisfaction with the situation, while making nonevaluative, descriptive statements about the observed behaviors). States the need for change while provide not more than general invitation to engage the other person in problem-solving. Messages contain minimally structured use of the interaction practices listed under the collaborative unifunctional message description. In conflict openings, messages redefine the situation in a way that the partner’s behavior is seen as something other than a transgression; contain expression of dissatisfaction, but sustain a neutral evaluation of the partner. Contains no clear moves to seek solutions to the problem. May include expressed views and emotions, asking questions, and indication of shared responsibility.</td>
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<td><strong>Example Message:</strong> I’m really upset that we won’t be seeing each other today. It’s been a while since we got together last time. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Don’t you think so? I know we all need friends. But I don’t think we can keep things this way if we want this relationship to work. I don’t want you to think you need to give up your friendship though. Can we talk about it?</td>
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| **8. Collaborative Unifunctional Message** |

**Formal Features:** Redefines the situation in a way to depersonalize the expression of conflict (e.g., express dissatisfaction with the situation, while making nonevaluative, descriptive statements about the observed behaviors). States the need for change and make clearer directive to engage the other person in problem-solving than collaborative minimal messages. Creates space to discuss the partner’s stance and actions. Engages in inquires to learn partner’s desires and interests, expresses self’s aims, interests, and priorities, integrates interests, provides arguments, proposes options, and overall engages in a reasoned analysis of the situation. Flexible use of interaction forms such as dialogue, argument, and negotiation to engage in joint problem solving to produce mutually satisfactory solutions. In openings, express dissatisfaction the situation, and redefine the situation in a way that the partner’s behavior is seen as something other than a transgression. Ask questions to learn the partner’s perspectives and interests, indicate common ground and a concern for both self and partners’ interests. |
Table 3.1 Continued

| Example Message: I’m upset that we won’t spend the day together. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Do you feel the same? It’s hard to keep this relationship going if we don’t see each other enough. Although we text and talk on the phone, they’re quite different from spending time face-to-face. What do you think? I’m not saying you need to give up your friendships. Can we talk about it? I’m sure we can figure out a way to get together more often while we can still hang out with friends. |

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<th>9.</th>
<th>Collaborative Multifunctional Message</th>
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<td><strong>Formal Features:</strong> Redefines the situation in a way to depersonalize the expression of conflict, and link both parties’ goals (through creating a mutual purpose and voicing what each wants to have happen). In the redefinition, messages also simultaneously affirm the other’s positive identity and parties’ relationship. Flexible use of interaction forms such as dialogue, argument, and negotiation to engage in joint problem solving. Engages the partner to jointly create a solution that will simultaneously serve both people’s interests, as well as enhancing the relationship and parties’ identities. In openings, messages express dissatisfaction with the situation, but redefine the situation in a way that not only the partner’s behavior is seen as something other than a transgression, but also the partner’s positive identity and parties’ relationship are affirmed. Ask questions, identify common ground, and invite the partner to jointly create a mutually satisfied solution. May include frequent use of “we” and “our” statements, statement of shared responsibilities, statements that infer understanding and positive beliefs about the partner and the relationship. May also include elements to prepare the partner for the confrontation (e.g., telling the partner that one is going to confront the partner), and politeness strategies (e.g., redressive and mitigation forms).</td>
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Table 3.1 Continued

| Example Message: It’s great that you have so many friends to hang out with. You’ve always been popular. I’m just sad that we won’t be spending time together today. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Do you feel the same? It’s been great between us and we care about each other. I’m afraid that we would drift apart because of not spending enough time together. What do you think? Can we talk about it? I’m sure we can figure out a way that’s best for us and our friendships. |

Research Aims and Hypotheses

This dissertation aims to test the proposed conflict message classification system by employing it to examine the effectiveness of different conflict openings. Research questions and hypotheses are categorized into two major groups: message evaluations (i.e., message effectiveness and message outcomes) and social cognitive processes. A first group of hypotheses is proposed concerning the manipulation checks for the experimental conflict opening messages designed based on the dimensions of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. Then a second group of hypotheses pertinent to the primary goal of the study is proposed. These hypotheses address the relationship between evaluations of the conflict opening messages and the conflict-solving orientation and goal structure embedded in the message. Evaluations of conflict opening messages are approached from three aspects: general message effectiveness, effectiveness in accomplishing multiple interactional goals, and perceived message outcomes. Third, in order to better understand people’s evaluations of conflict openings, one important social
cognitive process (i.e., the role of perceived goal importance in the perception of conflict messages), is examined. A third group of hypotheses regarding the role played by goal importance in the evaluations of conflict opening messages is proposed.

Message Manipulations

A first goal was to ascertain whether the designed messages embodied the features conceptualized to be characteristic of the message dimensions for which the messages were designed. In particular, conflict openings designed to reflect a certain level of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure are expected to embody message features characteristic of that conflict-solving orientation/goal structure. The following hypotheses regarding conflict-solving orientations were proposed:

H1: Conflict openings of each conflict-solving orientation are rated highest in embodying features of that conflict-solving orientation.

This hypothesis can be divided into three subtype hypotheses:

H1a: Eristic conflict openings are rated higher in embodying eristic orientation features than conventional-confrontation or collaborative conflict openings.

H1b: Conventional-confrontation conflict openings are rated higher in embodying conventional-confrontation orientation features than eristic or collaborative conflict openings.

H1c: Collaborative conflict openings are rated higher in embodying collaborative orientation features than eristic or conventional-confrontation conflict openings.

Similarly, messages designed to reflect a certain goal structure are expected to embrace message features of that goal’s structure. Furthermore, because messages with minimal goal structure, by definition, do not display clearly the speaker’s primary goal,
they could be considered to violate Grice’s (1976) cooperative principle of communicating clearly, relevantly, and informatively. Therefore it is expected that participants will find it more difficult to perceive and identify the clear goal of the speaker in these messages. The following hypotheses are generated:

H2a: Participants report that unifunctional messages and multifunctional messages are easier than minimal messages to infer the goal of the speaker.
H2b: Participants report it to be equally easy to infer the goal of unifunctional messages and multifunctional messages.
H2c: Participants rate multifunctional messages to be higher in embracing multiple goals message features than unifunctional messages.

Message Effectiveness and Outcomes

Message Effectiveness

Since multifunctional messages are designed to accomplish multiple goals, the effectiveness of these multifunctional messages is theoretically conceptualized in accordance with the multiple effects these messages are able to achieve (O’Keefe, 1988). In any communication situation, a speaker tries to pursue instrumental goals, relational goals, and identity goals; therefore the perceived effectiveness of a message can be theorized to be evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in displaying and achieving instrumental goals, managing desired identities and face, and maintaining relationships (Clark & Delia, 1979; O’Keefe & Delia, 1982; Weinstein, 1969).

Because collaborative conflict opening messages employ a dialogic approach and tend to recreate and co-create the conflict situation in ways that either the conflict dissipates or the conflict can be more easily managed, it is expected that these conflict
opening messages would be highly effective. Conventional-confrontation conflict opening messages explicitly acknowledge the conflict and initiate conflict interaction by using persuasion to gain agreement, and thus are expected to be more effective than eristic conflict opening messages, which initiate conflict interaction with dominance and negative expressions in order to gain immediate behavioral compliance. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are be perceived as progressively more effective in general.

According to O’Keefe (1988), messages with more complex goal structures attend to more situational beliefs and goals. Multifunctional conflict opening messages are responsive to two or more goals relevant to a conflict situation, while unifunctional conflict opening messages are responsive to only primary task goals, and minimal conflict opening messages do not appear to display any clear goal. Because the quality and sophistication of communication is contingent to the effectiveness in achieving multiple situationally-relevant goals (Caughlin, 2010), the following hypothesis is advanced:

H4: Multifunctional conflict openings are rated higher than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings in general effectiveness.

Because collaborative conflict opening messages seek to link both interactants’ objectives together and facilitate solutions that increase mutual gain, they can be anticipated to be more effective in addressing parties’ multiple goals than conventional-confrontation conflict opening messages, which aim at individual gain and restoring social relationship, or eristic conflict opening messages, which are characterized by
antagonistic actions that are detrimental to identities and the relationship. Research in regulative communication has found that regulative messages with a rhetorical design logic which reconstructed social situations through communication were perceived to be most effective in achieving situationally relevant goals (e.g., instrumental goals, face support, and relationship preservation) (e.g., Bingham & Burleson, 1989; O’Keefe & McCormack, 1987). Regulative messages with an expressive design logic which contained speaker’s unedited expressions of negative emotions and thoughts were perceived to be least effective in achieving these goals, while regulative messages with a conventional design logic were perceived to be moderate in achieving these goals.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are rated as progressively more successful in accomplishing instrumental goals.

H5b: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are rated as progressively more successful in creating a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant).

H5c: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are rated as progressively more successful in presenting a positive identity for the speaker (i.e., participant’s partner).

H5d: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are rated as progressively more successful in preserving a positive relationship between the parties.

Multifunctional conflict opening messages are attentive to multiple situationally-relevant goals, while unifunctional conflict opening messages are attentive to only
primary task goals, and minimal conflict opening messages do not appear to display any clear goal. Thus, it is expected that multifunctional messages would be also perceived as more effective in achieve various goals related to the conflict situation than unifunctional and minimal messages. Bingham and Burleson (1989) found that in confrontation situations involving sexual harassment, multifunctional messages were perceived to be more effective in achieving relationship-relevant goals than either unifunctional or minimal messages. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6a: Multifunctional conflict openings are more likely to accomplish instrumental goals than than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings.

H6b: Multifunctional conflict openings are more likely than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings to create a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant).

H6c: Multifunctional conflict openings are more likely than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings to present a positive identity for the message speaker (i.e., participant’s partner).

H6d: Multifunctional conflict openings are more likely than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings to preserve a positive relationship between the parties.

**Message Outcomes**

Message outcomes concern the perceptions of outcomes of conflict messages. Two types of outcomes are examined in this study: perceived resolvability and relational outcomes.
**Perceived conflict resolvability.** Perceived resolvability about a conflict refers to the belief that a conflict is resolvable (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). It is an important predictor of relationship satisfaction. Because collaborative conflict openings recreate the conflict situation to minimize direct confrontation and explicitly legitimate a partner’s viewpoint, it is expected that they will be highly effective, and associated with more perceptions of conflict resolvability than conventional-confrontation or eristic conflict opening messages. Conventional-confrontation conflict opening messages, on the other hand, directly acknowledge the existence of conflict and seek agreement through persuasion and sound reasoning. So it is expected that these messages will be associated with higher perceptions of conflict resolvability than eristic conflict opening messages, which not only denigrate the other person’s viewpoint but also incorporate attacking tactics. Research studies have consistently found that collaborative styles are positively associated with perceived resolvability of the conflict (e.g., Bevan, Finan, & Kaminsky, 2008), while unskilled distributive styles which adopted various destructive communication behaviors (e.g., threat, criticism) were negatively associated with perceived resolvability (e.g., Hample & Krueger, 2011). In a study of roommate conflict, integrative conflict strategies were found to be associated with greater likelihood of conflict resolution than distributive strategies (Sillars, 1980a). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative messages are rated progressively higher in the perceived of conflict resolvability.

Because multifunctional conflict opening messages are not only attentive to instrumental goals but also attentive to identity and relationship goals, they are expected
to display more identity- and relationship-affirming behaviors than unifunctional conflict opening messages and minimal conflict opening messages, which either are attentive to only task goals or attentive to no particular goal at all. Results of research studies have established that constructive behaviors in conflict interactions are conducive to conflict resolution and tend to de-escalate conflict (e.g., Gottman, 1994). Johnson and Roloff (2000b) argued that showing affection and commitment during conflict may signal to partners a “willingness to work on resolving the problem” (p. 678). Thus, multifunctional conflict opening messages are likely to associate with greater perceived conflict resolvability than unifunctional and minimal conflict opening messages. Johnson and Roloff (2000a), in their study of serial arguments, found that relationally affirming behaviors such as assuring the partner of one’s commitment to the relationship during arguments were found to predict greater perceived resolvability of the conflict. The attainment of relationship goals and identity goals were found to be associated with satisfaction with negotiation outcomes among both Japanese and American participants (Ohbuchi, Fukushima & Tedeschi, 1999). Therefore, the following hypothesis is developed:

H8: Multifunctional conflict openings are rated higher in the likelihood of conflict resolvability than unifunctional or eristic conflict openings.

**Perceived relationship enhancement.** The outcomes of communication interactions on the relationship between interactants have long been a topic of interest for interpersonal communication scholars. A number of studies have been conducted to examine conflict message outcomes on relationships (e.g., Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001). Because collaborative conflict opening messages avoid overt opposition and
criticism by recreating the conflict situation in ways that legitimate the partner’s viewpoint and incorporate incorporate a series of constructive tactics, these messages are expected to impose minimal harm on the parties’ relationship. On the other hand, eristic conflict opening messages may employ a number of destructive tactics, including name-calling, personal attack, negative emotional venting. Hurtful messages (i.e., messages that hurt people’s feelings) tend to cause damage to a relationship, resulting in relationship, dissatisfaction, or dissolution (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Therefore, eristic conflict opening messages that display more destructive tactics and less constructive tactics are expected to be less associated with relationship enhancement. In general, research studies have found that collaborative tactics are positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and relational intimacy (e.g., Cupach, 1980; Gottman, 1982), while distributive/eristic conflict behaviors are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction/intimacy (e.g., Gottman, 1982). Sillars (1980a), in a study of college roommates, found that integrative strategies during conflict were positively associated with satisfaction with the partner. From these studies, the following hypothesis is formed:

H9: Eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings are rated as progressively higher in the likelihood of relationship enhancement.

An important assumption of multiple goal communication theory has been that a multifunctional message relevant to the interpersonal relationship of the interactants will be perceived as expressing multiple goals that in turn is associated with desired relationship outcomes. To be more specific, multifunctional messages that enact desired relationships while pursuing instrumental tasks will be associated with distinct positive effects on the relationship, because the participants will perceive the features of
multifunctional messages which enact positive perceptions of the relationship for the participants. In their study of serial arguments, Johnson and Roloff (2000a) found that relationally affirming behaviors were found to be negatively associated with relational harm from repeated arguments. Bingham and Burleson (1989), in their study of confrontational messages in sexual harassment situations, found that messages with multifunctional goal structures were perceived to be associated with less relational damage and relational tension than messages with unifunctional or minimal goal structures. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H10: Multifunctional conflict openings are rated higher in relationship enhancement than unifunctional or minimal conflict openings.

The Effect of Conflict-Solving Orientation and Goal Structure Integration

In addition to examining the main effects of message conflict-solving orientation and goal structure, this study also assessed whether evaluations of conflict opening messages are affected by the integration of different conflict-solving orientations and goal structures. Based on the earlier discussion, it can be anticipated that messages with higher-level conflict-solving orientations and goal structures will be evaluated more favorably than messages with lower-level conflict-solving orientations and goal structures. Therefore, it can be predicted that conflict openings with an integration of a collaborative orientation or a multifunctional goal structure will be rated more positively than conflict openings with an integration of a conventional-confrontation orientation or a unifunctional goal structure, which will be rated more positively than conflict openings with an integration of an eristic orientation or a minimal goal structure. Because conventional-confrontation messages that have a multifunctional goal structure employs
politeness strategies and are listener-adapted, they are expected to be perceived as similarly effective as collaborative messages. Similarly, eristic messages with a multifunctional goal structure may not be as face-threatening and harmful to the relationship as eristic messages with a unifunctional or minimal goal structure. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H11: Conflict openings with an integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure at low levels (i.e., eristic minimal and eristic unifunctional openings), medium levels (i.e., eristic multifunctional, conventional-confrontation minimal, and conventional-confrontation unifunctional openings), and high levels (i.e., conventional-confrontation multifunctional, collaborative minimal, collaborative unifunctional, and collaborative multifunctional openings) are rated progressively higher in general message effectiveness (H11a), multiple goal effectiveness (H11b), and favorable message outcomes on conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement (H11c).

Social Cognitive Processes: The Role of Goal Importance

Another line of research relevant to the interpretation and production of conflict behaviors has focused on the social cognitive knowledge and processes that undergird conflict communication, which has produced extensive findings regularly synthesized by Michael Roloff and his associates (Roloff & Chiles, 2011; Roloff & Miller, 2006; Roloff & Soule, 2002; Roloff & Wright, 2013). People’s cognitive frames, beliefs, memory structures, scripts, social rules and problem appraisals are all cognitive structures that influence conflict processes and behaviors (Roloff & Miller, 2006; Roloff & Wright, 2013). This study focuses on one important cognitive concept that was considered to be
relevant to people’s perceptions of message evaluations and message outcomes—the perceived importance of goals.

**Literature review of perceived goal importance**

Goals are defined as cognitively structured ends that one desires to attain (Dillard et al., 1989). In a conflict situation, multiple goals are typically relevant (Fukushima, Ohbuchi, & Kojima, 2006), such as instrumental goals of conflict interactions, identity-related goals, and relationship goals (Clark & Delia, 1979). However, each person may perceive these goals differently in terms of their importance. Certain goals may be considered more important than others for some people but not for others, and in some situations but not others (Lakey & Canary, 2002; Samp & Solomon, 1999).

In conflict situations, goal importance is generally found to relate to people’s preferences in conflict behaviors. For example, Ohbuchi, Fukushima and Tedeschi (1999) found that relationship goals are positively associated with collaborative conflict tactics while negatively associated with assertive conflict tactics, and the importance of instrumental goals are associated with distributive tactics (Keck & Samp, 2007).

Confrontational situations typically evoke goals that are conventionally relevant to which people add their personal goals that structure their conflict behaviors. In conflict opening situations, when confronted by the partner, a person may have three general types of instrumental goals, in accordance to the conflict-solving orientation this person takes. A person may have conventional and distributive instrumental goals (e.g., winning the argument), collaborative instrumental goals (e.g., satisfying the partner’s needs), and/or expressive instrumental goals (e.g., venting frustrations). Besides instrumental goals, the confrontee may also have identity goals and/or face concerns. For example, a
person may be concerned about the image s/he has in her/his partner’s eyes (positive face) and her/his autonomy (negative face). A person may also have relationships goals when being confronted by her/his partner. One may feel the relationship is at stake due to partner dissatisfaction, and feel the need to preserve the relationship with one’s partner during conflict.

This dissertation explores the role people’s perceived importance of these goals play in their evaluations of the confrontation messages in conflict opening situations. When valued goals are hindered in partner’s messages, a person is likely to respond differently to her/his partner’s messages than when one’s valued goals are not hindered. Research questions and hypotheses about the role of perceived importance in message evaluations are developed.

