THE CONFLICT CONTINUUM

MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERCEPTIONS
THAT GENERATE AND ESCALATE
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONAL CONFLICTS

Doctoral Project

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DEDICATION

I was prompted to begin this doctoral journey by a desire to elevate the quality of care and support I could offer to others and by a hope that the knowledge I would gain along the way would reveal a specialized arena for the future of my career. I could never have predicted the extent to which my hopes and desires would be far exceeded along the course of this difficult and rewarding path.

A few key people played crucial roles during this stage of my life, influenced my ideas and beliefs about this field of study, and were essential to my capability of crossing the finish line nearly five years after I began.

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ABSTRACT

The growing body of research demonstrating the effects neurocognitive mechanisms and cognitive biases have on individuals' perceptions, interpretations, memories, and reactions to emotional and stressful experiences has not been sufficiently integrated and applied to traditional theories of conflict etiology and analysis. In this doctoral study, academic theories of conflict from a range of research fields are comprehensively examined to identify catalysts, components, and consequences specifically associated with severe, intense, and disruptive conflicts, termed *significant interpersonal relational conflicts* (SIRCs). The problem of SIRC is explored through extant literature on subjective, self-motivated, endogenous cognitive processes, termed *personalized cognitive filters* (PCFs), which generate individual perceptions about conflict. Literature on both conflict and perception are synthesized into *the conflict continuum model* (CCM), comprising 5 dimensions of perception. Research participants ($N = 25$) represented American Millennials, with criteria addressing age, gender, and the mean demographics on race, religion, and education. Virtual, qualitative interviews solicited participant narratives about a personal SIRC, follow-up questions about determinative factors, and written responses addressing dimensions of the CCM. Constructivist grounded theory methodologies generated a taxonomy of SIRC-related themes associated with individual PCFs and perceptions about SIRC. Findings supported and enriched the CCM, demonstrating interconnections between the CCM, taxonomy of themes, and PCFs. In this study, an endogenous essence and etiology of SIRC are clarified by literature and grounded in research. Immediate clinical applications for instruments generated by this study and further research, development, and instrument validation recommendations are discussed.

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

During conflicts, the issues people believe they are fighting about may not be the issues actually causing their offense. Likewise, the heart of an offense may not be accurately portrayed by words exchanged in the heat of a moment. Interpersonal conflict is a pervasive, sometimes daily reality for relational beings and is established as a common and damaging phenomenon in both personal and professional settings (Mauersberger et al., 2018; Miller & Roloff, 2006; Su et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2017). In one workplace study (Gilin Oore et al., 2015), conflicts cost managers 7.5 hours of productivity every week, and unresolved conflicts cost organizations $100,000 per case when escalated into formal action. Although unresolved conflicts are unequivocally correlated with undesirable outcomes, individuals are recurrently unable or unwilling to facilitate positive resolutions in their own conflicts (Clark et al., 2020). Indeed, researchers of interpersonal conflict have observed instances when 33%–66% (Miller & Roloff, 2006), 58% (Fortado, 2001), 63% (McGinn et al., 2009), and even 90% (Lasater, 2016; Raffaelli, 1997) of conflicts resulted in unsatisfying, unresolved states of avoidance, deterioration, or termination of the relationship.

The destructive consequences of unresolved conflicts should motivate individuals to pursue conflict resolution. However, efforts aimed at correcting external differences may fall short of resolving deeper problems. The expanding literature on neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of perception, emotion, and memory indicates that endogenous processes may impede accurate perceptions about the underlying cause and nature of an offense (Farmer & Maister, 2017; Hackel et al., 2020; Javanbakht, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Leder, 2017). Researchers have identified patterns of errors, biases, and distortions that occur within internal

processes of perception, interpretation, memory, and cognition, which directly and indirectly impact interpersonal relationships (Adams, 2016; Ayoko, 2016; Berndsen et al., 2018; Keser et al., 2020; Mroz & Allen, 2020; You et al., 2019). However, scholarly literature has yet to embrace a comprehensive conceptualization of the essence, core issues, and causes of conflict (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017), and this lack of clarity limits public confidence and success during attempts at conflict resolution. Although researchers of conflict consistently mention perception throughout their theories of etiology and analysis, none have overtly placed perception in the central and determinative position of a comprehensive theory of conflict etiology, analysis, and resolution (Benitez et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Grover & Hasel, 2018; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Raimundo, 2020; Rockett et al., 2017; Semerci, 2019).

Therefore, in this doctoral project, I synthesized existing evidence about automatic and self-motivated biases within internal systems of attention, perception, emotion, memory, and cognition that generate individual perceptions about conflict. These endogenous processes of subjectively interpreting and making meaning of salient lived experiences were termed *personalized cognitive filters* (PCFs). I also comprehensively examined academic theories of conflict, produced by various fields of research, in order to identify components and catalysts specifically associated with severe, intense, and disruptive conflicts, termed *significant interpersonal relational conflicts* (SIRCs). The evidence throughout existing literature on conflicts and perception was constructed into a preliminary model of interpersonal conflict, built around universal dimensions of perception. This perception–oriented framework was used to guide qualitative interviews with research participants, who were asked to describe a previous SIRC and reflect on factors that influenced the severity, duration, and impact of their conflict.

Qualitative analysis followed constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodologies to identify key themes and linguistic patterns associated with individual perceptions about conflict experiences. Over the course of this doctoral project, the essence and etiology of interpersonal conflict were clarified, and a newly constructed theoretical model emphasizes the central and determinative role of PCF–generated perceptions.

Background of the Problem

At their core, human beings are relational creatures. People need healthy social relationships for overall well-being and life satisfaction (Sul et al., 2016), but individual perspectives, preferences, priorities, and personalities create friction during daily interactions in an interdependent society (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Few would consciously claim that uniformity of thought is required for positive relationships, but openly expressed differences in opinion may seem to demand reactions of offense, outrage, and ostracism. Recent social and political volatility in American communities (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Katz, 2018; Politico Magazine, 2020) has demonstrated an underlying psychological propensity for polarized generalizations, dichotomous thinking, and tribalism (Gautam et al., 2020; Haidt, 2020; Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020; Spaulding, 2018; Tappin et al., 2020). Contempt, rather than compassion, is the undeniable framework that structures public dialog and hinders objective analysis of opposing parties. The current social, political, cultural climate in America is suggestive of cognitive filtering processes that oversimplify, exaggerate, characterize, label, and dismiss disagreeable perspectives of others (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Katz, 2018; Shapiro et al., 2019). These same cognitive tendencies may also play foundational roles in the etiology, escalation, and maintenance of SIRCs.

The problem of interpersonal conflict has been studied by organizational, clinical, social, behavioral, and moral psychologists, as well as political scientists, anthropologists, economists, financial analysists, sociologists, educators, marriage and family therapists, professional counselors, mediators, philosophers, neurocognitive scientists, and medical practitioners. Though conflicts negatively impact each of these fields in unique ways, researchers have yet to identify a transferable and comprehensive framework for explaining and resolving conflicts (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017). Previous studies have demonstrated significant relationships between SIRCs and clinical problems with anger (Choi & Murdock, 2017), alcohol use (Rodriguez et al., 2019), self-esteem (Curran & Allen, 2017), depression (Roberson et al., 2018), subjective well-being (Alkozei et al., 2018), marital and family relationships (Sutton et al., 2017), family health (Scharp & Curran, 2018; Singh & Nayak, 2016), long-term medical issues (Allen et al., 2018), social attributions (Önal & Yalçın, 2017), employees and professional teams (Benitez et al., 2018), and organizational cultures (Rockett et al., 2017).

Despite their numerous and well-known negative effects, conflicts continue to occur frequently in all types of settings (Ilies et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2017). A common presumption is that SIRCs are inevitable and are the unavoidable outcome of interactions comprising mismatched expectations, opposing goals, conflicting opinions, differing assumptions about family or gender roles, violations of subjective cultural norms, or actions judged as immoral or unethical (Egorov et al., 2019; Semerci, 2019). However, none of these potential catalysts can trigger a SIRC without passing through intermediary filtering processes (Haj & Miller, 2018). When an undesirable or painful interaction occurs, PCFs of neurocognitive mechanisms rapidly process the sensory data, circumstantial details, preexisting beliefs about the

other party, and expectations unique to that relationship (Kunzmann et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2019; Spaulding, 2018; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017).

Automated perceptions of harm or threat can trigger rapid physiological, affective, and behavioral reactions before slower cognitive systems consciously comprehend the nature of the other party's offense (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Nobre & Stokes, 2019; Smeijers et al., 2020; Wante et al., 2018). Even when parties in conflict have time to reflect on an offensive interaction and consider possible explanations and motivations, their assessments are influenced by myriad factors not directly related to the conflict (e.g., PCFs of schemas, mood-congruence effects, self-narratives, fundamental attribution errors, gender-norm heuristics; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Rohr et al., 2018). In fact, postconflict reflections, ruminations, and internal analyses are particularly prone to generate erroneous justifications, confabulations, and self-enhancing narratives (Raimundo, 2020; van Helvoort et al., 2020), due to biases amplified by emotional arousal during conflict events (Bowen et al., 2018).

Studies from numerous fields suggest that PCFs have a powerful influence over perceptions related to the development and maintenance of SIRCs (Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Raimundo, 2020). The existence and influence of PCFs are supported by the efficacy of cognitive reappraisal and reframing techniques to address unresolved conflict and relational dysfunction in organizational and clinical populations (Ho et al., 2020; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020). However, extant theories of conflict, conflict analysis, and conflict resolution have been slow to incorporate the growing body of evidence on neurocognitive mechanisms associated with relational stress and emotional arousal.

The ongoing lack of a universal, comprehensive theory of conflict contributes to scholarly and public confusion about the essence and etiology of conflict (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017), which, in turn, limits the generalizability of new and effective techniques across fields of study, cultures, and contexts. Therefore, the goal of this study was to conduct critical analysis of existing research and overtly orient a conflict theory around internal, subjective dimensions of perception (in contrast to prominent conflict models that emphasize external, circumstantial factors) so that future conflict research can benefit from advancements in highly relevant fields of neurocognition, memory, emotion, motivation, moral intuition, and cognitive biases.

Statement of the Problem

SIRC has a well-established relationship with negative life outcomes and clinical disorders (Benitez et al., 2018; Curran & Allen, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Scharp & Curran, 2018). These prevalent and damaging conflicts are often treated and tested by clinicians and researchers who lack a comprehensive theoretical foundation upon which to explain and generalize their findings. Though there is an abundant and growing body of research on the effects neurocognitive mechanisms and cognitive biases have on individuals' subjective perceptions, interpretations, memories, and reactions to emotional and stressful experiences (Engelmann et al., 2017), this is not sufficiently reflected by extant theories of conflict etiology and analysis. Nearly all literature on conflict incorporates perceptions into the descriptions of etiology and analysis, but none have overtly placed perception in the central and determinative position of a comprehensive theory of conflict etiology, analysis, and resolution. However, the direct relationship between perceptions and SIRC is strongly supported throughout existing literature. The need in the fields of conflict research is for a perception–oriented theory of

conflict that incorporates extant literature on neurocognitive mechanisms of PCFs and establishes the comprehensive etiology and essence of SIRC. Toward that end, research was needed to demonstrate the qualitative and thematic manifestations of perception that generate and dictate individual experiences of SIRC.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this doctoral project was to identify qualitative elements of perceptions related to SIRCs, and to integrate results with existing literature to construct a theoretical model of conflict, oriented around perception. CGT (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019) was a well suited research methodology for this study because it allowed relevant, existing theories related to PCFs to be incorporated into the thematic and categorical analysis of new research data about SIRCs. In this study, CGT methods promoted detailed and rich exploration of categorical themes within participants' narratives about a significant SIRC from their past. The research comprised interviews wherein participants were invited to describe a previous SIRC and then reflect on various perceptions and beliefs related to their experience.

Existing literature identifies myriad endogenous mechanisms by which the external world is filtered and interpreted to generate self-motivated perceptions and recollections (Carlucci et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Vanderveren et al., 2017). Accordingly, qualitative data collected in this study were not presumed to be precise or objective recapitulations of conflict events. Instead, conflict narratives were approached as representations of SIRC perceptions, overtly influenced and guided by the unique PCFs of each participant. Thus, research data represented a taxonomy of verbal expressions associated with perceptions about SIRCs, generated by highly personalized and subjective neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of attention, perception, memory, emotion, and cognition.

There is extensive evidence about the influence of cultural differences on values, beliefs, and social norms that influence expectations, perceptions, and linguistic descriptions of previously experienced SIRCs (Brett, 2018; Noh & Chow, 2019). This study was structured to explore thematic and categorical perceptions about SIRCs within a population, rather than differences between culturally distinct populations. This was intended to create clarity about prominent SIRC perceptions and beliefs, the relationship between specific SIRC perceptions and postconflict relational outcomes, and SIRC perceptions that correspond with established processes and modes of PCFs. By selecting culturally homogenous participants, ingroup patterns of expectations and attitudes about SIRCs represented the thematic dimensions of perception driving these conflicts.

Millennials are the largest American generation and are commonly identified as those born between 1981–1997 (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; Frey, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019). Fifty-six percent of Millennials are White, 49% identify as Christian, and 67% have at least some postsecondary education. Initial purposive sampling focused on Millennials who fit those mean demographic criteria. Subjects were invited to participate via social networks, using snowballing recruitment methods (Williams et al., 2019). According to CGT methods, subsequent participants could be targeted based on themes and insights that emerged from initial data analysis, in order to collect a thorough representation of the range of thematic perspectives about SIRCs (Ward et al., 2019). Based on data collection procedures in other qualitative, grounded theory studies (Guest et al., 2020; Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Sun et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2019), theoretical saturation was estimated to occur within 25 qualitative interviews.

Research Questions

RQ1. What words and phrases do participants include within their conflict narratives that are indicative of subjective perceptions and/or specific modes of PCFs?

RQ2. Do participants incorporate morally valenced terminology into their conflict narratives?

RQ3. Do thematic components of SIRCs identified within participants' conflict narratives correspond with the thematic dimensions of the conflict continuum model?

RQ4. How do participants describe their SIRCs when guided by multidimensional questions in the conflict continuum research instrument?

RQ5. What do participants identify as the key factors that determined the cause, durability, and consequences of their SIRC?

Theoretical Framework

The broad, theoretical assumption in this doctoral project was that PCFs can influence perception and memory in conscious and subconscious ways, through a variety of paradigms and mechanisms (e.g., affective, rational, neurological, cognitive, cultural, and moral). Dual-processing theory was established on the idea that working memory is a limited resource, which is budgeted and coordinated efficiently by two types of cognitive processes: automatic and deliberative (Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Markovits et al., 2019). Automatic processes are subconscious shortcuts that occur instinctively and allow people to react quickly based on preexisting stereotypes, categories, and expectations (Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). Particularly during emotionally arousing events, people make automatic decisions and react swiftly, and later rationalize moral justifications for their behaviors (Greene, 2017; Huang et al., 2019). This theoretical framework was synthesized in the work of Kahneman (Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Kahneman & Miller, 1986), and was elaborated in Haidt's (2001)

theory of social intuition and Greene's neurocognitive research on emotion, moral judgment, and perception (Greene, 2015; Greene et al., 2004; Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Social interactions related to SIRCs are often retroactively perceived through a self-defending and other–blaming moral framework (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Joseph, 2008). For example, when an individual makes an automatic choice to commit an immoral act, System 2 processes quickly create rationalizations to justify the act, which protects the individual's self-perception as a moral person (Greene & Haidt, 2002). The negatively valenced, emotionally aroused state of individuals who have conflicting agendas is associated with System 1 rapid reactions. Instead of accepting these automatic, biased, neurocognitive processes as an inevitable part of cognition, Haidt (2012) observed an instinctive human tendency to claim that moral intuitions are rational, and to deny the influential role of automatic, emotion–driven passions.