**Goal importance and evaluations of conflict openings**

The way people interpret communication and respond to communicative messages have been found to be related to the goals they have (Caughlin, 2010; Wilson, 2007). In conflict opening situations, the way people evaluate and respond to the conflict opening messages may also be affected by the goals they have in that situation. As discussed in earlier sections, in a confrontation situation, a person not only has instrumental goals, but may also have identity and/or relationship goals. The confrontee’s valued interactional goals may be either satisfied or hindered by their partner’s messages, thus affecting how s/he would evaluate her/his partner’s messages. It makes sense that if a person’s valued goals are frustrated by the partner’s messages, s/he may react negatively to these messages. For example, if a person places high importance in self-identity goals, s/he is more likely to react negatively to partner’s face-attacking confrontational messages.
which hinders her/his self-identity goals more than a person who places low importance on self-identity goals. Similarly, a person who values maintaining relationship with the partner may be more hurt by the partner’s confrontational messages that contain no relationship-affirming practices than people who do not value maintaining relationships.

Because eristic or conventional-confrontation messages criticize the person’s behaviors and refer to them as transgressions, they are more face-threatening; while collaborative conflict messages redefine the situation to sustain a neutral evaluation of the person and characterize the person’s behavior something other than transgression, it is likely that a person with greater identity goals would feel more impeded by eristic or distributive messages than a person with weaker identity goals, and react more negatively to these messages. Because eristic messages take a more competitive stance, it is expected that people with greater relationship goals would feel more hurt by partner’s competitiveness reflected in the eristic messages than people with weaker relationship goals. Conventional-confrontation messages in general acknowledge the disagreement, in contrast to collaborative messages which re-construct the situation to evade overt opposition, it can be expected that conventional-confrontation messages will be perceived to be more relationship-threatenign by people with greater relationship goals. When a person’s valued identity and relationship goals are hindered, it is likely the person will react negatively to the message, and perceive the message to be less effective in accomplishing her/his multiple relevant goals, and less effective in general. Therefore, following hypotheses about a moderated relationship are proposed:

H12: People with greater perceived importance of identity goals will rate collaborative conflict openings to be more effective in general and in
accomplishing multiple goals than eristic or conventional-confrontation conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. 

H13: People with greater perceived importance of relationship goals will rate collaborative conflict openings to be more effective in general and in accomplishing multiple goals than eristic or conventional-confrontation conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals.

Similarly, minimal messages and unifunctional messages do not explicitly display identity goals and relational goals as multifunctional messages do, so it can be expected that these messages are likely to be perceived more negatively by people who value identity and relationship goals more so than people who do not value identity and relationship goals. Thus, hypotheses of a moderated relationship between message type and message evaluations are proposed:

H14: People with greater perceived importance of identity goals will rate multifunctional conflict openings to be more effective in general and in accomplishing multiple goals than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

H15: People with greater perceived importance of relationship goals will rate multifunctional conflict openings to be more effective in general and in accomplishing multiple goals than minimal or unifunctional conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals.

Similarly, the following hypotheses are proposed for conflict opening messages with an integration of different levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure:
H16: People with greater perceived importance of identity goals will rate conflict openings with an integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure at high levels (i.e., conventional-confrontation multifunctional, collaborative minimal, collaborative unifunctional, and collaborative multifunctional openings) to be more effective in general and in accomplishing multiple goals than conflict openings with an integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure at low levels (i.e., eristic minimal and eristic unifunctional openings) or medium levels (i.e., eristic multifunctional, conventional-confrontation minimal, and conventional-confrontation unifunctional openings), more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

H17: People with greater perceived importance of relationship goals will rate conflict openings with an integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure at high levels (i.e., conventional-confrontation multifunctional, collaborative minimal, collaborative unifunctional, and collaborative multifunctional openings) to be more effective in general and in accomplishing multiple goals than conflict openings at low levels (i.e., eristic minimal and eristic unifunctional openings) or medium levels (i.e., eristic multifunctional, conventional-confrontation minimal, and conventional-confrontation unifunctional openings), more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals.
Chapter 4: Method

This study tests the viability of the system proposed in this dissertation for classifying messages used by a person to initiate a conversation with his/her romantic partner in a conflict situation. The study employed a message perception paradigm. Conflict opening messages were designed to reflect combinations different conflict-solving orientations and goal structures.

Young adults who were currently in a dating relationship were recruited as sample participants. They were randomly assigned to read descriptions of one of two experimental conflict situations, and one of the nine conflict opening messages (3 conflict-solving orientations × 3 goal structures) designed for that situation. Participants were asked to imagine themselves and their dating partners being in that situation, and imagine hearing the message from their partner. Participants then reported their evaluations and perceived outcomes of the assigned message.

In this chapter, the design of the messages, general procedures, and the measurement instruments are described.

Participants

Participants were students at a large Midwestern university who were enrolled in undergraduate communication courses during September, 2014, and October, 2014, and who were recruited to participate in this study for extra course credit. A total of 545 students responded to the questionnaire. To ensure the quality of the data, three detective
scale items were added in different places in the questionnaire. The items read “Please select Strongly Agree for this question.” The purpose was to detect whether the participant was paying attention to the content while completing the questionnaire.

Participants (N = 105) who got at least one of the question wrong were deleted from the data. In the remaining sample, subjects (N = 19) who had not completed at least 95% of the questionnaire and subjects (N = 2) who indicated they were not in a romantic relationship but completed the questionnaire anyway were also removed from the data before data analyses. As a result, the final sample contained 419 subjects, including 251 females and 168 males. The average age was 24 (SD = 2.45), ranging from 18 to 44 years old. Among the subjects, 341 were Caucasian (81.4%), 30 were Asian (7.1%), 18 were African American (4.3%), 7 were Hispanic or Latino/Latina (1.7%), 1 was American Indian or Alaska native (0.2%), 11 identified themselves as mixed race (2.6%), and 11 either identified themselves as other ethnic groups or did not indicate any ethnicity (2.7%).

To qualify for the study, participants had to be currently in a unmarried romantic relationship (i.e., casual or exclusive dating relationship, co-habiting, or engaged). This criterion was chosen to ensure that participants were answering the questionnaire based on their relationship with an actual person, instead of an imagined relationship. All participants indicated being in an unmarried romantic relationship, with 211 in an exclusive dating relationship (50.4%), 162 in a casual dating or hanging-out type of relationship (38.7%), 24 co-habiting (5.7%), 11 engaged (2.6%), 10 in other types of relationship (2.4%), and one participant who did not indicate the type of relationship
he/she was in. The average length of the relationship was 17.63 months ($SD = 18.56$), ranging from less than a month to 108 months.

Random assignment of the experimental conditions resulted in an average of 23 participants in each condition, with the “collaborative unifunctional message in the neglected relationship situation” condition containing the lowest number of participants (20), and the “conventional-confrontation minimal message in the neglected situation” condition containing the highest number of participants (26).

**Procedure**

The study used an online questionnaire designed with Qualtrics software. Participants completed the questionnaire using personal computers. Interested participants were given a link to a webpage where they read a cover letter that functioned as an online consent form (see Appendix A). The cover letter explained the purpose of the study and supplied brief descriptions of the questionnaire. Participants agreed to the terms described in the cover letter by clicking the “next” button, which served as their consent to participate. Once a participant clicked the “next” button, a survey flow randomization command provided by the computer software assigned that participant randomly to one of the eighteen experimental conditions (2 scenarios $\times$ 9 message types). The participant was then directed to the first page of the first part of the online questionnaire designed for that particular experimental condition.

Participants then read a script of a conflict opening message expressed by a person to his/her dating partner after perceiving that his/her relational expectations were violated by the dating partner, and then responded to a series of close-ended questions asking participants’ perceptions about the message.
Development of Script Materials

This section describes the development of relevant script materials used in this study, including the design of the conflict scenarios and the development of conflict opening messages.

Scenario Design

To enact the design of the study, scenarios were created to depict situations in which the participant’s partner engaged the participant in a conversation about a problematic behavior the participant had performed. In order to reduce possible topic-specific effects and enhance the generalizability of the study results, two conflict situations were used in the study: a neglected relationship situation (in which a romantic partner gives other relationships and/or tasks a higher priority over the primary romantic relationship) and an insensitive behavior situation (in which a romantic partner engages in behaviors that are perceived to be insensitive or hurtful by the other partner, such as making inappropriate jokes about the other partner). These two situations reflect two types of relationship transgressions that have been found to be common in dating relationships, and found to be salient issues that often generate conflict between romantic partners (e.g., Cameron, Ross, & Holmes, 2002; Metts, 1994; Miller, 2001; Roloff, Soule & Carey 2001). Thus, they were chosen for this study as the two conflict situations under which the experimental messages were contextualized.

In both situations, it was assumed that the participant’s partner was the one initiating the interaction, and thus was the message speaker/producer. The participant was assumed to be the person who had engaged in the relationship transgression, and thus was the message hearer/recipient. To resemble a real-life social confrontation situation,
especially the initial confrontation, the situation was designed to involve the participant’s partner expressing dissatisfaction or disfavor about the participant’s transgression for the first time, while the participant was not aware of his/her partner’s dissatisfaction prior to that interaction. The descriptions of the situation was designed in a way to reflect only a “neutral” description of the event prior to the participant’s exposure to the message, in an effort to insure that participants were not aware they were about to be confronted by their partner before reading the message. This was done to not only resemble real-life initial confrontation situations in which the confrontee may not be aware that his/her own behaviors were causing his/her partner discomfort until being confronted by the confronter (Johnson & Roloff, 2000b), but to also avoid priming the participant’s certain expectations and interpretations of the message. (See Appendix B for descriptions of the two situations.)

The neglected relationship situation depicted the participant’s partner expressing dissatisfaction about the participant who had made plans to be with friends instead of making plans to spend time with the participant’s partner. It was assumed that the participant was the person who neglected the relationship, and the participant’s partner was assumed to be dissatisfied and expressing the message. The insensitive behavior situation depicted the participant’s partner confronting the participant about making inappropriate jokes about the partner in front of the participant’s friends during a party. The participant was assumed to be the person who made inappropriate jokes, and the participant’s partner was assumed to be the person who was dissatisfied and expressing the message.
From June to August in 2014, descriptions of these two situations were subjected to two rounds of revisions based on two pretests involving 29 college students. In each test, participants were asked to read descriptions of the two situations (or the revised descriptions in the second pretest), and indicate: (1) on a Likert-type scale how realistic they perceived these two situations were, and (2) following open-ended questions their suggestions on how to further improve the realism of the scenarios. In their responses, participants provided information about college life and dating relationships, and gave detailed suggestions to improve the realism of the scenarios such as the length of the relationship, the specific events involved in the scenario, and characteristics of partners’ school life and social circles. Descriptions of the two situations were revised carefully after each pilot study. From the first to the second pilot study, the perceived realism of the first scenario (neglected relationship) went from $M = 3.4$ to $M = 4.4$ (out of 5), and the perceived realism of the second scenario (insensitive behavior) went from $M = 4.3$ to $M = 4.4$ (out of 5). The descriptions of the two situations used in the main study were the final version after the second round of revision (see Appendix B).

**Design of messages**

A total of eighteen stimulus messages were developed. For each situation, nine message instantiations were created by crossing three types of conflict-solving orientations (eristic, conventional-influence, and collaborative) with three levels of goal structures (minimal, unifunctional, multifunctional). Messages were represented as what the participant’s partner would say to the participant in that situation to initiate the conversation about the participant’s transgression. Within each conflict-solving
orientation condition, the participant’s partner’s language was manipulated to correspond to each goal structure condition (minimal, unifunctional, multifunctional).

To rule out relevant confounding factors, the word counts across all eighteen messages were held approximately constant (with an average of 85 words in each message, ranging from 74 to 92 words for messages in the neglected relationship situation, and from 80 to 94 words for messages in the insensitive behavior situation) (See Appendix B for the reports of exact word count for each message). Each questionnaire started with a short description of the relationship between the two speakers and the conflict situation, followed by the message and the measurement scales.

From July to August in 2014, these eighteen messages were subjected to a pretest among 11 college students. Each student was asked to read the description of the two situations and three messages designed for each situation. The student was then asked to (1) indicate on a Likert-type scale how realistic each message was in the given situation and (2) provide specific suggestions on how to improve the messages. Participants provided detailed suggestions on how to improve the messages, and example words and expressions, emotional tones, and message themes that were common among college students. Subjects also provided message examples and specific sentences they have said to or heard from their romantic partner in similar situations. Taking into account these suggestions and examples, a careful revision of the eighteen messages was undertaken before they were employed in the main study. The final eighteen stimulus messages of the main study can be found in Appendix B.
Questionnaire Design and Measurement Instruments

**Questionnaire Design.** The questionnaire contained six parts.

**Part 1: Demographics.** The first part of the questionnaire surveyed participants’ basic demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, year in college). A yes-or-no question was also presented to the participants, which asked them whether they were currently in an unmarried romantic relationship. Answers to this question were used to determine whether they were qualified to continue completing the questionnaire.

**Part 2: Scenario, message, and manipulation check.** The second part of the questionnaire started with a description of the designed conflict situation, and was followed by the experimental message. Participants were told to imagine themselves and their partner being in this scenario throughout the entire questionnaire. Before reading the scenario and the message, participants were asked to type in the initials of their partner’s name. This was to better ensure that the participants indeed had the actual person in their mind. After reading the scenario and the message, participants responded to a series of scales that were used to measure the effectiveness of the message manipulations. Participants’ perceived realism of the scenario and the message were also measured.

**Part 3, 4, and 5: Message effectiveness, message outcomes, and goal importance.** The third part of the questionnaire was composed of a series of scaled measures to solicit participants’ evaluations of the effectiveness of the message. The evaluations included perceived general effectiveness of the message, and the perceived message’s regard for instrumental, identity, and relationship goals. The fourth part of the questionnaire measured perceived outcomes of the message. Constructs that were measured included perceived conflict resolvability and perceived relationship enhancement. The fifth part of
the questionnaire was designed to measure the participants’ perceived importance of various goals in the situation.

**Part 6: Relationship measures.** This part of the questionnaire surveyed the participants’ specific type of their current relationship (e.g., casual or exclusive dating), and the length of their relationship.

**Instruments.** All instruments are found in Appendix C.

**Part 1. Screening relationship status.** Participants were asked “Are you currently in an unmarried romantic relationship? (Unmarried romantic relationship includes going out, casual or exclusive dating, co-habiting, and engaged relationships.)” Response items included “Yes,” which allowed participants to continue completing the questionnaire, and “No, I’m not currently in a romantic relationship” or “No, I’m married”, which disqualified the participants from the study and ended the online questionnaire.

**Basic demographic information.** Participants’ were asked to report their age, gender, ethnicity and year in college.

**Part 2. Scenario, message, and manipulation check.** Perceived realism of the scenario was measured using three items adapted from scales used to measure perceived realism for relationship transgressions (Cionea, 2012), and advice-giving (Feng & Burleson, 2008). Items asked participants the degree to which they thought the scenario was realistic (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). A sample item was “The scenario is realistic.” These items demonstrated internal consistency (α = .93, M = 6.00, SD = 1.04), and were averaged to create the scenario realism measure, with higher scores indicating stronger perceptions of scenario realism.
Manipulation checks. Two measures assessed the extent to which the conflict-solving orientation and goal structure of the messages were successfully manipulated. These scales were composed of items describing the defining features of messages of a particular conflict-solving orientation or goal structure. Conflict-solving orientation features were measured with three subscales that asked participants whether each message centered on communication behaviors that were characteristic of eristic, conventional-confrontation and collaborative orientations. The eristic message feature subscale contained 6 items, the conventional-confrontation message features subscale contained 4 items, and the collaborative message features subscale 3 items. Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with each item (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). A sample item was “My partner’s words show that he/she looks out for both of our interests” (collaborative orientation). The reliabilities for these subscales were .78 for eristic message features ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.21$), .80 for conventional-confrontation message features ($M = 4.75, SD = 1.04$), and .80 for collaborative message features ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.50$). Items were averaged to form scores of a particular subscale, with a higher score indicating the message embracing a higher level of message features of the respective conflict-solving orientation.

Goal structure features were measured with 2 subscales. One subscale, the ease of inferring goals, was a single-item measure that asked participants the degree to which they perceived it was easy to infer the intended goal of the speaker in the message. Participant reported the degree to which they agreed that “It is easy to infer the clear goal of the speaker in this message” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Another subscale that measured multiple goal message features was composed of 5 items, which
asked the participant the extent to which each message reflected three types of interactional goals: instrumental, identity, and relational goals. Participants evaluated these items with 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A sample item was “This message is effective in maintaining a good relationship between the two people” (relationship goal). The measure for multiple goal message features was calculated by averaging the 5 items, which demonstrated reliable internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.42$).

Perceived message realism. Perceived message realism was measured using a one-item measure: “The message is realistic given the situation.” Participants reported the degree to which they agree with this statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.55$).

Part 3. Message evaluation. General message effectiveness was measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale that contained five items designed from the interpersonal conflict literature and related topics such as topic avoidance (Donovan-Kicken et al., 2011), social support (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; Jones & Burleson, 1997), self-disclosure (Caughlin et al., 2009), and persuasion (Dillard, Shen, & Vail, 2007). The scale measured participants’ general perceptions of the effectiveness of the message. Participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with each statement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sample items were “The message is effective” and “The message is appropriate.” The five items demonstrated high level of internal reliability ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.54$), and were averaged to form a measure of general message effectiveness, with higher scores indicating greater general message effectiveness.
Effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals. Message effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals was measured for perceived regard for instrumental goals, perceived regard for participants’ identities, and perceived regard for the relationship. Participants responded to a series of 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Effectiveness in accomplishing instrumental goals was measured using a scale designed based on the conflict resolution literature. Five items measured the message’s ability to facilitate instrumental goals relevant to conflict resolution. A sample item was “My partner’s message will facilitate a resolution of the conflict.” The items demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .92, M = 4.84, SD = 1.45), so they were averaged to create the measure of effectiveness in accomplishing instrumental goals.

Effectiveness in accomplishing identity goals. Effectiveness in accomplishing identity goals were measured from two angles: regard for identity goals and regard for face. Perceived identity goals were measured using items constructed based on identity implications theory (Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998) and the conflict literature. Six items were constructed, with three items measuring the message hearer’s (i.e., participant’s) identity and three items measuring the message speaker’s (i.e., participant’s partner’s) identity. Sample items included “My partner’s words make it sound that I only care about my own interests in the situation (reversed)” (message hearer’s identity), and “My partner’s words indicate that his/her opinions are important” (message speaker’s identity).

Perceived regard for face was measured using items adapted from Goldsmith’s (2000) politeness scale and factors found to indicate a speaker’s social image in Bingham
and Burleson (1989). Nine items were constructed, with five items measuring the message hearer’s (i.e., participant’s) face and four items measuring message speaker’s (i.e., participant’s partner’s) face. Sample items were “My partner’s words would make me feel good about myself” (message hearer’s face), and “My partner’s words make him/her likeable” (message speaker’s face).

In the end, the measure of effectiveness in accomplishing the message hearer’s identity goal was constructed by averaging the three items that measured perceived regards for message hearer’s identity and five items that measured regards for message hearer’s face. These items demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92, M = 3.40, SD = 1.32$). The measure of effectiveness in accomplishing the message speaker’s identity goal was constructed by averaging the three items that measured message speaker’s identity and four items that measured message speaker’s face. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for these items was .86 ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.16$).

*Effectiveness in accomplishing relationship goals.* Perceptions of the message’s regard for the relationship were measured with a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from the relational goal measure used in Keck and Samp (2007), and items measuring relational assurance in Goldsmith, McDermott, and Alexander’s (2000) study of support messages. Four items asked participants whether they perceived that their partner’s message in the scenario helped maintain their relationship. Sample descriptive/adjective pairs were “What my partner said is unsupportive–supportive,” and “What my partner said displays a lack of caring–displays caring.” The four items demonstrated high internal reliability ($\alpha = .86, M = 4.51, SD = 1.61$), and were averaged.
to form a score of effectiveness in accomplishing relationship goals. The higher scores indicated greater effectiveness.

**Part 4: Message outcomes.** Perceived conflict resolvability. The perceived conflict resolvability of the conflict was measured using five items adapted from the scale used to measure perceived resolvability of serial arguments (Johnson & Roloff, 2000a, 2000b). Participants responded to a 7-point scale with items that asked the extent to which participants were confident that the situation could be resolved (1 = not at all confident, 7 = extremely confident). A sample item was “Based on your partner’s words, how confident are you that you and your partner will be able to find a really good solution?” These items demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.26$), and were averaged to create the measure for perceived conflict resolvability, with higher scores indicating perceptions of greater conflict resolvability.

Relationship enhancement. Perceptions of the message’s outcomes on enhancing the relationship was measured using a scale adapted from Johnson and Roloff (2000a, 2000b). Participants were asked to imagine the rest of the conversation they might have with their partner based on the message they read, and report on a 5-item scale the extent to which they perceived that the conversation would affect their relationship (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). A sample item was “to what extent will the whole conversation between you and your partner make your relationship stronger?” These items also generated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.42$), and were averaged to create the measure for perceived relationship enhancement, with higher scores indicating perceptions of more positive impact on relationship enhancement.
**Part 5: Goal importance.** The perceived importance of two types of interactional goals relevant to conflict situations was measured: identity-related goals, and relationship-related goals. Respondents responded to a series of 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

*Importance of identity goals* measured concern for identity and concern for face. *Concern for identity* was measured using items adapted from Keck and Samp (2007) and Shrader and Dillard (1998). Three items measured participants’ concern for their own identity, and three items measured their concern for their partner’s identity. Sample items included “In this situation I want to be true to myself” (a participant’s own identity goal), and “In this situation I want my partner to be herself/himself” (a partner’s identity goal). *Concern for face* was measured using items adapted from scales used in Goldsmith (2000) and Bingham and Burleson (1989). A total of eight items were included in the scale, with four items measuring participant’s concern for their own face and four items measuring participant’s concern for their partner’s face. Sample items included “In this situation I want to make sure my partner still thinks highly of me” (a participant’s own face goal), and “In this situation I want my partner to know that I think he/she has positive qualities” (a partner’s face goal). The measure of *importance of identity goals* was constructed by averaging the fourteen items (the six items that measured participant’s importance of identity goals and the eight items that measured participant’s perceived importance of face goals). The reliability (Cronbach's *alpha*) for these items was .86 (*M* = 6.38, *SD* = .65).

*Importance of relationship goals* was measured using a scale with four items adapted from Shrader and Dillard (1998), Bevan et al. (2004) and Keck and Samp (2007).
A sample item was “In this situation I would not be willing to risk possible damage to the relationship.” Acceptable internal reliability was found for this scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$, $M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.01$). These items were averaged into a single measure for perceived importance of relationship goals.

**Part 6: Relationship measures.** Participants identified the *relationship type* (i.e., hanging out or casual dating, exclusive dating, co-habiting, engaged, or other) with their dating partner, and the *length* of their relationship in terms of the number of months.

**Data Analysis Plan**

Demographic variables were analyzed using descriptive analyses. The manipulation check analyses employed descriptive analyses, one-sample $t$ tests, and ANOVAs. In the testing of study hypotheses, general message effectiveness, multiple goal effectiveness, and message outcomes were analyzed using multivariate and univariate analyses of covariance to determine whether there were 1) conflict-solving orientation main effects, 2) goal structure main effects, and 3) integrated effects of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. The effects of goal importance and its interaction with conflict-solving orientation or goal structure on the message evaluation variables were analyzed using SPSS PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). The results of these analyses are presented in the next chapter.

Before the analyses, the data were first screened for outliers. No obvious outliers were detected for each measure. Adherence to the assumptions of normality was tested using Shapiro-Wilk tests. The non-normality was significant on most dependent variable measures, and the data for most measures were negatively skewed. Therefore, all analyses were initially run with inversed-then-log transformed data, which were closer to
normal distributions. However, the findings were unchanged when using transformed data from when using the original measured data. Therefore, the results chapter reports the findings from the analyses using the original untransformed data.

Prior to the analyses of covariance, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was tested using Levene’s tests. Heterogeneity of variance was found to be significant on most dependent variable measures. Therefore, analyses of variances were examined using both parametric (equal variance assumed) significant tests (i.e., ANCOVAs) and non-parametric (equal variance unassumed) significant tests (i.e., Kruskal-Wallis $h$ tests). In all analyses, the findings were not altered in the non-parametric significant tests. Therefore, ANCOVAs appear to be robust to the violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Hence, the next chapter reports results from the analyses with the parametric significant tests.
Chapter 5: Results

The goal of this research was to test the proposed conflict message classification system for its ability to differentiate the effectiveness of conflict messages. This study focuses on conflict openings—conflict messages that are used in the initial stages of conflict interaction to initiate a discussion about a conflict issue. Again, the terms “messages,” “conflict openings,” and “openings” are used interchangeably in this chapter. Conflict openings varying with respect to the two message dimensions (i.e., conflict-solving orientation and goal structure) of the system were designed and evaluated. Analyses of covariance compared the perceived effectiveness and outcomes of these conflict opening messages.

This chapter presents the results of the study. A series of manipulation check analyses were first performed to ensure the quality of the conflict opening messages. The chapter then presents the main analyses that addressed the study hypotheses.

Manipulation Check Analyses

The manipulation check analyses focused on two issues: (1) whether the conflict scenarios and conflict opening messages were considered by participants to be realistic, and (2) whether the conflict openings were effectively manipulated to reflect the intended levels of each conflict-solving orientation and goal structure.
Analyses of Scenario and Message Realism

Analyses of perceived realism were conducted for the two conflict scenarios: the *neglected relationship* situation and the *insensitive behavior* situation. Means and standard deviations of perceived realism for these two scenarios and designed messages are provided in Table 5.1.

Descriptive analyses and one-sample t tests showed that the total average rated realism of the two scenarios was 6.01 (SD = 1.04) on a 7-point scale, which was significantly greater than the scale midpoint, *t*(418) = 39.31, *p* < .001. The mean realism for the *neglected relationship* situation was 6.24 (SD = .74), which was significantly above the scale midpoint, *t*(205) = 43.71, *p* < .001. The mean realism for the *insensitive behavior* situation was 5.78 (SD = 1.23), which was also significantly above the scale midpoint, *t*(212) = 21.05, *p* < .001. Given that these ratings of perceived realism were all above the scale midpoint, it can be inferred that both scenarios were considered to be realistic, from the participants’ viewpoints.

Similarly, the average rated realism across all 18 designed messages was 5.31 (SD = 1.55) (See Table 5.1), significantly above the scale midpoint on a 7-point scale range, *t*(418) = 17.37, *p* < .001. The average realism ratings of 18 messages ranged from 4.00 (SD = 1.84) for the eristic minimal message in the insensitive situation, to 6.32 (SD = .65) for the conventional-confrontation multifunctional message in the neglected relationship situation. Except for three messages with the lowest levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure (i.e., eristic minimal and eristic multifunctional messages in the insensitive situation, and eristic minimal message in the neglected relationship situation; See Table 5.1 for means and standard deviations), the realism ratings of each designed
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<td>(1.79)</td>
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<td>(1.23)</td>
<td>(1.32)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5.46</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>4.32</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(.65)</td>
<td>(1.38)</td>
<td>(1.31)</td>
<td>(1.85)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.1 Means and Standard Deviations of Scenario Realism, and Message Realism by Conflict-Solving Orientation and Goal Structure**

*Note. ERI = eristic orientation; CON = conventional-confrontation orientation; COL = collaborative orientation*
message was statistically above the scale midpoint (t values ranging from 2.33 to 16.82; p < .05 in each one-sample t test). Therefore, in general, participants considered the experimental messages to be realistic.

To examine whether conflict orientation and goal structure exerted specific effects on message realism, a 2 (situation) × 3 (conflict orientation) × 3 (goal structure × 2 (gender)) ANOVA was conducted on message realism. The analysis produced significant effects for situation, $F(1,383) = 9.118, p = .003, \eta^2 = .03$; conflict orientation, $F(2,383) = 8.312, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$; goal structure, $F(2,383) = 3.6729, p = .025, \eta^2 = .02$; gender, $F(1,383) = 2.229, p = .136, \eta^2 = .01$; a situation × conflict orientation interaction, $F(2,383) = 3.072, p = .047, \eta^2 = .02$; and a conflict orientation × goal structure interaction, $F(4,383) = 3.702, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$. Even though the message realism ratings were at the midpoint or above the midpoint of the response scale, to control for the possibility that message realism would account for differences in conflict orientation or goal structure on the message evaluations, message realism was included as a covariate in the analyses of covariance.

**Analyses of Message Manipulations**

Analyses of the message manipulations tested whether the messages were designed successfully to reflect the designated levels of message dimensions (i.e., the level of conflict-solving orientation and the level of goal structure). The following sections present the manipulation checks for message conflict-solving orientation and message goal structure.

**Message conflict-solving orientation.** The first analysis assessed whether the messages effectively distinguished among three types of conflict-solving orientations
(i.e., eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative orientation). H1 predicted that the conflict-solving orientation of a message would be associated with the ratings of message features conceptualized to be embedded in that particular orientation. To be more specific: (H1a) eristic messages would be rated higher in embodying eristic orientation features than conventional-confrontation messages or collaborative messages; (H1b) conventional-confrontation messages would be rated higher in embodying conventional-confrontation orientation features than eristic or collaborative messages; and (H1c) collaborative messages would be rated higher in embodying collaborative orientation features than eristic or conventional-confrontation messages.

In order to test these hypotheses, a series of three analyses of variance were conducted, in which message conflict-solving orientation (3 types) and situation (2 types) were entered as between-group factors, and the averaged ratings of message features of eristic orientation, conventional-confrontation orientation, or collaborative orientation was entered as the dependent variables. As expected, the analysis for eristic message features detected a main effect for message conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 413) = 105.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .34$, and no other significant effects. Post hoc comparisons showed that eristic features were rated higher for eristic messages ($M = 4.27, SD = .84$) than conventional-confrontation messages ($M = 3.28, SD = 1.13, p < .001$) and collaborative messages ($M = 2.55, SD = .99, p < .001$). Summary results of these analyses are reported in Table 5.2. Therefore, H1a was supported.
Table 5.2 ANOVA Summary Results for Message Conflict-Solving Orientation on Eristic, Conventional-Confrontation, and Collaborative Message Features

*Note.* Means with different superscripts differ significantly at the \( p < .05 \) level.

The analysis for conventional-confrontation message features also produced a main effect for conflict-solving orientation, \( F(2, 413) = 17.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08 \). Post hoc comparisons showed that conventional-confrontation features were rated higher for conventional-confrontation messages (\( M = 5.10, SD = .80 \)) than for eristic messages (\( M = 4.41, SD = 1.22, p < .001 \)) and collaborative messages (\( M = 4.76, SD = .95, p = .010 \); see Table 5.2). This analysis also yielded a main effect for situation type, \( F(1, 413) = 13.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03 \), with ratings in the neglected relationship situation (\( M = 4.57, SD = .97, p < .001 \)) lower than ratings in the insensitive behavior situation (\( M = 4.92, SD = 1.08 \)). However, there was no significant interaction between the situation type and the message conflict-solving orientation. Thus, H1b was supported.
Finally, the analysis for collaborative message features produced a main effect for conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 413) = 168.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .45$. Post hoc comparisons showed that collaborative message features were rated higher for collaborative messages ($M = 5.55, SD = 1.01$) than for eristic messages ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.13, p < .001$) or conventional-confrontation messages ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.19, p < .001$; see Table 5.2). No significant main or interaction effects were detected for situation type. Hence, H1c was supported.

Thus, the manipulation check hypotheses for conflict-solving orientations (H1a, H1b, H1c) were all supported. Participants saw messages of each conflict-solving orientation to embody message features characteristic of that particular conflict-solving orientation, indicating that the message manipulations of conflict-solving orientations were effective.

**Message goal structure.** A second group of hypotheses (H2a, H2b, H2c) tested the message manipulation of goal structures. It predicted that participants would report that: (H2a) it would be easier to infer the speaker’s goal(s) for unifunctional messages and multifunctional messages than for minimal messages; (H2b) it would be equally easy to infer the speaker’s goal for unifunctional messages and multifunctional messages; and (H2c) participants would rate multifunctional messages to be higher in embracing multiple goal message features than unifunctional or minimal messages. Two conflict goal structure (3) × situation (2) ANOVAs were conducted to test these hypotheses.

In the first analysis, the *ease of inferring goals* was entered as the dependent variable. This analysis design was used to test H2a and H2b. The results produced a significant main effect for message goal structure on the ease of inferring speaker goals,
\[ F(2, 413) = 4.47, p = .012, \eta^2 = .02, \] and no other significant effects. Summary results of these ANOVAs can be found in Table 5.3. Pairwise comparisons showed that minimal messages \((M = 4.80, SD = 1.72)\) were rated lower in the ease of inferring speaker goals than unifunctional messages \((M = 5.23, SD = 1.56, p = .026)\) and collaborative messages \((M = 5.34, SD = 1.50, p = .005)\), thus supporting H2a. No significant difference occurred between the ratings of unifunctional messages and collaborative messages \((p > .05)\), thus supporting H2b.

In a second ANOVA on multiple goal message features, the analysis produced a significant main effect for message goal structure, \(F(2, 413) = 10.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05, \) and no other significant effects. Pairwise comparisons showed that multifunctional messages \((M = 4.54, SD = 1.47)\) were rated significantly higher for multiple goal message features than unifunctional messages \((M = 4.08, SD = 1.28, p = .005)\) and minimal messages \((M = 4.08, SD = 1.28, p = .005)\) and minimal messages \((M = 3.79, SD = 1.43, p < .001; \) see Table 5.3). No difference was found between ratings of minimal messages and unifunctional messages \((p > .05)\). Therefore, H2c was supported. Collectively, hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c were all supported, indicating that the message manipulations for message goal structures were effective.

In sum, the findings from the manipulation analyses suggested that the conflict scenarios and conflict messages were considered by participants to be realistic. Messages of each conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were perceived to embody message features conceptualized to be characteristic of that particular conflict-solving orientation and goal structure, which demonstrated that the conflict opening messages were effectively designed.
Table 5.3 ANOVA Summary Results for Message Goal Structure on Ease of Inferring Goals and Multiple Goal Message Features

Note. Means with different superscripts differ significantly at the \( p < .05 \) level.

The next sections present the results of the analyses that tested the study hypotheses. See Table 5.4 for Pearson correlations between dependent and goal importance variables, along with their means and standard deviations. All of the ANCOVAs and MANCOVAs in the analyses were conducted with message realism as the covariate. Post hoc analyses were pairwise comparisons performed with estimated marginal means (EMM) and were Bonferroni-adjusted. Statistical power for the variables examined in this study ranged from 0.92 to 1.00 at the \( p \)-value of .05, except for the analyses on goal structure’s effects on relationship enhancement (.65) and instrumental goal effectiveness (.76). It should be noted that all of the analyses were also conducted without message realism being the covariate, and the findings were not substantially altered.
Table 5.4 Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent and Goal Importance Variables

Note. *p < .01.
Analyses of Conflict Opening Features on Perceived Message Effectiveness

The main analyses of the study examined and compared participants’ evaluations of conflict opening messages that varied on the two message dimensions: conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. This section reports analyses of the effects of message conflict-orientation/goal structure on perceived message effectiveness. Message effectiveness was examined in two ways: perceived general message effectiveness and message effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals. A series of hypotheses (H3, H4, H5, H6) were tested. Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed to compare group differences in message effectiveness based on message conflict-solving orientations and goal structures. In these analyses, general message effectiveness or effectiveness in accomplishing each interactional goal was treated as the dependent variables.

Perceived General Message Effectiveness (GME)

H3 and H4 were concerned with the perceived general effectiveness of conflict opening messages (GME).

Effect of conflict-solving orientation on GME. H3 predicted that eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings would be rated as progressively higher in GME. An ANCOVA was conducted, with conflict-solving orientation (3), situation (2) and gender (2) entered as between-group factors, and GME as the dependent variable. The results produced a main effect for conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 406) = 120.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .37$. Pairwise comparisons indicated that eristic messages ($EMM = 3.58, SE = .09$) were rated lower on GME than conventional-confrontation messages ($EMM = 4.87, SE = .09, p < .001$), which were rated lower than
collaborative messages ($EMM = 5.61$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). Summary results of this ANCOVA are reported in Table 5.5. Thus, H3 was supported.

The results did not detect any significant main effect of gender; however, a significant interaction between gender and message conflict-solving orientation was detected, $F(2, 406) = 6.04$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc analyses employing an analysis of variance indicated that collaborative messages were rated higher on GME than conventional-confrontation messages only among females; males perceived collaborative and conventional-confrontation messages to be the same in terms of GME. Conventional-confrontation messages were rated to be higher on GME than eristic messages by both males and females. No significant effects were detected for situation type.

**Effect of goal structure on GME.** H4 predicted that multifunctional openings would be rated higher than minimal or unifunctional openings on GME. In a similar ANCOVA, the results produced a significant main effect for goal structure on GME, $F(2, 406) = 9.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Post hoc analysis showed that multifunctional messages ($EMM = 5.05$, $SE = .11$) were rated higher on GME than both minimal messages ($EMM = 4.38$, $SE = .12$, $p < .001$) and unifunctional messages ($EMM = 4.59$, $SE = .12$, $p = .014$). No significant difference was found between minimal and unifunctional messages ($p > .05$). H4 was confirmed. Summary results of these analyses are reported in Table 5.6.

Situation type also produced a main effect, $F(1, 406) = 7.58$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with conflict openings in the insensitive behavior situation rated higher on GME than conflict openings in the neglected relationship situation. No other significant effects were found.
In sum, the results of these analyses indicate that conflict opening messages high in conflict-solving orientation or goal structure were perceived to be generally more effective than conflict openings low on conflict-solving orientation or goal structure.