Significance of the Study

Superficial conflicts are an unavoidable aspect of relationships in social and professional settings (Kozusznik et al., 2020; Singh & Nayak, 2016), but when SIRCs cause prolonged stress and distress, there are negative implications for workplace functioning, organizational health, family stability, mental and medical health issues, and overall well-being and life satisfaction (Gordon & Chen, 2016; Petersen & Le, 2017). SIRCs are strongly established as pervasive and harmful to individuals, religious groups, families, employees, and organizations (Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2017). The stress caused by SIRC exposure is responsible for immune system inflammation 15% above typical levels and is a risk marker for life-long problems with metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, premature aging, arthritis, tumor formation, and osteoporosis (Allen et al., 2018).

The inability to resolve SIRCs constructively is the strongest predictor of relational dissolution (Kim et al., 2015). SIRCs in marriage are directly related to clinical symptoms of major depression (Roberson et al., 2018). Numerous studies have demonstrated elevated depressive symptoms related to family conflict, adolescent–parent conflict, and peer conflicts (Choi & Murdock, 2017; Guan-Hao et al., 2019; Keser et al., 2020; Petersen & Le, 2017; Ripley et al., 2018; Sutton et al., 2017). Stulz et al. (2018) found that 54% of individuals who attempted suicide identified interpersonal conflict as the reason for their action, while Li et al. (2012) identified SIRCs as the primary cause of female suicide attempts in 90% of cases.

Although SIRCs are well-established as harmful in both personal and professional arenas, there is yet no generalized, gold standard for resolving distressing and damaging interpersonal conflicts across contexts (Overall & McNulty, 2017), or even a clear and comprehensive description of the essence and etiology of conflict (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017). This research identified patterns and thematic categories of participants' perceptions related to etiology, outcome determinants, and their subjective assessments about the remembered experience of their conflict. Qualitative insights drawn from this research were integrated with existing evidence of neurocognitive mechanisms of perception and memory for the purpose of developing a comprehensive theoretical framework about the etiology and essence of interpersonal conflicts.

Efficacious treatment models of cognitive reappraisal imply that underlying beliefs and biases about conflict must be identified and reframed in order to more effectively help clients resolve SIRCs (Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Gutenbrunner & Wagner, 2016; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020). This study clarified the thematic patterns of beliefs specifically associated with SIRCs in order to advance the field of knowledge

about underlying mechanisms of interpersonal conflict. The outcomes from this doctoral project have possible implications for improved models of diagnostic analysis and theoretically grounded treatment strategies, with application opportunities in clinical, organizational, and social settings. The grounded theory and conflict model generated by this research can be replicated in future studies to identify unique, thematic patterns of conflict perceptions within and between other populations. Future comparative analysis of unique perception differences between cultural or generational populations may be valuable across a range of psychological fields.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

In qualitative, grounded theory research, it is impossible to entirely remove the personal influence of researchers from data interpretation and theory construction (Charmaz, 2017). Data analysis relies upon perceptions of sociolinguistic nuance, the valence of words and phrases, and thematic interpretations of conflict narratives. My previous theoretical study and clinical experiences influenced expectations about the types of patterns that would emerge from the data. CGT methods anticipate these potential biases, and require frequent, critical reflexivity to minimize bias to the greatest degree possible. However, emergent grounded theories inevitably reflect the authors to a degree, which represents a potential weakness in this study.

Participants were contacted via virtual social networks, and snowballing recruitment methods (Williams et al., 2019) were used to broaden the sampling pool. This potentially limits transferability of the results because sampling was tied to the outer concentric circles of a single, social network. However, this limitation may be relatively minor when the short path-lengths between online, social networks are considered (Das, 2014; Laniado et al., 2018;

Wickramasinghe et al., 2018). Studies on relationship marketing have demonstrated that the widespread use of social media across platforms creates access to populations from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, sociopolitical beliefs, and geographic locations.

Another possible factor which may limit the transferability of this study are the unprecedented historic circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which coincided with wide-spread political and social injustice protests and riots in American cities. Lengthy social-distancing restrictions and sociopolitical volatility may have skewed results in unpredictable ways. It is plausible that global and domestic circumstances influenced the willingness of subjects to participate in virtual interviews about interpersonal conflicts or the types of SIRCs recalled and described during the interviews. Those circumstances may have created a priming effect on emotional valence and arousal when past conflicts were narrated. Unanticipated factors may have skewed the types of conflict narratives participants chose to recall during their interviews. Constant comparison data analysis occured throughout the study and guided adjustments to targeted gender sampling and modified interview questions (Charmaz, 2017).

Delimitations

People develop their own worldviews and schemas about interpersonal relationships, which are influenced by numerous factors. Each household has a unique family culture, geographic regions in the United States have distinct social norms, each generation is shaped by social and historic events, and gender norms are often constructed by social learning in religious, political, and occupational settings. Even when primary demographic categories are the same, each household in a neighborhood has their own specialized customs, traditions, assumptions, beliefs, and rules for relationships. Social expectations are further nuanced and precise according to the role one plays within a given dyad or social system (e.g., student and teacher, husband and

wife, parent and child, employee and manager, or peers within a community). The purpose of this doctoral project was to identify prominent patterns and thematic categories of perceptions about SIRCs. Each person is uniquely complex in their schemas and reactions to conflicts, and those variances were accounted for as emergent patterns were identified and research data were organized into a useful, transferable model and theory of interpersonal conflict.

In order to make results as meaningful as possible, this study focused on thematic patterns in conflict beliefs within a demographically homogenous population. Demographic factors which can have a significant influence on relational norms include age, religion, ethnicity, and education. In order to develop a theory which can be generally applied to the greatest degree possible, the most populous generational group was selected for this study, and the mean demographics of that group provided the sampling parameters. In this way, the study was structured to identify ingroup themes and patterns associated with the typical beliefs of American Millennials, while limiting results reflective of known cultural differences. There are many additional demographic categories within this population that can influence relational expectations and social norms, such as gender, geographic region, occupation, or marital status. By recording participant data in these subcategories, post hoc analysis identified meaningful distinctions and integrated them into the discussions on research outcomes.

Key Terms and Definitions

Autobiographical narratives: Individuals experience and remember single events within a broader framework of their life story. Episodic memories are constructed to foster coherent integration into a self-narrative about life and identity (Rubin et al., 2019).

Cognitive biases: Self-favoring patterns of perception and prediction that influence interpretations, assessments, and comparisons, based on inaccurate, intuitive correlations,

generalized expectations, and preexisting beliefs. Cognitive biases guide perceptions about self and others in a self-enhancing, coherent way that aligns with and bolsters internal motivations, goals, beliefs, and priorities (Jussim et al., 2018; Lieder et al., 2018; Toma et al., 2016). Examples of cognitive biases that impact relationships are provided in Appendix C.

Cognitive distortions: Irrational or distorted thought patterns, related to underlying, dysfunctional schemas. Cognitive reappraisal and cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques strategically target and modify these negative thought patterns (Brazão et al., 2017; Kaplan et al., 2017). Relationship-relevant examples of cognitive distortions are provided in Appendix D.

Confabulation: The tendency in nonclinical populations to fabricate self-believed, post hoc rationalizations for preferences, behaviors, and decisions (Bar-Anan et al., 2010).

Dual-processing theory: People engage in experiences, challenges, interactions, and circumstances using two types of cognitive processes: System 1 (automatic, intuitive, rapid) and System 2 (deliberative, complex, slow). Dual-processing theory assumes that focused, self-controlled, attentive thinking is a limited resource. The tension between these two processes is one of accuracy versus speed, associated with effortful, reflective reasoning versus automaticity (Białek & De Neys, 2017; Greene, 2014; Kahneman, 2011; Shenhav et al., 2017).