**Perceived multiple goal effectiveness (MGE)**

The next tests focused on perceptions of conflict openings in their effectiveness in accomplishing multiple interactional goals (MGE). The effectiveness in accomplishing four types of goals were examined: instrumental goal effectiveness (i.e., the message’s effectiveness in accomplish instrumental goals), hearer’s identity goal effectiveness (i.e., the message’s effectiveness in creating a positive identity for the message hearer, or study participant), speaker’s identity goal effectiveness (i.e., the message’s effectiveness in producing a positive identity for the message speaker), and relationship goal effectiveness (i.e., the message’s effectiveness in maintaining good relationship between the interactants). Two groups of hypotheses are tested. This section first reports the analyses of message conflict-solving orientation and MGE, and then the analyses of message goal structure and MGE.

**Effect of conflict-solving orientation on MGE.** The first group of hypotheses (H5a, H5b, H5c, H5d) predicted that messages varying in conflict-solving orientation would be perceived differently in their ability to accomplish multiple goals. To be more specific, eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative messages would be rated progressively more effective in accomplishing instrumental goals (H5a), creating a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant) (H5b), presenting a positive identity for the message speaker (i.e., participant’s partner) (H5c), and preserving a positive relationship between the parties (H5d). A MANCOVA was initially conducted to
handle experiment-wide Type I error rate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). Conflict-solving orientation (3), situation (2) and gender (2) were entered as between-group factors, and instrumental goal effectiveness, hearer identity goal effectiveness, speaker identity goal effectiveness, and relationship goal effectiveness were entered as the four dependent variables. The results yielded a significant main effect for conflict-solving orientation, $F(8, 806) = 45.72, p < .001$, Wilks lambda = .473, $\eta^2 = .31$; and situation, $F(4, 403) = 3.86, p = .004$, Wilks lambda = .963, $\eta^2 = .04$; and a conflict-solving orientation × situation interaction, $F(8, 806) = 2.10, p = .034$, Wilks lambda = .960, $\eta^2 = .02$; and a conflict-solving orientation × gender interaction, $F(8, 806) = 2.11, p = .032$, Wilks lambda = .959, $\eta^2 = .02$.

Given the MANCOVA findings, examination of the univariate analyses followed. Table 5.5 reports the summaries of these univariate analyses. In the first ANCOVA on instrumental goal effectiveness, a main effect for conflict-solving orientation was detected, $F(2, 406) = 82.09, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .29$, such that eristic messages ($EMM = 3.85, SE = .10$) were rated lower on instrumental goal effectiveness than conventional-confrontation messages ($EMM = 5.11, SE = .10, p < .001$), which were lower than collaborative messages ($EMM = 5.61, SE = .10, p = .001$). Thus, H5a was supported.

A significant main effect was also found for situation, $F(1, 406) = 5.71, p = .017$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with messages in the neglected relationship situation rated higher on instrumental goal effectiveness than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. No other significant main or interaction effects were found.
Table 5.5 ANCOVA Summary Results for Message Conflict-Solving Orientation on General Message Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes

Note. Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the \( p < .05 \) level (Bonferroni-adjusted).

In the second ANCOVA on hearer’s identity goal effectiveness, conflict-solving orientation yielded a main effect, \( F(2, 406) = 176.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .47 \) (See Table 5.5). Post hoc analyses indicated that eristic messages (\( EMM = 2.39, SE = .08 \)) were rated lower than conventional-confrontation messages (\( EMM = 3.36, SE = .08, p < .001 \)), which were lower than collaborative messages (\( EMM = 4.51, SE = .08, p < .001 \)) on
effectiveness in creating a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant). Thus H5b was supported.

The results also detected a main effect for gender, $F(1, 406) = 4.23, p = .040, \eta^2 = .01$, with males rating conflict openings higher on hearer’s identity goal effectiveness than females. A significant interaction was also discovered between gender and conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 406) = 4.64, p = .010, \eta^2 = .02$. There was no gender difference in the ratings for eristic messages and collaborative messages ($p > .05$), while males rated conventional-confrontation messages to be more effective on hearer goal effectiveness than females. No significant effects were found for situation type.

The third ANCOVA focused on speaker’s identity goal effectiveness. A significant main effect was discovered for conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 406) = 111.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$. Pairwise comparisons showed that eristic messages ($EMM = 3.70, SE = .07$) were rated lower than conventional-confrontation messages ($EMM = 4.65, SE = .07, p < .001$), which were rated lower than collaborative messages ($EMM = 5.21, SE = .07, p < .001$; see Table 5.5), confirming H5c.

There was also a significant main effect for situation type, $F(1, 406) = 12.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$. Conflict openings in the neglected relationship situation were rated significantly lower on speaker identity goal effectiveness than conflict openings in the insensitive behavior situation. A significant interaction was also found between situation and conflict-solving orientation, $F(2, 406) = 5.11, p = .006, \eta^2 = .03$. Eristic messages were rated significantly lower in the neglected relationship situation than in the insensitive behavior situation, while conventional-confrontation or collaborative messages were rated similarly in both situations.
No significant main effect was found for gender. However, there was a significant gender × conflict-solving orientation interaction effect, $F(2, 406) = 4.79, p = .009, \eta^2 = .02$. Collaborative messages were rated higher than conventional-confrontation messages among females, whereas males perceived collaborative and conventional-confrontation messages to be similar in effectively creating a positive identity for the speaker. Both males and females rated conventional-confrontation messages to be higher on speaker identity goal effectiveness than eristic messages.

Finally, a fourth ANCOVA was conducted on relationship goal effectiveness. As shown in Table 5.5, conflict-solving orientation was found to have a significant main effect, $F(2, 406) = 108.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$. Eristic messages ($EMM = 3.44, SE = .10$) were rated lower on effectiveness in preserving a positive relationship between the interactants than conventional-confrontation messages ($EMM = 4.57, SE = .10, p < .001$), which were lower than collaborative messages ($EMM = 5.62, SE = .10, p < .001$). Thus, H5d was supported.

The results also yielded a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 406) = 6.13, p = .014, \eta^2 = .02$. Males rated conflict openings to be more effective in accomplishing relationship goals than females. A significant interaction between gender and conflict-solving orientation was also discovered, $F(2, 406) = 3.36, p = .036, \eta^2 = .02$, such that both males and females rated eristic and collaborative messages similarly on their ability to preserve the relationship between the parties, while males rated conventional-confrontation messages to be more effective than females. No significant main effects or interaction effects were found for situation type.
In sum, the results of these analyses indicate that conflict openings with higher levels of conflict-solving orientation were perceived as more effective in accomplishing multiple interactional goals (including instrumental goals, message hearer’s and speaker’s identity goals, and relationships goals) than conflict openings with lower levels of conflict-solving orientations.

**Effect of goal structure on MGE.** A second group of hypotheses (H6a, H6b, H6c, H6d) predicted that conflict opening messages that vary in goal structures would be perceived differently in their ability to accomplish multiple goals. Specifically, multifunctional conflict opening messages would be rated higher than minimal or unifunctional conflict opening messages for accomplishing instrumental goals (H6a), creating a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant) (H6b), presenting a positive identity for the message speaker (i.e., participant’s partner) (H6c), and preserving a positive relationship between the parties (H6d).

A 3 (goal structure) × 2 (situation) × 2 (gender) MANCOVA was initially conducted. The four dependent variables were instrumental goal effectiveness, hearer identity goal effectiveness, speaker identity goal effectiveness, and relationship goal effectiveness. The results yielded significant main effects for goal structure, $F(8, 806) = 2.82, p = .004$, Wilks lambda = .946, $\eta^2 = .03$, and situation, $F(4, 403) = 4.31, p = .002$, Wilks lambda = .959, $\eta^2 = .04$. No other significant main or interaction effects were identified.

Given the significant MANCOVA findings, the univariate analyses were examined, with summaries reported in Table 5.6. The first analysis on instrumental goal effectiveness detected a significant main effect for goal structure, $F(2, 406) = 4.44, p = ...
.012, $\eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc analyses showed that multifunctional messages ($EMM = 5.11$, $SE = .11$) were rated higher than minimal messages ($EMM = 4.63$, $SE = .12$, $p = .012$), but not higher than unifunctional messages ($EMM = 4.77$, $SE = .12$, $p > .05$). No significant difference was shown between unifunctional messages and minimal messages ($p > .05$; see Table 5.6). Thus, H6a was partially supported in that multiple goal openings were rated as more effective than minimal openings but not more effective than unifunctional openings for achieving instrumental goals.

Situation also yielded a significant main effect, $F(1, 406) = 6.76$, $p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with messages in neglected relationship situation rated lower on instrumental goal effectiveness than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. No other significant main or interaction effects were detected.

The second ANCOVA on hearer’s identity goal effectiveness also detected a main effect for goal structure, $F(2, 406) = 6.84$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Multifunctional messages ($EMM = 3.71$, $SE = .11$) were rated higher than minimal messages ($EMM = 3.15$, $SE = .11$, $p = .001$), but not higher than unifunctional messages ($EMM = 3.38$, $SE = .11$, $p > .05$). No significant difference was found between unifunctional and minimal messages ($p > .05$). Therefore, H6b was partially supported, such that multifunctional openings were rated higher than minimal openings but not higher than unifunctional openings on effectiveness in creating a positive identity for the message hearer (i.e., the participant). No other significant main or interaction effects were detected.
Table 5.6 ANCOVA Summary Results for Message Goal Structure on General Message Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes

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Note. Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level (Bonferroni-adjusted).

Similarly, the third ANCOVA on speaker’s identity goal effectiveness yielded a significant main effect for goal structure, $F(2, 406) = 7.70, p = .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that multifunctional messages ($E(MM = 4.79, SE = .09$) were rated higher than both unifunctional messages ($E(MM = 4.37, SE = .09, p = .003$) and minimal messages ($E(MM = 4.36, SE = .09, p = .002$) in producing a positive identity for the
speaker. No significant difference was shown between unifunctional messages and minimal messages ($p > .05$). Hence, H6c was supported.

These results also yielded a significant main effect for situation type, $F(1, 406) = 12.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$, with conflict messages in the neglected relationship situation rated lower than conflict messages in the insensitive behavior situation on their effectiveness to accomplish the message speaker’s identity goals. There was no significant interaction between situation type and message goal structure. No significant main or interaction effects were detected for gender.

Finally, the fourth ANCOVA on relationship goal effectiveness also produced a significant main effect for goal structure, $F(2, 406) = 7.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Multifunctional messages ($EMM = 4.91, SE = .13$) were rated significantly higher in preserving a positive relationship between the interactants than minimal messages ($EMM = 4.21, SE = .13, p < .001$), and unifunctional messages ($EMM = 4.44, SE = .13, p = .029$; see Table 5.6). No significant difference was found between unifunctional messages and minimal messages ($p > .05$). Thus, H6d was supported.

A significant main effect was also detected for situation type, $F(1, 406) = 4.41, p = .036, \eta^2 = .01$. Conflict messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on relationship goal effectiveness than conflict messages in the insensitive behavior situation. No other significant main or interaction effects were found.

In general, these results suggest that conflict openings that are multifunctional in goal structure were perceived to be more effective than messages that are minimal in goal structure for accomplishing instrumental goals, hearer’s identity goals, speaker’s identity goals, and relationship goals. Multifunctional openings were rated to be more effective
than unifunctional openings in accomplishing speaker’s identity goals and relationship goals. Although multifunctional openings were not rated significantly higher than unifunctional openings in accomplishing instrumental goals and hearer’s identity goals, the mean of ratings of effectiveness in accomplishing these two types of goals trended in the predicted direction.

To sum up this section, the analyses suggest that conflict openings with higher levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure are perceived to be more effective in accomplishing multiple interactional goals than conflict openings with lower levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure.

**Analyses of Conflict Opening Features on Perceived Message Outcomes**

Besides the effects on perceived message effectiveness, the analyses of this study also tested the effects of conflict opening messages on perceived message outcomes. The third group of hypotheses (H7, H8, H9, H10) tested how variations of an opening message’s conflict-solving orientation and goal structure affected participants’ perceptions of conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement. This section presents analyses of the effects on perceived conflict resolvability and relationships enhancement.

**Message Outcomes on Perceived Conflict Resolvability (CR)**

The effects on perceived conflict resolvability (CR) were addressed in H7 and H8.

**Effect of conflict-solving orientation on CR.** H7 predicted that eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative messages would be progressively associated with higher perceived conflict resolvability. In a 3 (conflict-solving orientation) × 2 (situation) × 2 (gender) ANCOVA, perceived CR was entered as the dependent variable. The results produced a main effect for conflict-solving orientation,
$F(2, 406) = 32.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Post hoc analysis indicated that eristic messages ($EMM = 4.73, SE = .10$) were rated lower on perceived CR than conventional-confrontation messages ($EMM = 5.46, SE = .09, p < .001$), which were rated lower than collaborative messages ($EMM = 5.80, SE = .09, p = .031$; see Table 5.5). Thus, H7 was supported.

The results also detected a significant main effect for situation, $F(1, 406) = 8.69, p = .003, \eta^2 = .02$. Conflict openings in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on perceived conflict resolvability than conflict openings in the insensitive behavior situation. There were no other significant main or interaction effects.

**Effect of goal structure on CR.** H8 predicted that multifunctional conflict openings would be associated with higher perceived conflict resolvability than minimal or unifunctional messages. A similar ANCOVA design based on goal structure was used to test H8. As can be seen in Table 5.6, only a marginally significant main effect was detected for goal structure ($p = .061$), disconfirming H8. A significant effect was found for situation, $F(1, 406) = 9.95, p = .002, \eta^2 = .02$. Conflict openings in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower than conflict openings in the insensitive behavior situation in the association with perceived conflict resolvability. No other significant main or interaction effects were found.

In general, the analyses suggest that conflict opening messages high on conflict-solving orientation were perceived to be more likely to be associated with conflict resolvability. Although differences on perceived conflict resolvability by goal structure were only marginally significant, the differences in mean ratings of conflict resolvability by message goal structure were in the predicted direction.
Message Outcome on Relationship Enhancement (RE)

H9 and H10 concerned with the effect of conflict opening messages on the enhancement of the relationship between the interactants (RE).

Effect of conflict-solving orientation on RE. H9 predicted that eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative messages would be rated progressively higher on relationship enhancement. In a 3 (conflict-solving orientation) × 2 (situation) × 2 (gender) ANCOVA, RE was entered as the dependent variable. As shown in Table 5.5, a significant main effect was found for conflict-solving orientation, \( F(2, 406) = 22.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10 \). Eristic messages (\( EMM = 4.78, SE = .11 \)) were rated lower on RE than conventional-confrontation messages (\( EMM = 5.39, SE = .10, p < .001 \)), which were rated lower than collaborative messages (\( EMM = 5.80, SE = .11, p = .016 \)), supporting H9.

Situation also yielded a significant main effect, \( F(1, 406) = 9.21, p = .003, \eta^2 = .02 \), with messages in the neglected relationship situation rated lower on positive relational impact than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. A significant interaction was detected between situation and conflict-solving orientation, \( F(2, 406) = 5.26, p = .006, \eta^2 = .03 \). Conventional-confrontation and collaborative messages were rated similarly in the neglected relationship situation and the insensitive behavior situation, while eristic messages were rated lower in the neglected relationship situation than in the insensitive behavior situation. No significant main or interaction effects were found for gender.

Effect of goal structure on perceived RE. H10 predicted that multifunctional messages would be rated higher on relationship enhancement than unifunctional or minimal openings. The results of a similar ANCOVA yielded a significant main effect for goal structure, \( F(2, 406) = 3.47, p = .032, \eta^2 = .02 \) (See Table 5.6). Post hoc analyses
showed that multifunctional messages ($EMM = 5.53, SE = .11$) were rated higher on RE than minimal messages ($EMM = 5.24, SE = .11, p = .035$), but not higher than unifunctional messages ($EMM = 5.13, SE = .11, p > .05$). There was also no significant difference between minimal messages and unifunctional messages ($p > .05$). Hence, H10 was partially supported.

The results also showed a main effect for situation, $F(1, 406) = 12.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$. Conflict messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on perceived relationship enhancement than conflict messages in the insensitive behavior situation in relationship enhancement. There was no significant interaction between situation type and message goal structure. Gender was found to have a significant interaction with goal structure, $F(2, 406) = 3.28, p = .039, \eta^2 = .02$. Males rated multifunctional messages higher on relational enhancement than females, while both males and females rated unifunctional and minimal messages similarly. No significant main effects were detected for gender.

In sum, conflict openings that are higher in conflict-solving orientation and goal structure are associated with higher relationship enhancement than conflict openings lower in conflict-solving orientation or goal structure. Although significant differences on relationship enhancement by goal structure were found only between minimal and multifunctional messages, overall differences in mean ratings of outcome on relationship by message goal structure were in the predicted direction. Taking the findings of the section together, conflict openings with higher levels of conflict-solving orientation are associated with greater conflict resolvability than conflict openings with lower levels of conflict-solving orientation; and conflict openings with higher levels of conflict-solving
orientation or goal structure are associated with higher relationship enhancement than conflict openings with lower levels of conflict-solving orientation or goal structure.

**Analyses of the Integrated Effects of Conflict-Solving Orientation and Goal Structure**

Beside the effect of message conflict-solving orientation and goal structure taken singly, this study also tested the effect of the integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. H11 predicted that conflict openings with an integration of low, medium, and high levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure would be on progressively higher on general effectiveness (H11a), multiple goal effectiveness (H11b), and favorable message outcomes (H11c).

In order to test these hypotheses a 3-value grouping variable, Message Sophistication, was created, with value “1” indicating messages with an integration of low levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure (eristic minimal and eristic unifunctional messages), value “2” indicating messages with an integration of medium levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure (eristic multifunctional, conventional-confrontation minimal, and conventional-confrontation unifunctional messages), and value “3” indicating messages with high levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure (conventional-confrontation multifunctional, collaborative minimal, collaborative unifunctional, and collaborative multifunctional openings). H11 was tested by comparing message evaluations among these three message sophistication groups. Based on H11, it was expected that low, medium, and high levels of message sophistication would be rated progressively higher on general message effectiveness.
(H11a), multiple goal effectiveness (H11b), and favorable message outcomes (conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement) (H11c).

**Perceived General Message Effectiveness (GME)**

To test H11a, a 3 (message sophistication) × 2 (gender) × 2 (situation) ANCOVA was conducted with GME as the dependent variable. Summaries of the ANCOVA analysis are reported in Table 5.7. As can be seen, there was a main effect for message sophistication on GME, $F(2, 406) = 139.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$. Pairwise comparison showed that conflict openings with low message sophistication ($EMM = 3.50$, $SE = .11$) were rated significantly lower on GME than conflict openings with medium message sophistication ($EMM = 4.30$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$), which were rated significantly lower on GME than conflict openings with high message sophistication ($EMM = 5.62$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$). H11a was thus supported.

Situation type yielded a significant main effect, $F(1, 406) = 8.67$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .02$, with messages in the neglected relationship situation rated lower on positive relational impact than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. A significant interaction was also detected between situation and message sophistication, $F(2, 406) = 3.35$, $p = .036$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Low-sophistication messages were rated higher on GME in the neglected relationship situation than in the insensitive behavior situation, while medium- and high-sophistication messages were rated similarly in both situations. No significant main or interaction effects were detected for gender.

**Perceived Multiple Goal Effectiveness (MGE)**

H11b predicted that low, medium, and high-sophistication conflict messages would be rated progressively higher on MGE. A MANCOVA was initially conducted with
message sophistication (3), gender (2), and situation (2) entered as the between-group factors. Instrumental goal effectiveness, hearer identity goal effectiveness, speaker identity goal effectiveness, and relationship goal effectiveness were entered as the dependent variables. The results produced a main effect for message sophistication, $F(8, 806) = 48.42, p < .001$, Wilks lambda = .456, $\eta^2 = .33$, and a main effect for situation type, $F(4, 403) = 5.43, p < .001$, Wilks lambda = .949, $\eta^2 = .05$. No other significant effects were identified.

Given the significant MANCOVA finding, the univariate analyses were examined. As shown in Table 5.7, the first ANCOVA on instrumental goal effectiveness yielded a main effect for message sophistication, $F(2, 406) = 81.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$. Conflict openings with low message sophistication ($EMM = 3.47, SE = .12$) were rated lower on instrumental goal effectiveness than openings with medium message sophistication ($EMM = 4.63, SE = .10, p < .001$), which were rated lower than conflict openings with high message sophistication ($EMM = 5.59, SE = .09, p < .001$). Hence, H11b was supported for instrumental goal effectiveness.

Situation type also yielded a significant main effect, $F(1, 406) = 7.02, p = .008, \eta^2 = .02$, with messages in insensitive behavior situation rated higher on positive relational impact than messages in neglected relationship situation. No significant effects were found for gender.

The second ANCOVA on hearer’s identity goal effectiveness also found a main effect for message sophistication, $F(2, 406) = 177.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .47$. Conflict openings with low message sophistication ($EMM = 2.38, SE = .10$) were rated lower on hearer’s identity goal effectiveness than conflict openings with medium message
sophistication (EMM = 2.84, SE = .08, p < .001), which were rated lower than conflict 
openings with high message sophistication (EMM = 4.38, SE = .07, p < .001; see Table 
5.7). No other significant effects were found. Thus, H11b was supported for hearer’s 
identity goal effectiveness.

The third ANCOVA on speaker’s identity goal effectiveness also produced a 
significant main effect for message sophistication, \( F(2, 406) = 123.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .38 \). Conflict openings with low message sophistication (EMM = 3.58, SE = .09) were rated 
lower on speaker’s identity goal effectiveness than conflict openings with medium 
message sophistication (EMM = 4.28, SE = .07, p < .001), which were rated lower than 
conflict openings with high message sophistication (EMM = 5.19, SE = .06, p < .001). 
H11b was thus supported for speaker’s identity goal effectiveness.

Situation type yielded a significant main effect, \( F(1, 406) = 17.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04 \). Messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on positive 
relational impact than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. A significant 
interaction was also detected between situation and message sophistication, \( F(2, 406) = 
4.04, p = .018, \eta^2 = .02 \). Low-sophistication messages were rated lower in the neglected 
relationship situation than in the insensitive behavior situation, while medium- and high-
sophistication messages were rated similarly in both situations.

Gender was also found to interact with message sophistication, \( F(2, 406) = 3.61, p 
= .028, \eta^2 = .02 \). Female rated medium-sophistication messages higher than low-
sophistication messages more so than males; while females and males rated high-
sophistication messages similarly. No significant main effect was found for gender.
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Table 5.7 ANCOVA Summary Results for Message Sophistication on General Message Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes

*Note.* Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level (Bonferroni-adjusted).

Similarly, the fourth ANCOVA on relationship goal effectiveness detected a main effect for message sophistication, $F(2, 406) = 128.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .39$. Conflict openings with low message sophistication ($EMM = 3.38, SE = .12$) were rated lower on relationship goal effectiveness than openings with medium message sophistication ($EMM = 3.93, SE = .10, p = .002$), which were rated lower than openings with high message sophistication ($EMM = 5.58, SE = .09, p < .001$; see Table 5.7). Thus, H11b was
confirmed for relationship goal effectiveness. No other significant main or interaction
effects were detected.

Collectively, H11b was fully supported. Conflict openings with an integration of
low, medium, and high levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were
perceived to be progressively more effective in accomplishing multiple interactional
goals, including instrumental goals, identity goals, and relationship goals.

**Message Outcomes on Conflict Resolvability (CR) and Relationship Enhancement (RE)**

H11c predicted that low-, medium-, and high-sophistication conflict opening
messages would be rated progressively higher on positive message outcomes on conflict
resolvability (CR) and relationship enhancement (RE). Two 3 (message
sophistication) × 2 (gender) × 2 (situation) ANCOVAs were conducted. In the first
ANCOVA, perceived CR was entered as the dependent variable. As can be seen in Table
5.7, the results revealed a main effect for message sophistication, $F(2, 406) = 31.64, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Conflict openings with low message sophistication ($EMM = 4.73, SE = .12$) were rated lower on perceived CR than openings with medium message
sophistication ($EMM = 5.11, SE = .10, p = .035$), which were rated lower than openings
with high message sophistication ($EMM = 5.79, SE = .08, p < .001$). Hence, H11c was
supported for CR.

Situation also yielded a significant main effect, $F(1, 406) = 9.32, p = .002, \eta^2 = .02$,
Messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on positive relational
impact than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. No other significant effects
were detected.
In the second ANCOVA, perceived RE was entered as the dependent variable. As also shown in Table 5.7, a main effect for message sophistication was detected, \( F(2, 406) = 26.33, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12 \). Conflict openings with low message sophistication (\( EMM = 4.69, SE = .13 \)) were rated lower on perceived RE than openings with medium message sophistication (\( EMM = 5.15, SE = .11, p = .017 \)), which were rated lower than openings with high message sophistication (\( EMM = 5.78, SE = .09, p < .001 \)). Therefore, H11c was supported for RE.

A significant main effect was also found for situation, \( F(1, 406) = 17.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04 \). Messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated lower on positive relational impact than messages in the insensitive behavior situation. A significant interaction was also detected between situation and message sophistication, \( F(2, 406) = 8.39, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04 \). Low-sophistication messages were rated lower in the neglected relationship situation than in the insensitive behavior situation, while medium- and high-sophistication messages were rated similarly in both situations. No significant main or interaction effects were found for gender.

Overall, H11 was fully supported, such that conflict openings with an integration of low, medium, and high levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were rated progressively higher on general message effectiveness (H11a), effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals (H11b), and favorable message outcomes on conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement (H11c). It should be noted that a 3 (conflict-solving orientation) \( \times \) 2 (goal structure) \( \times \) 2 (situation) \( \times \) 2 (gender) ANCOVA was also tested. The results on conflict-solving orientation \( \times \) goal structure interaction effects are reported in Appendix D. The effect of conflict-solving orientation within each level of
goal structure were examined using a series of 3 (conflict-solving orientation) × 2 (situation) × 2 (gender) ANCOVAs, the results of which are reported in Appendix E.

The Role of Goal Importance on Message Evaluations

In addition to examining the effect of conflict opening features on message evaluations, the study also tested whether the perceived importance of multiple goals affects evaluations of messages embodying different conflict-solving orientations and goal structures (See Table 5.4 for means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations for the goal importance measures).

Hypotheses 12-17 predicted a moderation relationship (see Figure 5.1), in which the linkage between message features (conflict-solving orientation and/or goal structure) and message effectiveness would be moderated by perceived goal importance. Message effectiveness was examined in terms of general message effectiveness (GME) and multiple goal effectiveness (MGE). SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), a process modeling program, was employed to test these hypotheses. PROCESS Model 1, a simple moderation model, was specifically used to test the moderating effect of goal importance on the linkages between message features and messages effectiveness (See Figure 5.2 for the statistical model of the moderation relationship).

The following sections first present analyses of the interaction between goal importance and conflict-solving orientation/goal structure individually, and then present analyses on the interaction between goal importance and message sophistication (i.e., the integration of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure).
Figure 5.1. Simple Moderation Model

*Note.* Conceptual moderation model of message features’ (i.e., conflict-solving orientation or/and goal structure) direct influence on message effectiveness (i.e., general effectiveness, multiple goals effectiveness) under the conditions of goal importance (i.e., identity goal importance, relationship goal importance) (see Figure 2 for statistical models and Table 5.8 and 5.9 for estimates of coefficients).
Figure 5.2. Statistical Model of the Simple Moderation Model

*Note.* Statistical moderation model of message features’ (i.e., conflict-solving orientation or/and goal structure) direct influence on message effectiveness (i.e., general effectiveness, multiple goals effectiveness) under the conditions of goal importance (i.e., identity goal importance, relationship goal importance) (see Table 5.8 and 5.9 for estimates). Conflict-solving orientation \(X_{i=1}\), goal structure \(X_{i=2}\), and message sophistication \(X_{i=3}\) are independent variables. Identity goal importance \(M_{k=1}\) and relationship goal importance \(M_{k=2}\) are moderators. General message effectiveness \(Y_{j=1}\) and multiple goal effectiveness \(Y_{j=2}\) are dependent variables. Paths \(a\) represent the direct relationship between independent variable \(X\) and dependent variable \(Y\). Paths \(b\) represent the direct relationship between the moderator \(M\) and the dependent variable \(Y\). Paths \(c\) represent the direct effect of the interaction of the independent variable \(X\) and the moderator \(M\) on the dependent variable \(Y\).
The Interaction between Goal Structure and Conflict-Solving Orientation/Goal Structure

Hypotheses 12-15 predicted that the relationship between conflict-solving orientation/goal structure and message effectiveness is moderated by perceived goal importance. In a set of simple moderation analyses using PROCESS, message conflict-solving orientation or goal structure was entered as predictor variable. A combined measure of perceived importance of identity goals was constructed by averaging the ratings of perceived importance of hearer’s identity goals and the perceived importance of speaker’s identity goals. This combined measure of perceived identity goals as well as the perceived importance of relationship goal was entered as moderator variables in the moderation model. A combined measure of multiple goal effectiveness (MGE) was also constructed by averaging the ratings of instrumental goal effectiveness, hearer’s identity goal effectiveness, speaker’s identity goal effectiveness, and relationship goal effectiveness. In each analysis, general message effectiveness (GME) or this combined measure of multiple goal effectiveness (MGE) was entered as the message evaluation variable. Therefore, a total of 8 (2 message dimensions × 2 types of goal importance × 2 message effectiveness variables) moderation relationships were analyzed. Paths for the full PROCESS models and their corresponding coefficients are provided in Table 5.8 (model 1-8). In these analyses, situation type, participants’ gender, and perceived message realism were entered as covariates.

H12 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of identity goals would rate collaborative openings higher in GME and MGE than eristic or conventional-confrontation openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of
identity goals. This was tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 1 and model 2 (See Table 5.8). A significant interaction was found between identity goal importance and conflict-solving orientation on GME ($b = .21$, $SE = .10$, $t = 2.07$, $p = .039$) and MGE ($b = .20$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.71$, $p = .007$). Post hoc tests on the identity goal importance $\times$ conflict-solving orientation interaction (see Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4) showed that collaborative openings were rated higher on GME and MGE than eristic openings, and the differences in ratings were larger among people with greater perceived importance of identity goals than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. People with greater perceived importance of identity goals and people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals both rated collaborative openings to be equally higher on GME and MGE than conventional-confrontation openings.

As can also be seen in Table 5.8, identity goal importance had significant main effects on both GME ($b = .22$, $SE = .08$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .007$) and MGE ($b = .21$, $SE = .06$, $t = 3.54$, $p < .001$). These findings indicated that people who perceived identity goals to be more important rated conflict openings to be higher on general message effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness than people who perceived identity goals to be less important, regardless of the conflict-solving orientations. Therefore, H12 was partially supported. Collaborative openings were rated higher on GME and MGE than eristic openings, more so by people with greater perceived importance of identity goals than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals; collaborative openings were rated higher on GME and MGE than conventional-confrontation openings equally by people with greater perceived importance of identity goals and people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.
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**R^2**

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Table 5.8 Path coefficients (with standard errors) from simple moderation models with conflict-solving orientation or goal structure as the independent variable, and general message effectiveness (GME) or multiple goal effectiveness (MGE) as the dependent variables.

*Note.* *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001
Figure 5.3. Interaction Effects of Identity Goal Importance and Conflict-Solving Orientation on General Message Effectiveness (GME)

Figure 5.4. Interaction Effects of Identity Goal Importance and Conflict-Solving Orientation on Multiple Goal Effectiveness (MGE)
H13 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of relationship goals would rate collaborative openings to be higher in GME and MGE than eristic or conventional-confrontation openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals. This was tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 3 and model 4. As indicated in Table 5.8, no significant interaction was found between relationship goal importance and conflict-solving orientation on GME \((p > .05)\) or MGE \((p > .05)\). As shown in Table 5.8, the results produced a main effect for relationship goal importance on GME \((b = .27, SE = .05, t = 5.26, p < .001)\) and MGE \((b = .22, SE = .04, t = 5.64, p < .001)\). People who perceived relationship goals to be more important rated conflict openings, regardless of their conflict-solving orientations, to be higher on general message effective and multiple goal effectiveness than people who perceived relationship goals to be less important. Therefore, H13 was unsupported.

H14 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of identity goals would rate multifunctional openings to be to be higher in GME and MGE than minimal or unifunctional openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. This was tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 5 and model 6. As can be seen in Table 5.8, the results did not show any significant interactions between identity goal importance and message goal structure on GME \((p > .05)\) or MGE \((p > .05)\). The results detected a significant main effect for identity goal importance on GME \((b = .24, SE = .10, t = 2.28, p = .023)\) and MGE \((b = .21, SE = .09, t = 2.49, p = .013)\) (See Table 5.8). These results indicated that people who perceived identity goals to be more important rated conflict openings, despite their goal structures, to be higher on
general message effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness than people who perceived identity goals to be less important. Hence, H14 was unsupported.

H15 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of relationship goals would rate multifunctional openings to be to be higher in GME and MGE than minimal or unifunctional openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals. This was also tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 7 and model 8. As shown in Table 5.8, there were no significant relationship goal importance × goal structure interaction effects on GME (p > .05) or MGE (p > .05). A main effect for relationship goal importance was found for GME (b = .34, SE = .06, t = 5.19, p < .001) and MGE (b = .27, SE = .05, t = 5.17, p < .001) (See Table 5.8). This suggested that people who perceived relationship goals to be more important rated conflict openings, despite their goal structures, to be higher on general message effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness than people who perceived relationship goals to be less important. Thus, H15 was unsupported.

In sum, a moderating effect was only found for identity goal importance on the relationship between conflict-solving orientation and message effectiveness. Specifically, collaborative openings were rated to be more effective than eristic openings by participants with greater perceived importance of identity goals than participants with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

The Interaction between Goal Structure and Message Sophistication

Hypotheses 16-17 also predicted a moderation relationship, in which the relationship between message sophistication (i.e., the integration of conflict-solving
orientation and goal structure) and message effectiveness would be moderated by perceived goal importance.

In this set of analyses using PROCESS model 1, message sophistication was entered as a predictor variable. Identity goal importance and relationship goal importance was entered as moderator variables in the moderation model. In each analysis, general message effectiveness (GME) or multiple goal effectiveness (MGE) were entered as the dependent variables. Hence, a total of 4 (1 message sophistication \( \times \) 2 types of goal importance \( \times \) 2 message effectiveness variables) moderation relationships were tested. Paths for the full PROCESS models and their corresponding coefficients are provided in Table 5.9 (model 9-12). Situation type, participants’ gender and perceived message realism were entered as covariates.

H16 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of identity goals would rate high-sophistication conflict openings to be higher in GME and MGE than medium- or low-sophistication conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. This was tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 9 and model 10. As shown in Table 5.9, there was a significant interaction between identity goal importance and message sophistication on MGE \( (b = .22, SE = .08, t = 2.78, p = .006) \), but not on GME \( (p > .05) \). Post hoc tests on the identity goal importance \( \times \) message sophistication interaction (see Figure 5.5) showed that high-sophistication conflict openings were rated to be higher on MGE than low-sophistication conflict openings, and the differences in ratings were larger among people with greater perceived importance of identity goals than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. High-sophistication conflict openings were also rated to be higher on
MGE than medium-sophistication conflict openings; however, the differences in these ratings were similar among people with greater perceived importance of identity goals and people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

Therefore, H16 was partially supported. High-sophistication conflict openings were rated higher on MGE than low-sophistication conflict openings more so by people with greater perceived importance of identity goals than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals; while high-sophistication conflict openings were rated higher on MGE than medium-sophistication conflict openings equally by people with greater perceived importance of identity goals and people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

There was also a main effect for identity goal importance on both GME ($b = .21, SE = .08, t = 2.71, p = .007$) and MGE ($b = .21, SE = .06, t = 3.47, p < .001$). These results indicated that people who perceived identity goals to be more important rated conflict openings to be higher on GME and MGE than people who perceived identity goals to be less important, regardless of message sophistication.

H17 predicted that people with greater perceived importance of relationship goals would rate high-sophistication conflict openings to be higher in GME and MGE than medium- or low-sophistication conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of relationship goals. This was tested by examining the interaction coefficients in model 11 and model 12. The results did not yield any significant interaction between relationship goal importance and message sophistication on GME ($p > .05$) or MGE ($p > .05$; see Table 5.9). Therefore, H17 was unsupported.
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<td>.61***</td>
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Table 5.9 Path coefficients (with standard errors) from simple moderation models with message sophistication as the independent variable, and general message effectiveness (GME) or multiple goal effectiveness (MGE) as the dependent variables.

*Note.* *p* < .05. **p** < .01. ***p*** < .001
Figure 5.5. Interaction Effects of Identity Goal Importance and Message Sophistication on Multiple Goal Effectiveness (MGE)

However, as shown in Table 5.9, the results produced a main effect for relationship goal importance on GME ($b = .28, SE = .05, t = 5.50, p < .001$) and MGE ($b = .22, SE = .04, t = 5.82, p < .001$). People who perceived relationship goals to be more important rated conflict openings higher on GME and MGE than people who perceived relationship goals to be less important, regardless of message sophistication.

To summarize, a moderating effect was found for identity goal importance on the relationship between message sophistication and message goal effectiveness. High-sophistication conflict openings were rated to be more effective than low-sophistication conflict openings, more so by participants with greater perceived importance of identity.
goals than participants with weaker perceived importance of identity goals. In general, identity goal importance was found to have interaction effects with conflict-solving orientation or message sophistication on message effectiveness.