Fundamental attribution error: A type of cognitive bias that judges the character and competence of others based on their actions and assumes that negative behaviors of others demonstrate fixed dispositions. Conversely, negative personal behaviors are justified by external circumstances, and personal moral character is self-affirmed based on positive motives and intentions (Devers & Runyan, 2018; Scopelliti et al., 2018).

Heuristic: A principle or rule of thumb that facilitates rapid decision-making. Heuristics draw upon previous experiences, schemas, and perceived correlations or associations to make

intuitive judgments. When inaccurate or incorrect, heuristic rules of reasoning produce cognitive biases (Białek & De Neys, 2017; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Examples of heuristics related to interpersonal dynamics are provided in Appendix B.

Interpersonal conflict: The perceived incompatibility of beliefs, preferences, or goals resulting in at least one party experiencing a shift in affect, perspective, or interpersonal dynamics.

Millennials: The largest generation in the American population, defined as those born between 1981–1997, with mean demographics including White (56%), Christian (49%), and post-secondary education (67%; Bialik & Fry, 2019; Frey, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019).

Perception: The personalized way an individual receives and labels sensory data, interprets the affect and motivations of others, makes meaning of experiences, and identifies potential threats or important objects in the environment, based on associated experiences, schemas, expectations, and emotions (Adams, 2016; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Khatib et al., 2018; Nobre & Stokes, 2019).

Personalized cognitive filters (PCFs): neurocognitive mechanisms of perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and autobiographically organizing information, which are influenced by self-motivated cognitive mechanisms of schemas, heuristics, biases, distortions, and moral judgments (Haidt, 2012; Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Rubin et al., 2019; Spaulding, 2018).

Schemas: The internal collection of beliefs, expectations, and rules about self, others, and relationships. Schemas contribute to autobiographical narratives, and both describe and determine an individual's experience of life and the world, which powerfully influences perceptions of events and interactions (Vanderveren et al., 2017; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Examples of schemas that impact interpersonal relationships are provided in Appendix A.

Significant interpersonal relational conflict (SIRC): An adverse interpersonal dynamic within a highly valued relationship following an event or interaction that is strongly perceived to threaten or harm a matter of great value, attributed to undesirable motives or morals. The offense is perceived as harmful and intractable by one or both parties, triggers negative emotional arousal, and disrupts further interactions. SIRCs reflect interpersonal perceptions that can residually degrade affective states, mental focus, self-worth, subjective well-being, family stability, job performance, and psychophysiological health (Ilies et al., 2020; Scharp & Curran, 2018).

Organization of the Study

The first chapter of this study introduces SIRCs as a type of severe and disruptive interpersonal conflict associated with harmful consequences. The background of this problem is the matter of prevalent and damaging conflicts being treated and tested by clinicians and researchers who lack a comprehensive theoretical foundation through which to explain and generalize their findings. The purposes and research questions of this study are presented as a response to problematic gaps in current conflict theory. The theoretical framework, research population, potential stakeholders, limitations, and benefits of this study are also addressed.

Chapter 2 provides extensive evidence about the negative impact of SIRCs on individuals, relationships, and organizations. Prominent theoretical models of interpersonal conflict and conflict analysis are critically evaluated according to their strengths, limitations, and application contexts. Conflict literature is consolidated and organized into a continuum model oriented around thematic dimensions of perception. Neurocognitive and cognitive evidence about subjective mechanisms of perception and memory demonstrates the strong relationship

between perceptions and resultant interpersonal conflicts. The dual-processing theoretical framework of this study is explained and applied to the current research on SIRCs.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods used in this study, including justification of the qualitative, CGT methodological approach, the specific strategies for participant recruitment, sample size, interview questions, transcription procedures, data analysis, coding, thematic categorizing, and constant comparison.

Chapter 4 presents results of the research, generated by CGT analysis of thematic patterns of words and phrases found within conflict narratives. Dimensions of perception and PCFs demonstrated in this study are discussed in relation to each research question, and the preliminary conflict continuum model is evaluated based on the research data. The relevance and meaning of these results are summarized in relation to the overall aims of this study.

The final chapter contains a general discussion on the implications and potential applications of this doctoral project, in conjunction with the literature addressed in Chapter 2. The observable and theoretical relationship between PCF–generated perceptions and interpersonal conflicts is summarized, and the revised CCM is used to guide recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict is a broad topic that contains a range of definitions and implications influenced by theories and contexts from several fields of study. This literature review is a synthesis of research publications addressing distinguishing characteristics of interpersonal conflicts and significant interpersonal relational conflicts (SIRCs), and addressing the endogenous processes of interpersonal perception, termed personalized cognitive filters (PCFs). In this chapter, critical analysis of extant theories and studies about conflict highlights the limitations of prominent categorical labels and demonstrates widespread ambiguity about the essence of interpersonal conflict. In order to explore and bring clarity to the issues of essence and etiology, conflict literature is organized into a continuum model, composed of five dynamic dimensions of perception. The conflict continuum provides a perception–based framework through which the etiology and essence of SIRCs can be better understood. Following discussions on the literature that establish perceptions as causal elements of interpersonal conflicts, the etiological substrate of perceptions is ascertained from studies addressing the internal mechanisms of PCFs.

The sections of this literature review comprise in-depth analysis, critique, and elucidation of interpersonal conflicts and PCFs in the context of their relevance to one another. The literature on PCFs is bifurcated into neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms, the former of which facilitate attention, perception, emotion, and memory, while the latter manage schemas, heuristics, biases, distortions, and moral judgments. PCFs are conceptualized as processes that influence interpersonal perceptions without direct awareness, intention, or discernment. Dual-processing theory provided a theoretical explanation for the phenomena of PCFs, and so the final section of this chapter incorporates dual-processing theory into the overall discussion on the

progressions from PCFs to perceptions to SIRCs. Over the course of this literature review, I evaluate existing conflict theory, establish the determinative role of perception in SIRCs, present evidence supporting the PCF–basis of perception, and discuss the dual-processing theory of cognitive efficiency. The multidimensional conflict continuum model (CCM) introduced within this chapter provided an analytic framework for the conflict research conducted later in this study.

Interpersonal Conflict

The Etiology of Conflict

The topic of conflict is present in a wide variety of contexts. Military battles, international disputes, cultural clashes, contradictory religious systems, competing political agendas, and symposiums on race and human rights are all examples of extrapersonal conflicts. Conflicts can also occur within individuals whenever someone encounters an opposing force that hinders their own personal goals, preferences, or expectations. Conflicting goals or beliefs between two parties do not necessarily trigger tension, damaged relationships, or violence, but rapid escalations from superficial conflicts to internalized relational problems are not uncommon. Without a clear understanding of the etiology of conflict and methods of effective conflict resolution, significant relational problems can seem inevitable. The following section on the etiology of conflict challenges this assumption of inevitability by presenting research on why some opposing positions result in conflict while others do not. SIRCs are a distinct type of interpersonal conflict, and this chapter establishes the contexts and criteria of SIRCs by describing harmful outcomes of conflict and the behaviors and beliefs by which conflicts are generated, escalated, and prolonged.

The literature on conflict etiology can vary significantly, depending on the type of conflict being addressed and the parties involved. Khatib et al. (2018) conducted research to explain why existing literature lacks a comprehensive concept of the essence, core issues, and causes of conflict. They found that conflict was perceived differently by individuals based on subjective attitudes and fluctuating, multifaceted constructs. Although researchers in fields of organizational psychology, political science, and business management utilize similar classifications for conflict analysis, namely task, relationship, or cultural (Brett, 2018; Corey et al., 2014; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Mauersberger et al., 2018; Su et al., 2015; You et al., 2019), there is a notable gap between those scholarly descriptions and the way conflicts are experienced, perceived, explained, and quantified by individuals (Alkozei et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Choi & Murdock, 2017; Raimundo, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019).