Summary

The focus of this study was to initially test the two dimensions of the proposed conflict message classification systems for analyzing conflict messages in the initial confrontation stage of conflict interactions. Conflict openings that varied systematically along the two dimensions (i.e., conflict-solving orientations and goal structure) were evaluated and compared for message effectiveness and message outcomes. These results provided initial support for the proposition that conflict opening messages that are higher in the level of conflict-solving orientation and/or goal structure are perceived to be more effective and have more favorable outcomes on perceived conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement. The perceived importance of identity and relationship goals also affects the perceptions of message effectiveness and outcomes on conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement.
Chapter 6: Discussion

This dissertation proposed a message analysis system to classify conflict management messages, and tested the system for its ability to classify conflict opening messages. Two classification dimensions were conceptualized: message conflict-solving orientation and message goal structure. Theoretical predictions regarding evaluations of conflict opening messages that varied systematically along the dimensions of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were advanced and tested. The results substantially supported these predictions. This chapter first summarizes the findings of this study, and then reviews and discusses the findings in terms of their implications for interpersonal conflict management and the interpersonal communication literature. Limitations of the study and suggested future research are also offered. This chapter then ends with a conclusion to this research.

Research Summary and Consistencies

This research investigated perceptions of different conflict opening messages that can be used by a romantic partner to confront the other partner about a relationship transgression. It was predicted that conflict opening messages embodying higher levels of conflict-solving orientation or/and goal structure would be perceived to be more effective and associated with conflict resolution and positive relationship impact than conflict-opening messages embodying lower levels of conflict-solving orientation or/and goal structure.
To test these predictions, two conflict opening situations (i.e., initial confrontation stage of a conflict interaction) were created, in which a dating partner either expressed dissatisfaction about the other partner choosing to spend rare leisure time with friends rather than with the dating partner (i.e., the neglected relationship situation) or expressed dissatisfaction about the other partner making inappropriate jokes about the dating partner at a party (i.e., the insensitive behavior situation). For each situation, nine experimental messages reflecting combinations of one of the three conflict-solving orientations and one of the three goal structures were designed and prescribed to the confronter in the situation to confront the transgressor. Participants were randomly assigned to read descriptions of one of the two conflict scenarios, and were asked to imagine themselves being the transgressor, and being confronted by their dating partner using one of the nine experimental conflict messages. Participants then responded to a series of scales measuring their perceptions of the effectiveness and outcomes of the conflict message they just read. Participants also indicated their perceived importance of different goals in the given conflict situation.

The hypotheses and research question were tested using primarily analyses of covariance, in which message conflict-resolving orientation and message goal structure were treated as between group factors, and evaluations of message on perceived message effectiveness and perceived message outcomes the dependent variables. This section presents the specific results of the study and discusses these results in relation to past research findings on conflict management styles and interpersonal communication.
Summary of the Findings

Analyses of the initial hypotheses indicated that conflict opening messages embodying a higher level of conflict-solving orientation or goal structure were perceived to be more generally effective than conflict opening messages embodying a lower level of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. For each conflict-solving orientation, eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings were rated progressively as more effective. In terms of message goal structure, the results showed that conflict openings that enacted multiple goals were perceived to be more effective than conflict openings that enacted only instrumental task goals or conflict openings that were not attentive to any clear situationally-relevant goals.

Besides measuring general message effectiveness, each message’s ability in accomplishing multiple interactional goals was also measured. Conflict openings’ effectiveness for accomplishing multiple goals that are relevant to conflict opening situations were analyzed. Four types of goal effectiveness were analyzed: effectiveness in accomplishing instrumental goals, effectiveness in producing a positive identity for the message hearer, effectiveness in creating a positive identity for the message speaker, and effectiveness in preserving the relationship between the interactants. It was predicted that conflict messages with a higher level of conflict-solving orientation or goal structure would be perceived to be more effective in accomplishing multiple goals than conflict messages with a lower level of conflict-solving orientation or goal structure. As expected, eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict openings were rated progressively higher on effectiveness in accomplishing all four goal measures.
Goal structure also affected message effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals. Conflict opening messages that had a multifunctional goal structure were rated to be more effective in accomplishing all four measured goals than conflict opening messages that had a minimal goal structure. However, differences in effectiveness between multifunctional conflict openings and unifunctional conflict openings were only found for two of the four goals—the effectiveness in creating a positive identity for the message speaker and in preserving a good relationship between the parties.

Conflict messages with a higher level of conflict-solving orientation were also expected to be associated with perceptions of higher conflict resolvability and relationship impact than conflict messages with a lower level of conflict-solving orientation. As predicted, eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict opening messages were rated to be progressively higher both in the likelihood of conflict resolvability and positive relationship impact.

It was also predicted that conflict openings with a multifunctional goal structure would be rated higher on perceived conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement than conflict openings with a unifunctional or minimal goal structure. This was partially supported for perceived relationship enhancement, in that multifunctional openings were rated higher on perceived relationship enhancement than minimal openings, but were rated to be similar to unifunctional openings. The main effect for goal structure on the perceived conflict resolvability was only marginally significant ($p = .061$). However, the mean ratings of these messages were trending toward the predicted direction.

Finally, message sophistication also affected participants’ message evaluations. The results of this study found that conflict opening messages with an integration of
higher levels of conflict-solving orientation and higher levels of goal structure were perceived to be more effective generally than conflict opening messages with an integration of lower levels of conflict-solving orientation and lower levels of goal structure. Conflict openings with low, medium, and high levels of message sophistication were rated to be progressively more effective generally. Conflict messages with an integration of higher-levels of conflict-solving orientation and higher-levels of goal structure (i.e., high sophistication messages) were also perceived to be more effective in accomplishing multiple interactional goals than conflict messages with an integration of lower-levels of conflict-solving orientation and lower-levels of goal structure (i.e., low sophistication messages). Conflict openings with an integration of low, medium, and high levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were rated as progressively higher on effectiveness in accomplishing all of the four measures of interactional goals: instrumental goals, message hearer’s identity goals, message speaker’s identity goals, and relationship goals.

Message sophistication also had an integrated effect on perceived conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement. Conflict openings with an integration of higher-levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure were associated with higher conflict resolvability and better relational impact than conflict messages with lower-levels of conflict-solving orientation and goal structure. Participants rated low-, medium-, and high-sophistication conflict opening messages to be progressively higher in both the likelihood of conflict resolvability and relationship enhancement.

A final issue taken up by the study was the effect of participants’ perceived importance of goals on participants’ evaluations of conflict openings. The need to
preserve a positive identity for themselves and for their partner (i.e., identity goal importance) and the need to maintain a positive relationship with their partner (i.e., relationship goal importance) were measured. The importance of identity and relationship goals were expected to moderate the relationship between message conflict-solving orientation and message effectiveness (i.e., general message effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness). Specifically, it was predicted that people with greater perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals would rate collaborative openings to be more effective (i.e., on both general effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness) than eristic or conventional-confrontation openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals. This expectation was only supported for identity goal importance. People who perceived identity goals to be important rated collaborative openings to be more effective than eristic openings, more so than people who perceived identity goals to be unimportant; while collaborative openings were rated to be more effective than conventional-confrontation openings equally by both people with greater perceived importance of identity goals and people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals.

Relationship goal importance was not found to have any interaction effects with conflict-solving orientation on either general message effectiveness or multiple goal effectiveness. People rated conflict openings with higher level of conflict-solving orientation to be higher on general effectiveness and multiple goal effectiveness, regardless of the degree of their perceived importance of relationship goals.

The effects of message goal structure on message effectiveness was also expected to be moderated by perceived importance of identity goals and relationship goals, such
that people with greater perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals would rate multifunctional openings to be more effective than minimal or unifunctional openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals. These hypotheses were unsupported. The perceived identity goal importance and relationship goal importance did not interact with message goal structure to predict message effectiveness.

The perceived importance of identity goals and relationship goals were also expected to interact with message sophistication to affect message effectiveness. People with greater perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals were predicted to rate high-sophistication conflict openings to be more effective than medium- or low-sophistication conflict openings, more so than people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals or relationship goals. These predictions were partially supported for perceived identity goal importance. People with greater perceived importance of identity goals rated high-sophistication conflict openings to be more effective in accomplishing multiple goals than low-sophistication conflict openings more so by people with weaker perceived importance of identity goals; while people rated high-sophistication conflict openings to be equally more effective in accomplishing multiple goals than medium-sophistication conflict openings, regardless of the degree to which they valued identity goals. The perceived identity goal importance was not found to moderate the relationship between message sophistication and general message effectiveness.

The perceived importance of relationship goals was also not found to significantly moderate the relationship between message sophistication and message effectiveness (both general message effectiveness and effectiveness in accomplishing multiple goals).
People rated conflict openings with higher-levels of message sophistications to be higher on both effective measures, regardless of the degree to which they valued relationship goals.

**Consistencies with Past Findings**

The findings obtained from this study on conflict-solving orientations and message effectiveness are largely consistent with past research on message effectiveness in regulative situations (O’Keefe & McCormack, 1987) and in social confrontations (Bingham & Burleson, 1989). O’Keefe and McCormack’s (1987) analysis of messages in regulative situations found that increases in message design logic were associated with greater perceived effectiveness in regulating the message hearer’s behavior, in satisfying the message hearer, as well as providing greater face support, greater perceived competence and greater attraction. Bingham and Burleson’s (1989) study on confrontation messages in sexual harassment situations also found that rhetorical confrontation messages that redefined the situation were seen as more effective in preserving a positive relationship with the confrontee than conventional messages, which, in turn, were more effective than expressive messages. They also found that confronters who used rhetorical confrontation messages were seen as more competent, more likable, and have higher self-esteem than confronters who used an expressive confrontation message. These findings parallel the findings obtained here, such that conflict openings that were more sophisticated (e.g., collaborative conflict openings) were rated as more effective than conflict openings what were less sophisticated (e.g., eristic conflict openings).

The results on goal structure and message effectiveness also largely coincide with
findings in Bingham and Burleson’s (1989) study, which discovered that confrontational messages that embodied a higher goal structures were perceived to be most effective in producing desired identities and preserving the relationship between the confrontee and confronter. In their study, multifunctional messages were rated to be more effective in preventing the other party’s retaliation after a social confrontation episode than minimal messages; confronters who used multifunctional messages were perceived to be more competent and likable than confronters who used a minimal confrontation message. Multifunctional messages were rated to be more effective in minimizing relational damage than unifunctional or minimal messages. O’Keefe and McCornack (1987) also found that the increase in message goal structure was associated with increases in perceived effectiveness of the message in motivating the message hearer, perceived competence, perceived face support, and attraction to the message speaker. These findings suggest that conflict messages with a more complex goal structure are perceived to be more effective than conflict messages with a less complex goal structure, which were also confirmed by findings in the current study.

The findings on perceived conflict resolvability and perceived impact on the participants’ relationship were also consistent with research on conflict styles and behaviors. Past research has generally found that collaborative styles are positively associated with perceived resolvability of the conflict (e.g., Bevan et al., 2008), relationship satisfaction and relational intimacy (e.g., Cupach, 1980; Gottman, 1982). By contrast, distributive styles with destructive communication behaviors (e.g., threat, criticism) have been negatively associated with perceived resolvability (e.g., Hample & Krueger, 2011) and relationship satisfaction/intimacy (e.g., Gottman, 1982). Sillars
in a study of roommate conflict, found that integrative tactics during conflict were associated with greater likelihood of conflict resolution and satisfaction with the partner than the use of distributive strategies. The findings in this study are consistent with these findings, in that conflict messages with a more advanced conflict-solving orientation were associated with higher perceived conflict resolvability and more positive relational impact than conflict messages with a less advanced conflict-solving orientation; and conflict messages with more complex goal structure were associated with more positive relational impact than conflict messages with a less complex goal structure.

Past research that has examined the integrated effects of conflict orientation and goal structure in conflict management is limited. The findings on message sophistication in this study are similar to investigations of regulative situations that tested the interaction of message design logic and goal structure (e.g., Bingham & Burleson, 1989). Bingham and Burleson (1989) found that, for confrontational messages in sexual harassment situations, as the message design logic became more complex, the impact on the relationship became less destructive, and this effect of message design logic was “clearest and most consistent for messages with multifunctional goal structures” (p. 202). The findings on message sophistication also confirm Benoit and Benoit’s (1990) argument about conflict behaviors in conflict opening situations. In their study of conflict openings between roommates and romantic partners, Benoit and Benoit found that aggravated openings (e.g., insults, commands, accusations, and refusals of requests) were rated to be less appropriate and effective than mitigated conflict openings (i.e., requests, reaffirmations, indications of shared responsibility, and refusals with a reason). They argued that that the use of mitigated instead of aggravated conflict openings would
reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation and increase the chance of successful conflict resolution. The findings in this study further confirm their arguments by indicating that collaborative, multifunctional conflict openings were more effective and associated with higher perceptions of conflict resolvability than eristic, confrontation, minimal, unifunctional conflict openings.

Research on cognitive complexity and message perceptions have also found that people’s cognitive complexity moderates the relationship between message quality and people’s evaluations (O’Keefe & McCornack, 1989). People who are more cognitive complex tend to have more goals in a communicative situation and are more able to appreciate complex messages. Bingham and Burleson (1989) found that highly complex people perceived multifunctional messages to be more effective in achieving multiple relational goals than minimal and unifunctional messages, more so than people who are less cognitively complex. Similar to Bingham and Burleson’s findings, this study found interactions between identity goal importance, message sophistication and conflict-solving orientation. A more detailed discussion regarding the significance of these findings for goal importance is provided in the next section.

**Theoretical Significance of the Findings**

The findings are theoretically significant in several ways: in their support of an alternative view of interpersonal conflict orientations, in their support of behavioral goal complexity theory, and in the role of goal importance in evaluating conflict opening messages. Each theoretical contribution is discussed in this section.
Theorizing Conflict-Solving Orientations

A first theoretical contribution of the study is the reformulation of current conflict style descriptions. Numerous problems characterize the various conflict styles that are used in the interpersonal conflict literature. The three conflict-solving orientations examined here were conceptualized based on the empirical literature on conflict styles and tactics, rational models of message design, and the logic of dialogue orientations proposed by Walton and Krabbe (1995). Finding empirical support for the proposed orientations suggests their merit for further use. Whether these conflict-solving orientations characterize dating couples’ management of relationship transgressions needs to be replicated, and documented using other methods, such as interviews, diary studies, and actual interaction tasks.

Other conventional and collaborative design logics for managing interpersonal conflict could be examined as well. For example, Walton and Grabbe (1995) have advanced a theoretical explication of dialogue types that could provide a basis for predicting differences in the way conflict resolution is initiated and conducted. According to Walton and Krabbe’s (1995) dialogue orientation framework, partners engage in (argumentative) dialogues when they face a situation they want to change, such as when they have conflict of opinion, have an open problem that must be solved, or when they perceive a lack of knowledge of something important. Walton and Krabbe distinguish six types of dialogue, each characterized by a main goal of dialogue of that type (i.e., reaching a stable agreement, a practical settlement, or a provisional accommodation). When choosing a dialogue orientation, an individual aims not only to accomplish the main goal of that dialogue type, but also his/her personal goals through that dialogue type.
in the particular situation. The six types of argumentative dialogue are: using persuasion to reach an agreement (persuasion), reaching a settlement with bargaining (negotiation), using antagonistic exchanges to gain accommodation (eristic), establishing proof (inquiry), agreeing to a plan of action (deliberation), and sharing information (information-seeking dialogues).

By linking Walton and Grabbe’s perspective to conflict styles’ theorizing, a basis is formed for differentiating distributive, direct, cooperative and competitive speech activities that parties utilize in interpersonal conflict. Theoretical and empirical explications of dialogue (e.g., Forrester, Gray, Isaacs, Stewart) could also provide a basis for differentiating collaborative conflict management practices. Deliberative, inquiry, information gaining, negotiation and persuasion are dialogue types identified in Walton and Grabbe’s theory that may play a role in collaboration, which could be further examined in future research. The findings here substantiate that inductive question-asking, identifying similar values and views, and asking to learn the other’s perspective play a role in effective collaborative openings.

**Testing and Extending Behavioral Complexity Theory**

The findings provide substantial support for behavioral goal complexity theory in terms of a rational model of conflict opening design and goal complexity in conflict message design. Multiple goal approaches have been utilized in the study of competent interpersonal communication, and particularly behavioral goal complexity theory, with its combination of goal complexity and rational design, has been used (e.g. O’Keefe, 1988). However, when researchers have employed goal or behavioral complexity theory they have not always examined both the design logic employed and goal structures embodied
in messages (e.g., Scott, Caughlin, Donovan-Kicken, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013; Scott & Caughlin, 2014), or examined interaction effects between design logic and goal structure (e.g., O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987).

In this sense, this study is theoretically significant in its design in two ways. First, there has been no test of the theory for understanding message effectiveness in interpersonal conflict contexts or for conflict opening messages. So the findings of this study fill an important literature gap. Second, the design employed an examination of both conflict-solving orientation and goal structures in conflict opening messages, thus presenting a more complete test of behavioral complexity theory.

By employing a design that crossed conflict-solving orientations with goal structures, and that confirmed most of the hypotheses advanced, the study largely supported behavioral complexity theory. Moreover, the findings were established across four measures of message effectiveness and outcomes, including general message effectiveness, perceived accomplishment of multiple goals, perceived conflict resolvability, and relationship impact. The findings were also established across two different relationship transgression situations. Such consistencies further substantiate behavioral complexity theory. Finally, the findings were consistent with studies that have compared rational models of message design or goal structures in various tests of behavioral complexity theory (e.g., Bingham & Burleson, 1989; O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987; O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987; Scott & Caughlin, 2014).

While the findings were fairly consistent, there was a systematic exception among them regarding goal structures. The findings for goal structure across all seven effectiveness measures showed that there was no significant difference in the
comparative effectiveness of minimal and unifunctional goal structures in conflict opening messages, and only significant differences between unifunctional and multifunctional goal structures on general message effectiveness and effectiveness of speaker’s identity goals. The means among the three types of goal structures were all in the expected directions, but unifunctional messages were not always perceived to be less effective than multifunctional messages. The findings, however, were supported for the difference between minimal and multifunctional goal message structures. The way in which unifunctional messages can produce multiple goal interpretations remain to be examined and pursued in future research.

Given the overall support for behavioral complexity theory, seeking an explanation for these particular discrepancies in the findings is needed. That explanation may come by examining the original reasons for discriminating between minimal and unifunctional goal structures, which was that minimal goal structures implicitly violated Grice’s cooperative principle. By not being clear, informative, and true, the partner is called upon to produce implicatures to understand the speaker’s intentions. Yet Grice’s theory of cooperation was constructed to show that, in most situations, those who know one another can communicate indirectly and still be successful, because hearers can produce the implicatures needed to understand what the partner is saying. Applied to everyday relationship transgressions, it may be that dating couples are perfectly able to discern each other’s intentions, which would explain that there would be no differences between minimal and unifunctional goal structures in opening messages. This reasoning would explain the findings of nonsignificant differences between minimal and unifunctional goal structures.
The other five findings that disconfirmed behavioral complexity theory were the nonsignificant differences between unifunctional and multifunctional goal structures. Three of five of these nonsignificant differences occurred with the dependent measures being identity goal and relationship goal effectiveness. O’Keefe and Shepherd (1987) have previously hypothesized no difference between selection goal management (the goal management strategy employed in the eristic conflict-solving orientation) and separation and integration goal management strategies (goal management strategies used in confrontation and collaboration orientations, respectively). The findings here corroborate O’Keefe & Shepherd’s expectations. It may be that the separation strategy of using socially ratified discourse practices for conveying politeness may be just as effective for multiple goal effectiveness as the integrative goal management strategy that enact identity, relational and task aims simultaneously.

Both of these lines of reasoning for explaining discrepancies in the findings can be further justified when examining the findings for the message sophistication measure. Goal complexity within rational models of message design like message design logic theory would specify that it is not only the goal structures embedded in and expressed by a message, but also the design logic embedded in the message; that is, how the goals are carried out by the message. Multiple goal messages that embody a conventional or a collaborative orientation should both produce an incorporation of both participants’ aims and identities in the conflict situation, and thus produce higher ratings across the seven measures. This expectation was consistently confirmed in the analyses of message sophistication. As expected, low, medium and high levels of message sophistication produced progressively higher levels of effectiveness for each dependent measure.
Moreover, when both conflict-solving orientations and goal structures were combined into the message sophistication measure, distinctions among the three types of message sophistication enabled more variance to be accounted for. In fact, comparing the percentage of variance accounted for in the analyses of conflict-solving orientation separately with the analyses combining both conflict-solving orientation and goal structures, an additional 4% of variance was accounted for in general message effectiveness, 2% and 4% accounted for on speaker identity and relationship goal effectiveness, respectively, and 2% additional variance accounted for on relationship enhancement. No additional variance was accounted for on instrumental goal, hearer identity goal effectiveness, or conflict resolvability. Thus, overall message effectiveness appears to be constituted by both conflict-solving orientation and goal structure complexity. These findings are consistent with those of Bingham and Burleson (1989).

**The Role of Goal Importance**

The final component of the conflict solving framework and test of behavioral complexity theory involved the examination of participants’ own goals for perceiving and handling the conflict situation. Those participants who valued identity and relationship goals were more likely to differentiate conflict opening messages of various conflict-solving orientations and goal structures than those who primarily value instrumental goals. Prior research has shown that participants who valued interpersonal and identity aims were more likely to produce messages that explicitly coordinated participants’ views about the problem and solution in regulative communication contexts (Kline, 1991). Participants whose aims and plans are more differentiated and complex are more likely to use conflict management tactics that link both participants’ interests with long
term objectives (Waldron & Applegate, 1994). Similarly, in conflict interactions the importance of instrumental goals was associated with the use of distributive tactics, and the importance of other’s identity goals predicted the use of collaborative tactics (Keck & Samp, 2007). Regarding message interpretation, those higher in cognitive complexity perceive greater differences in message complexity, and appreciate the effectiveness of those messages high in message complexity (Samter, Burleson & Basden-Murphy, 1989). Given these studies, one would expect that the importance of identity and relational goals by participants would be related to their evaluations of conflict opening messages. These expectations were partially confirmed, as the predicted interaction effect occurred for identity goal importance on both measures of conflict opening effectiveness. Those with high identity goal importance perceived the effectiveness of highly sophisticated opening messages more than those who rated identity goals lower in importance. Valuing identity goals appears to create an ability to discriminate between identity relevant message features, findings that are consistent with the Samter et al. (1989), as well as Keck and Samp (2007). Whether identity goal importance moderates other relationships between messages and message outcomes remains to be pursued in future work.

Surprisingly, however, there were no expected interaction effects for relational goal importance, opening message types and message evaluations. Instead there were consistent main effects for relational goal importance. Regardless of conflict opening type, those with high relational goal importance were more likely to view conflict openings as more generally effective, and effective in achieving multifunctional goals. These findings may suggest that those with high relational goal importance may be implicitly comparing the attempt to communicate versus avoiding the conflict situation,
and evaluating the opening message as relationally helpful; if participants value relationships then any attempt to work out differences may be seen as helpful, regardless of the quality of the opening message. The belief that talk is better than avoiding the issue may be the standard and view of those who value relational goals. Examining this explanation could be a focus for future work, as it could reveal how implicit standards for communication operate during interpersonal conflict.

Despite the mixed findings that occurred with goal importance, the interpretation of these findings is probably the most interesting, and suggest a number of directions for future research. Two distinct groups of findings for goal importance suggest future directions. The first group of findings are the predicted and significant interaction effects between identity goal importance, conflict opening message features, and message effectiveness. These findings supported the tenets of Wilson’s identity implications theory of persuasion (IIT; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998; Wilson & Feng, 2007), in that sophisticated messages (those with more identity implications) were preferred by those who valued identity goals. The findings also confirmed O’Keefe and Delia’s (1982) behavioral complexity framework which argues that people with more differentiated interpersonal constructs tend to produce more complex goals, recognize obstacles to achieving these goals, and prefer messages that better address their aims and obstacles. People who valued identity goals preferred messages that were more sophisticated (in addressing obstacles to achieving one’s identity goals). However, the range of different message practices that are perceived positively by those who value identity goals is not known. The range of effective practices perceived by those who do not value identity
goals is also not known. Both types of message practices would be useful to know for effective conflict resolution.

The second group of findings that suggest a need for future research are the main effects between goal importance and message effectiveness. Consistent throughout the moderation analyses were significant main effects for goal importance on measures of message effectiveness. These main effects seem to suggest that “behavioral complexity is not in the eye of the beholder” (Samter et al., 1989), as those who valued identity and relationship goals rated conflict openings, regardless of their behavioral complexity, as more effective than those who considered identity and relational goals to be less important. Are participants’ desires and aims a perceptual screen that constructs their primary meaning of conflict opening messages, regardless of their complexity? Are communication standards also at work in participants’ evaluations of eristic and minimal structure messages, in that participants consider them to be positive and better than saying nothing at all? The role of communication criteria, along with desires and aims, needs to be better theorized and tested in future work in order to understand how participants reason about particular conflict opening messages.

Furthermore, the behavioral complexity framework (O’Keefe & Delia, 1982) argued that people with more developed construct systems tend to view conflict situations to be more complex and contingent to their personal, complex aims on more dimensions than people with less developed construct systems. Therefore, it is possible that people who valued identity and relationship goals were able to see conflict situations to be more complex and better appreciate the value of communication of any kind compared with conflict avoidance, and thus they evaluated all conflict openings to be more effective than
people who did not value identity and relationship goals. Future studies could inquire into this speculation by examining the functions of conflict avoidance in association with the complexity of people’s goal importance and representations of specific conflict situations.

Finally, other moderation analyses could be conducted to learn more about the role of goal importance on participants’ evaluations of conflict orientations and goal structures. For example, it would be informative to learn if goal importance moderates evaluations of message features on relationship impact or conflict resolution.

**Effects for Gender**

Given the role of gender differences in supportive communication, gender was included as a variable in the analyses of conflict opening messages, to determine if females perceived multifunctional and collaborative messages to be more effective than males. Over a series of studies Burleson and his colleagues (2003) have found that males and females largely evaluated support messages similarly and have similar support goals in support-relevant situations. Burleson also has found small effects for females valuing esteem and emotional support and conflict management skills more than males, who valued persuasive skills. The pattern of findings with regard to gender obtained in this study largely matches Burleson’s supportive communication findings. That is, there were very few differences between males and females on their evaluations of conflict opening messages. The gender differences that did emerge were consistent with Burleson’s research (2003). Females rated collaborative oriented openings to be more effective than confrontation openings, compared to males who saw no difference. Males, by contrast, saw confrontation orientation messages to be more effective for accomplishing speaker goals and relationship goals, compared to females. These differences reflect the valuing
of different skills found by Burleson, with males valuing persuasive skills (fitting confrontation message practices) more than females. Still, there were multiple tests and opportunities in this study for more gender differences to be detected; the absence of differences suggests that young adults perceive conflict opening messages in largely similar ways.

**Situation type**

The type of conflict situation affects the evaluations of conflict opening messages. Conflict opening messages in the neglected relationship situation were rated to be less effective than conflict opening messages in the insensitive behavior situation, particularly for eristic conflict messages. These results suggest that the same type of conflict messages may be perceived differently in terms of effectiveness when used to manage different types of transgressions. Although eristic conflict messages are often considered ineffective, they may be comparatively more functional when used to confront a partner’s insensitive behavior than when used to confront a partner’s negligence of the relationship. It is possible that when the romantic partner do not value the relationship, it is less effective to try to change the partner’s behavior by using negative expressions, threats, and demand than when the partner values the relationship. The effectiveness of conflict management messages may be situationally-determined, similar to conflict management styles. For example, distributive tactics are not always perceived as ineffective, while in fact they may be highly desirable in certain communication situations such as during emergencies when immediate, decisive action is needed. These findings are consistent with Cionea’s (2012) argument that the “conclusions about the management of relational transgression must take into account the type of transgression” (p. 167).
Practical Implications

This dissertation also offers implications on how conflict management messages that are used to initiate conflict interactions may be optimally constructed to facilitate conflict resolution and preserve parties’ relationships. Given the importance of conflict opening stages in their ability to determine the nature of the conflict and shape subsequent interactions (Benoit & Benoit, 1990, Newell & Stutman, 1988), individuals could be advised to use conflict opening messages that employ a collaborative conflict-solving orientation when trying to confront their relationship partners about a relationship transgression. Features of these messages can include using more “we” than “you” pronouns and asking questions about the other person’s perspective (e.g., “What do you think?” or “Am I right?”). One could indicate openness to possible solutions and express the desire for mutual conversation (e.g., “I’m not saying you should stop cracking jokes… So can we talk about it? I’m sure we could figure out what’s best for both of us.”). Collaborative conflict opening messages can redefine the situation in ways that overt opposition can be minimized and partners’ interdependence be emphasized. This type of messages is found to be the most effective in preserving positive identities for both partners and preserve a good relationship between the partners, which are often at stake in conflict, especially social confrontation, situations. The use of collaborative conflict opening messages may also help increase the belief that the conflict can be resolved, thus providing an optimistic outlook for the partner.

It should be noted that it is optimal for an individual to use conflict opening messages that are not only collaborative but also multifunctional, because multifunctional messages are the most attentive to parties’ identities and their relationship among the
three goal structures. However, for individuals who prefer to use conventional-confrontation conflict openings, constructing the message in a way they are multifunctional can still create positive identities and relationships, and increase the likelihood of conflict resolvability. Conventional-confrontation conflict opening messages can be created to be multifunctional by incorporating politeness strategies. For example, one could disclose personal feelings and thoughts about the future of the relationship (e.g., “I’m afraid that we would drift apart”) instead of expressing explicit criticism (e.g., “I need a girlfriend/boyfriend, not a stranger!”), make statements that describe and/or explain the other’s perspective (e.g., “I know friends are important to you”), make positive comments about the other person’s achievements and/or intentions (e.g., “You have always been popular,” and “I don’t think you intended to hurt my feelings, because I know you care about me.”) and indicate positive assessments and commitment to the relationship (e.g., “It’s been great between us.”).

Thus, there are practical implications that emerge from the study’s findings for interpersonal conflict teachers. The typical coverage of interpersonal conflict for teaching purposes relies on the conflict styles framework and self-report instrument (Guerrero, Anderson & Afifi, 2014). While styles research and its measure enable students to learn the basic behavioral strategies for managing interpersonal conflict, this study’s findings show that variations in specific conflict discourse practices make a difference in perceived conflict management and effectiveness. Differences in conventional confrontation practices and collaborative practices, for instance, could be exemplified in examples and taught. The difference between minimal and unifunctional goal structures and multifunctional goal structures could also be taught through examples and discussion.
Providing an emphasis on conflict openings could also invite strategic differentiation about conflict conversations.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Like any study that initiates a new line of research, there emerged a number of limitations that limit the generalizability of the findings. The sample, scenarios, messages, and interactional context permitted a clear and efficient test of behavioral complexity theory, but the design choices limit the extent to which the findings can be generalized to diverse groups, types of relational transgressions, variations in message openings, perceptions of partners, and types of conversation contexts. Specifically, the sample was largely Caucasian, and only two types of transgressions were utilized in the conflict opening messages. The messages themselves were composed to reflect theoretically relevant dimensions, as opposed to being initiated by dating young adults, and only one message was produced to respond to each scenario. Such design features commit the language as fixed effect fallacy (Jackson, 1992), in which it is not clear if the dimensions embedded in the messages are actually responsible for variations in the message evaluations. The design also did not gather the perceptions of the dating partner, so it is not clear if a partner’s perceptions in the flow of an actual relationship would evaluate the messages as this study’s participants did. Finally, the conflict opening messages were not examined in actual conflict interactions. Turn by turn conversation practices may affect how particular conflict openings are accomplished and evaluated.

Fortunately, each of these limiting design choices can be complemented in future tests of the behavioral complexity of conflict opening messages. Future studies could collect data from a diverse sample, both racially and ethnically. It would also be
interesting to collect data from dating couples who are slightly older with more communication experiences, to see if the message evaluations would be the same. Future designs could also expand the types of relationship transgressions studied, and examine relevant situational factors, like the severity of the transgression. Other changes in future research could involve the way messages are created and evaluated. In a separate study dating young adults could produce messages in response to crafted scenarios, which could then be edited, categorized, and used in a subsequent test of behavioral complexity theory. By including a variety of messages for each experimental condition, a fuller determination of the theory could be determined. Moreover, including the dating partner in a dyadic design, perceptions of the situation, goals, and the message by both partners could tease out the sequential effects and outcomes of particular conflict opening messages. Finally, the hypotheses here could also be tested with dating couples in structured interaction tasks, either in a laboratory setting or in the field. The features of interaction designs have been recently honed by interpersonal communication researchers studying social support (e.g., Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012; Scott & Caughlin, 2014); these practices could easily be adopted by conflict communication researchers to learn more about the role of multiple goal management in conflict interactions.

The Effects of Communication Modalities in Conflict Openings

Future study should also examine the effectiveness of technological modalities in conflict opening situations. The use of communication technologies in interpersonal conflict interactions is not new (Frisby & Westerman 2010; Shapiro & Allen, 2001), and there is a broad literature on research in technology-mediated communication in interpersonal relationships. However, the effects of communication technologies in
interpersonal conflict are still understudied (Ishii, 2010; Scissors & Gergle, 2013), particularly the effects of using communication technologies in conflict openings. Currently, little is known about how and why people use communication technologies to initiate conflict conversation, and which technologies are perceived to be more or less effective in communicating confrontational messages.

According to Dennis and Valacich (1999), effective communication depends on the optimal appropriation of media affordances in specific communication process. A study by Shapiro and Allen (2001) found that people in conflict situations sometimes prefer text-based communication such as email than face-to-face communication because this communication modality helped them to avoid aggravating the conflict. Friedman and Currall (2003) reasoned that certain structural features of electronic text-based communication (e.g., email) tend to lead to dispute escalation more than FtF or telephone communication do. However, in Perry and Werner-Wilson’s (2011) study participants reported using TMC for a conflict-related discussion with their romantic partner to be as satisfying as communicating FtF. Results of another study indicated that video chat can both facilitate and hinder emotional management in conflict situations (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012). The inconsistent findings in these studies suggest that the effectiveness of using a certain communication technology is relevant to not only the functions afforded by the technology, but also the specific communication needs and aims an individual may have. Therefore, future research should study the ability of the affordances provided by various modalities for accomplishing communication needs particularly relevant to conflict openings. Some research questions may include whether people use communication technologies in conflict openings, which technologies people
would perceive as more effective than others, why they perceive certain technologies as more effective in communicating confrontation messages in conflict openings—in relation to the specific goals they have in conflict opening situations.

A media multiplexity approach is merited in order to capture the complexity in the use and effects of communication technology in interpersonal conflict communication. The communication interdependence perspective (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013) argues that people in close relationships use multiple media channels, as compared with choosing only one preferred channel, to communicate with each other, and the use and content conveyed by various channels are interconnected. Conversations about a single issue can take place repeatedly at different times and places, and across different communication channels (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). This perspective is important to understanding the role of using communication technology in interpersonal conflict interactions. Many conflicts, such as serial arguments, instead of being resolved in one single conversation via one communication channel, involve continued communication in which two people argue about the same issue over and over again in a number of communication episodes via various communication channels (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). The role of technologies in conflict interactions cannot be understood by simply isolating one technology and analyzing its functions, but requires a holistic understanding of how the integrated uses of multiple technologies are interconnected.

Research on the interconnections of multimodality in conflict interactions is even scarcer. There is only one study that has looked at multimodality in interpersonal conflict. Scissors and Gergle (2013) used interviews to explore the patterns in which partners switch among communication channels to manage conflict in relationships. Some
participants in their study reported using text-based communication to signal their partner
their desire for a conversation, and later used face-to-face conversation to bring up the actual topic about a conflict. Using these findings future research should examine the effects of channel integration, and particularly the channel integration in initiating conflict openings in conflict situations.

Besides the use of communication technology, future research could also explore whether features of romantic relationships would affect individuals’ perceptions of conflict opening messages. Research questions may include, for example, whether people’s relationship type (e.g., casual or exclusive dating, co-habiting, engaged relationship) would affect their evaluations of conflict opening messages of different conflict-solving orientation/goal structure and whether people’s age affects their evaluations of conflict opening messages. Other features may also include individuals’ level of commitment to the relationship, relationship satisfaction, and attachment styles.

**Conclusion**

This study addresses some of the limitations in the conflict management style literature and offers a re-conceptualization of conflict-solving orientation employing an interpretive approach to conflict communication to differentiate between eristic, conventional-confrontation, and collaborative conflict-solving orientations. The findings in this dissertation employ a more complete test of behavioral goal complexity theory, and provide substantial support for behavioral goal complexity theory in terms of a rational model of conflict opening design and goal complexity in conflict message design. By examining the design logic employed and goal structures embodied in conflict
messages, as well as the interaction between the two, this study addresses an important literature gap.

This study also contributes to the conflict literature by examining an important, yet understudied type of conflict situations—the opening stage of conflict interactions. By examining features of messages that are used in conflict opening situations, the findings provide theoretical and practical implications to the understanding of messages that are effective in initiating a conversation about a conflict. Individuals who want to confront their partner about a relationship transgression may use collaborative and multifunctional messages to reduce the damage on themselves’ and their partner’s identities and on the relationships, and increase the likelihood of conflict resolvability.

Conflict in relationship is inevitable, and confronting a partner’s relationship transgression may not always be easy. Individuals face the dilemma of being clear about their dissatisfaction with the transgression and the need to convey love and acceptance to their relational partner. This study suggests one way to resolve this dilemma: by constructing messages in a way to 1) engage the partner in a dialogue to facilitate mutual understanding and redefine the situation, and 2) affirm identity and relationship simultaneously.
References


Putnam, L. L. (2013). Definitions and approaches to conflict and communication. In J.G. Oetzel & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), The Sage handbook of conflict communication:


Appendix A: Consent Letter

CONFRONTATIONAL MESSAGE IN CONFLICT OPENINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your interest in this study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to examine messages used by dating partners to confront each other’s behaviors. In this questionnaire, you will first read descriptions of a situation in which a person is confronted by her/his dating partner. The message said by the dating partner is also provided. After reading the scenario and the message, you will be asked to imagine you and your partner being in this situation, and imagine if you are hearing the message from your partner to fill out the subsequent questionnaire to indicate your impressions of the message.