There are myriad factors that uniquely shape each party's perceptions and memories of a conflict event, but without a better understanding of how and why these perceptions are formed and modified, efforts toward lasting resolution have been incomplete (Khatib et al., 2018). In this section, the broad topic of conflict is broken into various components, each of which have been studied from different perspectives by researchers during recent decades. The complexity of this topic has produced literature which lacks consensus on how to identify and define conflict or to pinpoint what causes harmful conflicts to occur. Throughout this section, the extant literature on conflict is critically evaluated and reorganized to emphasize patterns and salient concepts. As a synthesis of conclusions formed during this section, a novel, theoretical model is introduced to promote insight and deepen understanding about the essence and etiology of conflict.

Conflict Defined

A subtle but powerful theme throughout the academic literature on conflict is the role of perception. Though present in nearly every attempted definition of conflict, perception has not been instituted as the central determining factor of conflict. Researchers consistently mention perception in their analysis of conflict, but this subject has not been the explicit focus of conflict literature (Benitez et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Grover & Hasel, 2018; Gunkel et al., 2016; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Raimundo, 2020; Rockett et al., 2017; Semerci, 2019). Khatib et. al (2018) conducted one of the few studies that overtly acknowledged and examined the influence of perceptions, subjective attitudes, and opinions on interpersonal conflict. Literature is primarily focused on either topical analysis of disagreements or strategies to produce resolution, but this approach has failed to establish a comprehensive and explicit definition of conflict.

Conflict terminology is typically applied without distinction to the full range of interpersonal dynamics. Conflict experiments sometimes concentrate on either productive or harmful interactions, or they may encompass all offenses on a range between superficial disagreements and destructive, relational schisms. Research on conflict has often been guided by sociological interests about differences between cultural and societal norms, or about differing ways that groups perceive and resolve disagreements (Bar-Tal, 2019; Corey et al., 2014; DiFonzo et al., 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019). The potential impact of large-scale conflict on peace and profitability has resulted in a preponderance of conflict research staged within organizational contexts, like the studies by Benitez et al. (2018), Davis et al. (2018), Rockett et al. (2017), and You et al. (2019). Clinical psychology research addressing relational tension within or between individuals rarely utilizes conflict terminology, such as task or process labels, goal dissonance, or

resource competition. Instead, psychologists frequently explore conflict–adjacent topics such as forgiveness (Grover et al., 2019; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Schumann, 2018), interpersonal stressors linked with depression and health problems (Roberson et al., 2018), or stability and well-being within marriage and family systems (Alkozei et al., 2018; Ripley et al., 2018).

Conflict generally comprises a spectrum of circumstances that span from fleeting, inconsequential discords to hostile, destructive, internalized feuds. Academic publications have defined conflict at various points along this spectrum, depending on each study's context and population of interest. Corey et al. (2014) defined conflict as "a perceived incompatibility of interests" (p. 64), which takes the form of harsh words, differing opinions, or efforts to reduce dissonance between goals. Dunaetz and Greenham (2018) observed similar themes in their conflict research, depicting conflict as perceived opposition or differences in matters of beliefs, resources, values, interests, or behaviors. Gunkel et al. (2016) described conflicts as highly emotional interactions between individuals, "often perceived as personal attacks" (p. 570) against one's interests. Frawley and Harrison (2016) framed conflicts as trust violations that occur when one or both parties perceive that a cultural value or norm was not followed. Wachsmuth et al. (2017) suggested that conflict is based on perceived disagreements manifested through "negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions" (p. 89).

Other researchers approach the topic with a conflict resolution orientation, and these studies often identify conflict through the presence of interpersonal stress, relational harm, and feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and hostility (Overall & McNulty, 2017; Syme & Hagen, 2019; Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis & Schumann, 2018; Wu et al., 2019). These symptoms occur when an individual negatively construes, perceives, and interprets the situation and the other party's motivations (Griffin et al., 2016; Ho et al., 2020). Personal standards of morality have a strong

influence on perceptions about the severity of an offense (Bassett et al., 2018). When family members disagree, individuals distinguish between discussions and feuds based on their perceptions of prevailing relational intimacy and mutual emotional support (Scharp & Curran, 2018). Witvliet's extensive research on this topic (Witvliet, 2020; Witvliet & Root Luna, 2018; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020; Witvliet, Wade, et al., 2020) has described conflict as a perceived violation of relational expectations for interpersonal behavior that activates painful cognitions, negative emotions, and psychophysiological stress.

Cognitive neuroscientists have produced a growing body of literature that examines the nature, processes, and biases of perception (Baldassano et al., 2017; Farmer & Maister, 2017; Frankland & Greene, 2020; Hackel et al., 2020; Javanbakht, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Nam, 2020). Their research may provide the missing piece to the still-unsolved puzzle about the essence of conflict. Human perception is strongly influenced by personalized experiences, values, schemas, expectations, and biases, which function as PCFs. Consequently, conflicts are not simply the direct outcome of opposing goals. Individuals perceive a conflict to occur depending on the issue being opposed and their relationship with the other party. Because perception plays such an important role in the identification of conflict, individuals with distorted, inaccurate, and negatively skewed perceptions can interpret neutral interactions as conflicts. This is particularly relevant in the field of clinical psychology, where interpersonal conflict is associated with numerous disorders, including borderline personality disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, substance usage disorders, and several forms of disordered impulse control (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Given the conceptual inconsistencies throughout conflict literature, an index of precise conflict terminology would promote research conclusions that better account for relevant

contextual and individual factors. A functional definition of interpersonal conflict must incorporate the role of subjective, individual perception as well as characteristics of active conflicts. Conflict is not adequately represented by a single categorical label, such as task, relationship, or culture. Descriptions must incorporate causality as well as both context and consequence. Therefore, in this doctoral project, the summary definition of *interpersonal conflict* is the perceived incompatibility of beliefs, preferences, or goals resulting in at least one party experiencing a shift in affect, perspective, or interpersonal dynamics.

Conflict Catalysts

Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and external variables all contribute to the circumstances that result in conflict (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Researchers have consistently acknowledged the subjective, personalized aspects of perceived offenses, transgressions, and violations (Alkozei et al., 2018; Khatib et al., 2018; Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, et al., 2020; Tappin et al., 2020; Weiss, 2018; You et al., 2019). These subjective variables have hindered the formulation of a concise, generalizable explanation for why conflicts occur. Individuals determine for themselves which types of incompatibilities will result in conflict and which do not have the power to trigger negative affect and diminish relational quality. However, there are some types of interactions that seem to possess greater galvanizing potential for conflict than others.

Numerous studies have been conducted to test the reliability and potency of specific catalysts across populations (Baker et al., 2020; Bar-Tal, 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2020; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Sutton et al., 2017). Griffin et al. (2016) recorded which types of offenses their participants identified as causes of interpersonal conflicts. The most prominent catalysts were verbal aggression (27%), dishonesty (20%), sexual conflict (19%), and relational exclusion (13%). The relational role also has significant influence over the potency of

a conflict catalyst. In Griffin et al.'s study, the other parties in participants' conflicts were most often friends (30%), romantic partners (24%), parents (12%), or other family members (14%). Although much of the research on conflict has emphasized organizational contexts and coworker dynamics, these were not the relational conflicts most often remembered and referenced by participants during studies that elicited personal conflict narratives (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; da Silva et al., 2017; Robertson & Swickert, 2018; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Stulz et al., 2018).