As you complete this questionnaire, please note that there are not any right or wrong answers, or standard or typical answers. We are simply interested in your opinion.

The survey will take approximately 40-50 minutes to complete. You may skip any question you do not want to answer. Your participation in this study is voluntary. By clicking “continue” below, you are consenting to participate in this study. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer or stop participation at any time.

Your personal information and your answers will be kept completely confidential. Any personal information collected will only be used to award extra credit and will be in no way connected to your survey responses.

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey, please consult the survey facilitator, or contact the investigator Wen Song, at song.312@osu.edu

This survey is for students of The Ohio State University only.

Thank you for participating in this study!
Appendix B: Scenarios and Messages

**Scenario 1 Neglected relationship (Giving a primary relationship a lower priority)**

**Descriptions**
You and your partner have been dating exclusively for eight months. You have a busy schedule because of your school and part-time job. You also have a close group of friends that you spend a significant amount of time with each week. Currently, you see your boyfriend/girlfriend about once a week, and talk/text with him/her about 3-4 days out of the week. When things get really busy your texts and call become less frequent and shorter in length. However, in general you feel comfortable with the amount of time you spend with your boyfriend/girlfriend, and enjoy the time you can have with friends when you are not studying/working. Today you have a day off from work, and you decide to spend the day with your friends. Your partner says the following things to you:

**Message instantiations**

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<tr>
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<th>Eristic Minimal Openings: (74 words)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I CAN’T BELIEVE IT HAPPENED AGAIN! I’ve had it. You are treating me like crap. You think everyone and everyone is more important than me! What is your problem? I’m so sick of this. You always act like this. Your friends always come before me. What kind of a girlfriend/boyfriend are you?! You never think about me. You are so selfish. I’m not going to put up with it. You really make me mad.</td>
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<th>Eristic Unifunctional Openings: (78 words)</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>I can’t believe it happened again! Why do you keep doing this to me? It’s always work, friends, work, friends. You never spend time with me. You are my girlfriend/boyfriend, but all you do is ignore me. I’ve had it. Everyone is more important than me. I waited all week only to find out you are ditching me for your friends. I need a girlfriend/boyfriend, not a stranger! You better do something different. I deserve better than this!</td>
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<th>Eristic Multifunctional Openings: (82 words)</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>I don’t think I can take it any more. I’m so upset. Most people can’t handle a person who always puts everyone else first but her/his partner. I’m so upset. It happens again and again. I’m losing my patience. My girlfriend/boyfriend thinks everyone else is more important than me. I just don’t get it, and I’m so tired of it. This is not what I had expected when we got together. I just don’t know how I can put up with it.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>I’m really upset. You spend more time with your friends than with me. I have given you lots of space when you were really busy with work, but now you hang out with your friends more than with me. You need to think about it. This isn’t what relationships should be like, and you know better than this. If you keep doing things this way, I don’t think this relationship is going to work out.</td>
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<th>Conventional-Confrontation Unifunctional Openings: (92 words)</th>
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<td>5</td>
<td>I’m upset that you chose to hang out with your friends today. I feel we don’t see each other enough, and it’s hard to keep the relationship going this way. When you are finally free you still don’t want to get together with me. If you don’t even want to</td>
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</table>
spend time with me there’s no point for us to be together. It seems all your effort is put into hanging out with friends. It makes me think whether our relationship really matters to you. You should spend more time with me.

6. Conventional-Confrontation Multifunctional Openings: (89 words)

I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but you spend more time with your friends than with me. I never said anything, but I’m actually upset. I understand there’re not enough hours in a day to make time for everyone, but I feel left out when you always make plans with your friends instead of with me. I know friends are important to you, but people need to spend enough time together to keep their relationship going. So could you consider setting aside more time for us to be together?

7. Collaborative Minimal Openings: (90 words)

I’m really upset that we won’t be seeing each other today. It’s been a while since we got together last time. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Don’t you think so? I thought we would get together today, but it seems you have other plans. I know we all need friends. But I felt left out. I think we can do better than this—what do you think? I don’t want you to think you need to give up your friendship though, so can we talk about it?

8. Collaborative Unifunctional Openings: (91 words)

I’m upset that we won’t spend the day together. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Do you feel the same? It’s hard to keep this relationship going if we don’t see each other enough. Although we text and talk on the phone, they’re quite different from spending time face-to-face. What do you think? I’m not saying you need to give up your friendships. Can we talk about it? I’m sure we can figure out a way to get together more often while we can still hang out with friends.

9. Collaborative Multifunctional Openings: (90 words)

It’s great that you have so many friends to hang out with. You’ve always been popular. I’m just sad that we won’t be spending time together today. I feel we don’t see each other enough. Do you feel the same? It’s been great between us, but I’m afraid that we would drift apart because of not spending enough time together. What do you think? Can we talk about it? I’m sure we can figure out what’s best for us and also the friendships we want to keep with other people.

Scenario 2 Insensitive behavior

Descriptions

You and your partner have been dating exclusively for eight months. You sometimes bring your partner along when hanging out with your friends. You and your friends have always enjoyed teasing each other in a sarcastic way. So when you are all together, you sometimes tease your partner too and it seems everybody is having a good time. Tonight you went to your friends’ party with your partner. On the way back your partner says the following things to you:

Message instantiations

1. Eristic Minimal Openings: (80 words)

I KNEW IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN AGAIN! This is so ridiculous. You keep
<table>
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<th>Making fun of me in front of your friends again and again. What a jerk! You said so many mean things about me tonight. I’m so mad. Can’t you tell I was upset? You always act like this when you are around your friends. I hate those jokes. You are mean and selfish! You and your friends deserve one another. You guys are so rude. Unbelievable!</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong> Eristic Unifunctional Openings: (83 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can’t believe it happened again! You have been a jerk tonight. You made so many mean jokes about me in front of your friends. I hate your cruel, sarcastic jokes at my expense. Can’t you tell I was upset? You keep putting me down in front of your friends. You and your friends are so rude, getting a good laugh at my sacrifice! You never think about my feelings. You really make me mad! Don’t you ever embarrass me like that again!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> Eristic Multifunctional Openings: (82 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m so mad at what happened tonight! Why was I getting put down like this? I hate those jokes made about me. I don’t understand why a person would keep making fun of her/his partner in front of her/his friends. I’m so frustrated! Most people can’t handle jokes like these. And most people can’t take their partners being so disrespectful in front of others. I don’t think I can handle going out with you and your friends if this is what happens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> Conventional-Confrontation Minimal Openings: (80 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m really annoyed by some of the stuff you said tonight. You and your friends told some really offensive jokes. It was so inappropriate. I still can’t believe you made those jokes about me, especially in front of your friends. You should’ve known this would embarrass me. To tell you the truth, I was really upset. I really don’t appreciate them, and I shouldn’t have to put up with it. You should think about it and act differently next time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> Conventional-Confrontation Unifunctional Openings: (86 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of the jokes you and your friends made tonight were annoying. You might think they’re funny, but I actually found them offensive. I felt really embarrassed when you made jokes about me like that in front of your friends. I felt put down. And I don’t even know these people. They are going to think your sarcastic comments are actually true. As my girlfriend/boyfriend, you should think more about my feelings. I’d rather you don’t make fun of me in front of your friends again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> Conventional-Confrontation Multifunctional Openings: (90 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks for inviting me tonight. It’s been fun. There’s one thing that kind of bothered me though. I’m not really comfortable when you make jokes about me in front of your friends. I understand you were not serious, but I still felt put down. Also I don’t know these people very well. I’m afraid that they might think your sarcastic comments are actually true. I would appreciate it if you could consider my feelings more. So could you please not crack jokes about me when you are around your friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> Collaborative Minimal Openings: (83 words)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| One thing had bothered me tonight. You have made some jokes about me in front of your friends. Did you notice? I felt uncomfortable when that happened. I saw that you and your friends teased each other too, and you seemed fine. But I don’t think I
can handle it if things keep this way. I feel uncomfortable at times. I don’t want you
to stop the way you communicate with your friends though. So what do you think?
You have any suggestions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8. Collaborative Unifunctional Openings: (82 words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>You and your friends seem to enjoy teasing each other for fun. Am I right? While</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>that’s totally ok, I’m upset. I don’t have the same sense of humor as you guys, and I</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>feel uncomfortable at time, especially when those jokes are about me. I’m not saying</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>you should stop cracking jokes. I understand that it’s how you and your friends</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>connect, right? So can we talk about it? Let’s figure out a way that both of us can</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>feel comfortable.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. Collaborative Multifuctional Openings: (94 words)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>You and your friends like to tease each other! I’m glad that you guys have the same</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sense of humor, and can connect that way. But I feel uncomfortable at times,</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>especially when I’m the one being joked about. What do you think? I don’t think you</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intended to hurt my feelings, because I know you care about me. And I’m not saying</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>you should stop cracking jokes. I like that you have always been funny. So can we</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>talk about it? I’m sure we could figure out what’s best for both of us.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Questionnaire Scale Instruments

Part 1: Demographics and relationship status
Please provide some information about yourself (This information will be kept confidential and will be used only for purposes of this research).

Gender
___Male
___Female

Age: ___________

Year in college
___Freshman
___Sophomore
___Junior
___Senior
___Graduate student
___Other

Ethnicity/Race
___African-American
___American-Indian or Alaska native
___Asian
___Caucasian
___Hispanic or Latino/Latina
___Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
___A combination of the above
___I prefer not to answer
___Other

Are you currently in an unmarried romantic relationship? (Unmarried romantic relationship includes going out, casual or exclusive dating, co-habitating, and engaged relationships.)
___Yes (continue to next page)
___No, I’m not currently in a romantic relationship (disqualified for the study, end the survey)
___No, I’m married (disqualified for the study, end the survey)

Part 2: Scenario, message, and manipulation Check
Below is a brief description of a scenario involving the beginning of a conversation between two dating partners. Please read the scenario, imagining you and your dating partner being in the situation and having this conversation, and answer the following questionnaire with this in mind.

[Insert descriptions of experimental situation]
[Insert message]
2.1 Perceived scenario realism
What do you think about the scenario you have just read?
(1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) The scenario is realistic.
(2) This scenario reflects a situation that could happen in real life.
(3) This scenario reflects a believable situation

2.2 Conflict-solving orientation features

[Eristic message features]
My partner’s words… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) make me change just to appease his/her anger
(2) show he/she is hostile toward me
(3) are controlling
(4) show that he/she is so mad at me
(5) demand I change my behavior immediately
(6) show he/she thinks I personally has caused the conflict

[Conventional-confrontation message features]
My partner’s words… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) indicate he/she thinks I failed in my obligations or responsibilities as a girlfriend/boyfriend
(2) give me good reasons to see things his/her way
(3) give me reasons why he/she thinks I have done something wrong
(4) only criticize my behavior but not me as a person
(5) tell me specifically what I should or should not do in this situation

[Collaborative message features]
My partner’s words… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) indicate that a best solution needs both of our perspectives
(2) he/she wants to understand things from my perspective
(3) show that he/she looks out for both of our interests

2.3 Goal structure features

[Easiness to infer clear goal]
(1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) It is easy to infer the clear goal of the speaker in this message.

[Multiple goals message features]
(1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) This message is able to help the two people to come up with a solution to the conflict
(2) It is easy to infer the clear goal of the speaker in this message
(3) This message is able to express/create a positive identity for the speaker
(4) This message is able to express/create a positive identity for the hearer
(5) This message is able to maintain a good relationship between the two people

2.4 Perceived message realism:
(1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) The message is realistic given the situation.
Part 3: Message evaluation
Now imagine you and your dating partner being in the described situation. If you actually heard your partner say the following message to you, how would you feel about the message?

[Provide the scenario and message again]

3.1 General effectiveness
My partner’s message was… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) effective
(2) reasonable
(3) appropriate
(4) convincing
(5) showing understanding

3.2 Effectiveness in accomplishing instrumental goals
My partner’s message… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) will help him/her to get what he/she wants in the situation
(2) will set the stage for solving the problem
(3) will facilitate a genuine conversation
(4) will facilitate a resolution of the conflict
(5) will help my partner to find the best way to solve the problem

3.3 Effectiveness in accomplishment identity goals
Effectiveness in accomplishing message hearer’s identity goals
My partner’s words… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
[Perceived regard for message hearer’s identity/participant’s identity]
(1) make it sound like I only care about my own interests in the situation
   (reversed)
(2) show that he/she values me for who I am
(3) show that he/she wants me to achieve my goals
[Perceived regard for message hearer’s face/participant’s face]
(4) shows that s/he thinks highly of my ability
(5) would make me feel good about myself
(6) would make me feel liked and accepted
(7) shows that s/he respects me
(8) do not impose too much on me

Effectiveness in accomplishing message speaker’s identity goals
My partner’s words… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
[Perceived regard for message speaker’s identity/partner’s identity]
(1) show that he/she only cares about his/her own interests in the situation
   (reversed)
(2) make him/her appear respectable
(3) indicate that his/her opinions are important
[Perceived regard for message speaker’s face/partner’s face]
(4) make him/her appear competent
(5) make him/her likeable
(6) make me respect him/her
(7) indicate that he/she can do what he/she wants
3.4 Effectiveness in accomplishing relationship goals
What my partner said…
(1) 1= is unsupportive----- 7= is supportive
(2) 1= shows a lack of trust toward me
   7= shows that my partner trusts me
(3) 1= displays no desire to preserve the relationship
   7= displays a desire to preserve the relationship
(4) 1= displays a lack of caring
   7 = displays caring

Part 4: Message outcomes
[Provide the message again]
4.1 Perceived conflict resolvability
Based on your partner’s words, how confident are you that…
(1=not at all confident, 7=extremely confident)
   (1) you and your partner will be able to remedy the situation
   (2) you and your partner will resolve the situation in the immediate future
   (3) you and your partner will be able to find a really good solution
   (4) you and your partner will work through this
   (5) you and your partner will be able to get through this

4.2 Relational outcomes
Now imagine the rest of the conversation you would have with your partner. Based on how your partner starts the conversation, to what extent will the whole conversation between you and your partner… (1=not at all, 7=extremely)
   (1) make your relationship stronger
   (2) make your relationship better
   (3) improve your relationship with each other
   (4) help you satisfy each other’s needs
   (5) make your relationship closer

Part 5: Goal importance
5.1 Goal importance
Importance of identity goals
[Participant’s own identity goals]
   In this situation… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
      (1) I want to be true to myself
      (2) I want to hold on to my values
      (3) I want to be a good person
[Participant’s own face goals]
   In this situation… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
      (4) I want to make sure my partner still thinks highly of me
      (5) I want to make sure my partner remember that I have positive qualities
      (6) I don’t want to appear weak in front of my partner
      (7) I want to be able to make my own decisions about this matter
[Partner’s identity goals]
In this situation… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(8) I want my partner to be herself/himself
(9) I want to help my partner achieve her/his goals
(10) I want to understand my partner’s ideas

[Partner’s face goals]
In this situation… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(11) I want my partner to know that I think he/she has positive qualities
(12) I want my partner to know I still think highly of her/him
(13) I want my partner to know that I respect him/her
(14) I want to make sure that my partner can make her/his own decisions

Importance of relational goal
In this situation… (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree)
(1) getting what I wanted would be more important than preserving our relationship (reversed)
(2) I would not be willing to risk possible damage to the relationship
(3) I want to make sure the relationship keeps going
(4) I would really care if I made the other person mad

Part 6: Relationship measures
6.1 Relationship type
Please describe your relationship type
— Hanging out or casual dating
— Exclusive dating
— Co-habiting
— Engaged
— Other

6.2 Relationship length
How long have you been in this marital/relationship status?
— months

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Appendix D: Table of Univariate ANCOVAs Summary Results for the Conflict-Solving Orientation × Goal Structure Interaction Effects on Message General Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General effectiveness</td>
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<td>Multiple goal effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumental goals</td>
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<td>Hearer’s identity goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaker’s identity goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship goals</td>
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<td>.003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Message Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes on conflict resolution</td>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>.376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes on relationship</td>
<td>.60</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Tables of Univariate ANCOVAs Summary Results for the Conflict-Solving Orientation at each Level of Goal Structure on Message General Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes

ANCOVA Summary Results for the Conflict-Solving Orientation for Minimal Goal Structures on Message General Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict-solving orientation</th>
<th>Eristic $E MM$ (SE)</th>
<th>Conventional-confrontation $E MM$ (SE)</th>
<th>Collaborative $E MM$ (SE)</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple goal effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental goals</td>
<td>3.42$_a$ (.16)</td>
<td>4.79$_b$ (.17)</td>
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<td>34.74</td>
<td>.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearer’s identity goals</td>
<td>2.25$_a$ (.13)</td>
<td>3.00$_b$ (.12)</td>
<td>4.18$_c$ (.15)</td>
<td>45.69</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker’s identity goals</td>
<td>3.41$_a$ (.12)</td>
<td>4.54$_b$ (.13)</td>
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<td>36.47</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship goals</td>
<td>3.12$_a$ (.17)</td>
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<td>5.26$_c$ (.20)</td>
<td>31.66</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes on conflict</td>
<td>4.62$_a$ (.16)</td>
<td>5.32$_b$ (.17)</td>
<td>5.55$_b$ (.19)</td>
<td>7.60</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>resolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes on relationship</td>
<td>4.54$_a$ (.18)</td>
<td>5.28$_b$ (.19)</td>
<td>5.69$_b$ (.22)</td>
<td>8.55</td>
<td>.12</td>
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Note. Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level (Bonferroni-adjusted).
### ANCOVA Summary Results for the Conflict-Solving Orientation for Unifunctional Goal Structures on Message General Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict-solving orientation</th>
<th>Eristic $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>Conventional-confrontation $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>Collaborative $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple goal effectiveness</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental goals</td>
<td>4.01$_{a}$ (.20)</td>
<td>4.93$_{b}$ (.20)</td>
<td>5.60$_{b}$ (.19)</td>
<td>17.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hearer’s identity goals</td>
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<td>Relationship goals</td>
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<td>39.47</td>
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</table>

### Message Outcomes

<table>
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<th>Outcomes on conflict resolution</th>
<th>Eristic $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>Conventional-confrontation $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>Collaborative $EMM (SE)$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
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<td>Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.83$_{ab}$ (.18)</td>
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*Note:* Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level (Bonferroni-adjusted).
### ANCOVA Summary Results for the Conflict-Solving Orientation for Multifunctional Goal Structures on Message General Effectiveness, Multiple Goal Effectiveness, and Message Outcomes:

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Note. Estimated marginal means with different superscripts differ significantly at the $p < .05$ level (Bonferroni-adjusted).