Established Norms. Adams (2016) identified specific types of expectations individuals and groups have of one another, the violation of which results in perceived transgressions. Societal laws, rules, and social norms of behavior in a community provide a basis for legitimate expectations about appropriate behaviors. Moral and social conventions are clearly understood by children from an early age, and parents uniquely model, instruct, and enforce these interpersonal rules according to their own parenting style and cultural norms (Hawkins et al., 2019; O'Doherty et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2017). Once wrongdoing is judged to have occurred, the offended person will often form subjective, moral evaluations about the other party's motivations and about the importance of the rules that were violated (Adams, 2016). Stakeholders tend to experience negative effects from conflicts whenever a circumstance is deemed to indicate objectionable intentions related to a violation of sufficient seriousness.

Goal Dissonance. Another category of potential conflict catalysts entails personal and professional goals. Semerci (2019) drew upon theories of social and economic exchange to explain interpersonal conflict. When interdependent parties perceive one another symbolically, as a barrier, competition, opposition, or threat to highly valued goals, needs, wants, and objectives, the relational dynamic can become adversarial. In such cases, interactions may be

reduced to a reciprocal cycle of negative behaviors, interpretations, and reactions (Brett, 2018; Rinker & Lawler, 2018; You et al., 2019). Kim et al.'s (2015) study addressed this threatening dynamic through the lens of trust and mutual concern for well-being. When romantic partners believed one another to have purely self-serving motivations, trust was decreased, and conflicts were more severe and destructive. However, when partners pursued goals with positive joint outcomes and believed one another to have relationship–centered priorities and concern for the other's well-being, trust and forgiveness increased and incompatibilities were resolved more constructively. As this study demonstrated, goal dissonance can be mitigated by perceptions of positive, mutual intent.

Sometimes opposition, dissonance, or competition between individuals is more a matter of perception than of objective reality. As Dunaetz and Greenham's research (2018) clarified, interpersonal differences, prevention of goal attainment, and opposing concerns can be conflict catalysts created by fear, misperceptions, and incomplete information. Shapiro et al. (2019) provided a useful framework for this phenomenon, using the terminology of threats and counterthreats. Threats are determined by the perceptions, desires, strengths, and vulnerabilities of each party. Conflict does not necessarily stem from rational evaluations, but from affect–driven oversimplifications of what opposing parties represent in the pursuit of personal goals (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; O'Doherty et al., 2017; Rinker & Lawler, 2018; Tappin et al., 2020). Though goal dissonance is an undeniable component of conflicts, conflict intensity is not determined by goals but by emotional and biased reactions (Corey et al., 2014). In cases of intense conflict, external differences in goals or preferences become relationally damaging when the parties identify one another as symbols of opposition (Shapiro et al., 2019).

Topical Triggers. Some subjects are notorious for causing arguments and disagreements, which are often synonymous with relational stress. Triggering topics are those in which parties' opinions, goals, and preferences have a mutual impact and are influenced by early childhood schemas about behaviors, values, and routines in daily life (Bar-Tal, 2019; Brännmark, 2017; Clark et al., 2020; Crenshaw et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2019; Parsons et al., 2020). Relationships with greater intimacy, vulnerability, and interdependence are far more susceptible to opportunities for conflict about such topics. Single-dimension relationships comprise fewer matters that impel agreement, due to the diminished impact that individual choices have on the other party (Kim et al., 2015). For example, the triggering topics within a coach–athlete relationship primarily involve expectations and preferences for health-related lifestyle choices, the coach's communication style, a reasonable workload, and the benchmarks for success (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

As intimacy and interdependence in a relationship increase, so too does the potential potency of topical disagreements (Botsford et al., 2019; Choi & Murdock, 2017; Crenshaw et al., 2020; Curran & Allen, 2017; Grover et al., 2019; Handley et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2019; Kuster et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Roberson et al., 2018; Scharp & Curran, 2018; Scher et al., 2017). Some prominent topics where expectations are often unmet or unequal include shared finances, parenting practices, domestic responsibilities, gender roles, jealousy provocation, relationship equity and power, sexual intimacy, quality time, and perceived bad habits (Overall & McNulty, 2017). These topics all contribute to the quality of life, interpersonal dynamics, and behavioral norms of family units, making them powerful conflict catalysts when interdependent parties have incompatible convictions. Karaszewska et al. (2019)

noted that opinion differences and external stressors are mitigated by individual beliefs about conflict frequency, available solutions, potential consequences, and intensity level.

Role–based Expectations. Grover and Hasel (2018) highlighted another aspect of expectations that determine whether or not an action will be perceived as offensive. Their research on role–based expectations verified the importance of an offender's identity in the eyes of the offended party. Stereotypes influence expectations of and motivations attributed to others, based upon norms associated with their gender, age, religious affiliation, or leadership position (Grover et al., 2019; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Rinker & Lawler, 2018). For example, certain behaviors and communication styles are consistently viewed as either offensive or acceptable based solely on the gender of the actor (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020; Frawley & Harrison, 2016).

When dissonance occurs between a leader's behavior and followers' schema–based expectations about leaders (e.g., high ethical standards, organizational priorities, emotional regulation), damaging attitudinal backlash and professional consequences may follow (Grover & Hasel, 2018). It is not necessarily the unethical behaviors or aggressive outbursts from leaders that create offense, but rather the followers' belief that these actions are antithetical to the concept of leadership. A population will more comfortably accept harsh or immoral behaviors if these actions fit their schemas and expectations for that role or individual. For example, corrupt or immoral behaviors by a politician may be accepted by members of the public with preexisting beliefs that politicians and political systems are generally corrupt (Egorov et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2019; O'Doherty et al., 2017; Reiheld, 2018; Spaulding, 2018; Westra, 2020).

Communication Behaviors. Some of the more consistent catalysts for conflict have been identified as particular types of communication: shouts, insults, threats, rejection, disapproval,

belittlement, disparagement, criticism, sarcasm, and crude or undermining remarks (Keser et al., 2020; Rockett et al., 2017). The degree of conformity expected during conversations is largely determined by family-of-origin norms, and parties influenced by high–conformity family values tend to interpret differing opinions and stressful interactions as threatening and hurtful (Curran & Allen, 2017). Conversely, individuals from conversationally oriented families may have learned to navigate disagreements constructively without experiencing personalization, offense, or tension from dissonant communication. Keser et al.'s (2020) research revealed that individuals who drew upon their own emotional well-being and healthy interpretations of conflict events were better able to tolerate communication comprising differing thoughts and values, self-disclosure, confrontation, or emotional expressiveness.

Traits and Temperament. Individual dispositions influence how interpersonal relationships and interactions are perceived and interpreted. In the context of conflict, traits and temperaments describe patterned ways that individuals attribute or assess the motives and intentions of others, as well as their tendencies in emotional response. When Alkozei et al. (2018) studied trait associations, they found that participants with higher levels of gratitude perceived greater social support, reciprocal altruism, and relational closeness. Sutton et al. (2017) demonstrated that participants diagnosed with depression had increased perceptions of helplessness, lower positivity, withdrawal, hostility, anger, and aggression during couple interactions. Choi and Murdock (2017) also studied this link between conflict and depression, and they found that reactive expressions of anger increased conflict severity, hostility, and violence, while emotional regulation benefited conflict and depression outcomes. Relational stress responses of either emotional reactivity or emotional cutoff indicated trait intolerance of

differences, influenced by family-of-origin systems and early childhood schemas that classify disagreements as threats.

Temperament can be framed as the propensity to evaluate situations through positively or negatively valenced filters. Cognitive evaluations and affective reactions are benefited by an individuals' differentiation of self from external circumstances (Choi & Murdock, 2017) and schemas that promote an internal locus of control (Wu et al., 2017). Optimistic or pessimistic dispositions and default assumptions about the nature of life influence how individuals assign meaning to their experiences (Alkozei et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016). Preset assumptions subsequently focus greater attention toward events that align with underlying beliefs and expectations, which in turn reinforces and validates preexisting attitudes and strengthens memories of similar events. There is a powerful correlation between dispositions of positivity and gratitude and outcomes of long-term physical health, relationship quality, and awareness of positive life events (Alkozei et al., 2018; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020). Although traits and temperaments can prime some individuals to experience constant conflict, they can alternatively prompt perceptions of closeness and contentment.

Motive Attributions. Perceived motivations of the other party play a significant role in the etiology of conflicts. Keser et al.'s (2020) research on conflict and communication addressed the critical impact of inference, attribution, and interpretation on both intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being. Additionally, they identified negative attribution and rumination as a distinct cognitive style that is predictive of stress, depressive symptoms, conflict, and negative evaluations of self, others, the present, and the future. Though styles of communication can influence the course of an interaction, Gordon and Chen (2016) found that the crucial determinant of conflict was whether parties felt understood or misunderstood by one another.

However, Berzins et al. (2018) demonstrated that accurate understanding is not robust enough to prevent conflict if underlying motivations are mistrusted. Even when couples correctly understood that their partner's goal was to improve healthy lifestyle routines by promoting diet and exercise, they still experienced conflict if they construed the underlying motivation as selfish or judgmental, rather than a loving, altruistic concern for long-term health and well-being.

Raimundo's (2020) research provided another demonstration of the effects of subjective interpretations on interpersonal interaction. He found that individuals made incorrect assumptions about how their behaviors and intentions were perceived by others, and they incorrectly interpreted the intentions and behaviors of others. Conflicts arise when personal intentions fail to produce the desired response, or when the undesirable behaviors of others are credited to presumed negative intentions. Berzins et al.'s (2018) study recognized a possible coexistence of both accuracy and bias within perceptions and interpretations of others' behaviors, which is supported by studies on the accuracy of heuristic stereotypes (Jussim et al., 2018; O'Doherty et al., 2017; Westra, 2020). However, the abundant evidence of erroneous motive attributions (Bowes et al., 2020; Cowen & Montgomery, 2020; Devers & Runyan, 2018; Frawley & Harrison, 2016; Goldstone et al., 2017; Haj & Miller, 2018; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017; Rungduin et al., 2019; Shenhav et al., 2017; Spaulding, 2018, 2020; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017; You et al., 2019) has undeniable significance for conflict etiology. Dissonance between intentions and behaviors may originate from low self-awareness about the way personal emotions and behaviors are experienced by others, or from self-righteous inclinations to judge others based only on the unwelcome effects of their behaviors, without considering their circumstances (Raimundo, 2020).

Limitations of Conflict Catalysts

The conflict literature presented in this section consistently and clearly demonstrated that personalized interpretations, disposition–based reactions, experience–based perceptions, family– and culture–based norms, lifestyle– and value–driven topics, and goal–driven priorities all have a role in the complex phenomena of interpersonal conflict. Circumstances and situations can indirectly indicate the underlying elements of conflict, but there were no single variables that explained conflict generation broadly. Instead, the literature revealed several mitigating factors that deescalated or diminished the power of potential catalysts, such as trait gratitude, mutual trust, positive motive attributions, and feeling understood (Alkozei et al., 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Keser et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2015). Given the thematic presence of perception variables throughout conflict literature, an etiology derived from intrapersonal factors is indicated.

The catalyst categories in this section followed a progression from external, situational factors to increasingly subjective, internally oriented matters. Catalysts with an emphasis on outward behaviors and circumstances of goal dissonance or social norms have descriptive and preventative value but lack etiological explication. Therefore, studies on these subjects contributed little toward elucidating conflict origins. Conversely, the more each catalyst category reflected subjective interpretations, schemas, motive attributions, and trait expectations, the greater its explanatory value was for conflict etiology. Though extrapersonal conflict catalysts remain an area of interest for researchers, this approach does not provide an adequate framework for explaining why conflicts initially occur. The next section examines prominent theories of conflict analysis and classification in the search for meaningful contributions to conflict etiology.

Classifying Conflict

The qualitative research conducted as part of this doctoral project entailed analysis of conflict narratives based on five interactive dimensions of perception. This novel, multidimensional model was constructed only after extant theories, classification paradigms, and methods of analysis had been considered. In this section of the literature review, the prominent strategies of conflict analysis are described and critically evaluated. Following an initial discussion, the widely accepted classifications of conflict characteristics are restructured to foster more equitable, within-group comparisons. Categorical headings in this section reflect the conventions of researchers who organize and analyze conflicts according to paradigms based on content, consequences, culture, or circumstances. A final category is included in this section to acknowledge the constructive qualities of conflict, potential long-term benefits, and factors that promote positive outcomes.

Conflict Analysis

Most of the academic research on conflict examines variables within one of the following categories: the types of issues being threatened by another party, the types of dynamics affecting the relationship, the ways parties react to conflict, or the strategies used to resolve problems. Conflict analysis generally focuses on the types of incompatibilities that produce dissonance between parties, such as goals, preferences, or cultural values, along with universal tendencies that create collective divisions (Khatib et al., 2018). Interpersonal conflict is so widespread, common, and impactful, that it attracts the interest of researchers across many scholarly fields, in countless experimental contexts. As a result, conflict literature offers a wide variety of conceptual models and category labels but lacks a coherent theoretical foundation with equally weighted methods of analysis.

Interpersonal conflicts are most commonly described as either task– or relationship–oriented, and these distinctions are sometimes expanded to include nuanced variations of process, procedure, identity, or status (Ayoko, 2016; Brett, 2018; Clark et al., 2020; DiFonzo et al., 2020; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2017; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Semerci, 2019; You et al., 2019; Zhang & Wei, 2017). Mauersberger et al.'s (2018) study employed a model depicting a dichotomy between task conflicts, identified by a constructive focus on tasks, and emotional conflicts, identified by friction, hostility, and negative consequences. Su et al. (2015) studied conflicts based on a dichotomy between cognitive and affective types, while Grover et al. (2019) framed conflicts as violations of expectations about either integrity or competence. Khatib et al. (2018) described the existing literature as a collection of studies that emphasize either material or identity causes for conflict. Alipour et al.'s (2018) research designated affective content as both the defining characteristic and the method for measuring relationship conflicts. These examples demonstrate the ongoing lack of semantic differentiation between the causes, consequences, and characteristics of conflict.

Topic, task, and process conflicts all involve incompatible ideas about a specific issue, which constitute the *content* of a conflict. Relationship, identity, and status conflicts, on the other hand, are distinguished by affective and interpersonal outcomes which follow an initial conflict event. These negatively valenced emotional reactions and damaged relational dynamics are examples of the *consequences* of a conflict. Though conflicts are most frequently described with either task or relationship labels, these represent fundamentally different ways of assessing conflict, hence they are unequal measures for comparison. Accordingly, in the remainder of this section, conflict analysis literature is organized to promote fastidious distinction between

descriptive categories of content, consequence, and culture. Universal patterns of intergroup friction and the traits of constructive conflicts are addressed at the end of this section.

Content–Based Distinctions

When parties have opposing goals or preferences, interpersonal conflict does not always ensue. Depending on the matters in dispute, a wide range of outcomes can be expected. *Process* and *procedure* conflicts are common in organizational contexts, and they entail differing strategies for carrying out tasks, conducting projects, accomplishing the mission, and achieving outcomes (Brett, 2018). Process conflicts may also concern deficiencies in quality, competence, or training because these all factor into the experience, efficiency, and effectiveness of an endeavor (Ayoko, 2016). Literature does not indicate a direct link between process conflicts and negative interpersonal outcomes. Colleagues and family members seem generally able to possess differing ideas and opinions about the best materials, routines, and techniques for accomplishing tasks without perceiving a threat to personal well-being. Process conflicts do not trigger affective arousal unless the parties associate high personal value with opinions about policy or procedure, which is uncommon (Alipour et al., 2018). People are generally willing to compromise and find agreeable solutions about how a goal is reached, as long as the mutual goal is ultimately achieved.

While process conflicts emphasize how a goal is reached, task conflicts emphasize what the goal should be. *Task* conflicts are often observed during studies on workplace relationships, and they describe circumstances in which parties experience a conflict of interest (Brett, 2018; Karaszewska et al., 2019). Rather than working together toward a collective outcome, these parties may be perceived as working against one another in inter- or intra-organizational settings; social, informal, familial contexts; or large-scale, international situations (Dunaetz & Greenham,

2018; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; McCoy et al., 2018; Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, et al., 2020; Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019). Though researchers often do not make a distinction between task and process conflicts, it is helpful to contrast them based on differences in outcomes. Risks and emotions are generally less salient when parties disagree about how to accomplish a shared goal, but conditions intensify when parties have opposing goals and incompatible interests.

Though disparities may have greater ramifications during task versus process conflicts, both denote a temperate interaction in which conflicted parties address material and substantive issues by cognitive means (Alipour et al., 2018; Su et al., 2015). In other words, task and process conflicts have been described by researchers according to their content, but also connote an absence of personalization or emotional arousal in the parties' responses. Demonstrating this, Ayoko (2016) tested resolution strategies that were previously found effective for conflicts within stressed, personal relationships, such as methods promoting forgiveness or willingness to cooperate. Ayoko found these strategies unhelpful for parties with pragmatic conflicts focused on incompetence, task completion, and project outcomes. Su et al. (2015) described task conflicts as functional and beneficial because they arose from circumstances that impelled parties to identify common objectives and work together, which stimulated improved processes, innovative ideas, creativity, and quality decisions. Kozusznik et al. (2020) demonstrated that problem-solving orientations and rational coping styles allowed task and process conflicts to benefit group effectiveness and performance.

As an alternative to task and process distinctions, Khatib et al. (2018) proposed three novel categories of conflict content, influenced by their research on international relations. Conflicts about *nationality* referred to situations with opposing ideologies or identities, or threats

against self-determination and autonomy. Conflicts focused on *religious* content entailed opposing goals related to ideology or politics. Conflicts about *material* matters involved competitive efforts to control resources, wealth, commodities, and power. In theory, material and national conflicts can intertwine if economic decline threatens national stability (Kazanský & Andrassy, 2019). Likewise, religious and national conflicts can frequently overlap in matters of ideology (Khatib et al., 2018). As an example of application, the 2020 American election cycle occasioned multidimensional conflicts that intermingled national, religious, and material matters. Heltzel and Laurin (2020), Kozusznik et al. (2020), Moore-Berg, Hameiri, and Bruneau (2020), and You et al. (2019) all corroborated this lived experience with their observations of polarization and ingroup biases; American individuals and groups repeatedly and rapidly transformed content–based, cognitive disagreements into personalized, emotional, relational conflicts, through spirals of amplified reactions and misattributions about other parties.

The progressive escalation from task to so-called relationship conflict is well established in literature and in milieu, and is often perceived as an inevitable, unavoidable manifestation of cause and effect (Kozusznik et al. 2020; You et al., 2019; Zhang & Wei, 2017). However, researchers have found numerous examples of moderators between content–oriented conflicts and correlated, relational consequences. You et al. (2019) identified trust and communication as essential qualities that prevented content disagreements from escalating into relationally damaging interactions. Differences in ideas and opinions are plausibly beneficial for all parties, but trust and communication are needed to help the parties to remain focused on productive solutions.

Consequence–Based Distinctions

Conflicts can be described according to three comprehensive areas of impact: individual emotions, psychological well-being, and self-perception; the interpersonal relationship between parties, social status, and public perception; and group productivity, team dynamics, and organizational health. These broad regions of conflict consequences can be simplified into thematic categories of individual, interpersonal, and organizational effects. Conflict consequences can also be classified intrapersonally by three manifestations of impact: altered behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. Studies examining elements of conflict consequences detected each of these themes and categories consistently (Grover et al., 2019; Kozusznik et al. 2020; Su et al., 2015). However, when conflict consequences intensified and drew attention, they were often housed together under the blanket term of *relationship* conflict.

The relationship conflict label often indicates a negative change in interpersonal behavioral dynamics, observed through attitudes of reduced cooperation and tension (Parsons et al., 2020; Semerci, 2019; Witvliet, 2020). Interpersonal consequences of conflict comprise a spectrum of behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes, such as emotionally harsh language, demonstrations of negative attitudes, diminished relationship satisfaction, loss of trust, refusal to be vulnerable, unwillingness to seek reconciliation, loss of working partnerships, and total loss of the relationship (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Frawley & Harrison, 2016; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Webb et al., 2017; You et al., 2019). Grover et al. (2019) emphasized the ramifications of conflict on individual beliefs, namely, damaged trust and reduced assumptions of positive intent. Intrapersonal consequences of conflict include reduced information processing ability, inattention, internal distress, and low personal satisfaction (Adams, 2016; Alipour et al., 2018; Ayoko, 2016; Halilova et al., 2020; Siem & Barth, 2019; Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis &

Schumann, 2018; You et al., 2019). Conflicts in the workplace can distract team members, reduce team productivity and efficiency, harm overall team performance and outcomes, and threaten the entire organizational culture, performance, and stability (Alipour et al., 2018; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Su et al., 2015; You et al., 2019).

In literature, relationship conflict was often equated with negative emotional reactions (Semerci, 2019). Task, process, and relationship conflicts were all similarly triggered by interpersonal interactions, but unlike the self-titled content of task and process conflicts, relationship conflicts did not necessarily involve disagreements about relationships. Instead, conflict literature appointed relationship conflicts to represent escalated, aroused, personalized consequences, regardless of the initial content or context. In studies on conflicts in organizational settings, emotional outcomes of annoyance, animosity, anger, irritation, hostility, and distaste toward the other party were designated as definitive features of relationship conflicts (Alipour et al., 2018; Ayoko, 2016; Benitez et al., 2018; Kozusznik et al., 2020; You et al., 2019).

Although emotional reactions received preeminent attention during conflict studies, affective arousal inevitably lessens over time (Mata et al., 2019). By contrast, adverse shifts in beliefs, perceptions, and attributions often persist, and may sustain conflicts or permanently alter the nature of a relationship. You et al. (2019) explained that a shift in thinking occurs when parties interpret task–oriented debates as personal attacks. When individuals assess the motives and intentions of another party to be hostile, they may respond as though the other party was seeking to threaten them personally, rather than simply opposing their ideas. Kozusznik et al. (2020) affirmed that perceived threats to personal identity transmuted task conflicts into more serious, damaging interactions with greater interpersonal consequences.

Conflict literature indirectly revealed the thematic content of relationship conflicts by identifying perceptions linked with negative emotional reactions. Alipour et al. (2018) found that relationship conflicts emphasized fundamental personal differences and incompatible personal values, even when the parties were interacting in professional environments and working on material tasks. Relational consequences occurred when parties viewed one another as the problem, rather than as partners addressing a problem together (Karaszewska et al., 2019). Grover et al. (2019) stressed the power of severe trust violations to create unrecoverable damage to a relationship, generated when one party perceived that the other party intended them harm or lacked integrity and moral character. PCFs such as perceptions and attributions have a clear and consistent presence throughout literature on conflict content and consequences, but theories and methods of conflict analysis have not yet centralized or operationalized this insight. Despite evidence suggesting their significant etiological role in conflict, these shifts in perception and attribution have often been relegated to the blanket category of relationship conflicts (Adams, 2016; Ayoko, 2016; Berndsen et al., 2018; Keser et al., 2020; Mroz & Allen, 2020; You et al., 2019).

Emotional and relational consequences were strongly correlated with content themes of values and intentions, but conflicts focused on task and process content also produced varying degrees of emotional and relational consequences (Kozusznik et al., 2020; You et al., 2019). If relationship conflicts were given a revised label and description that highlighted their content, such as “personal values” conflicts or “hostile intentions” conflicts, fairer comparisons could be made with task and process conflicts. SIRCs are generally serious and consequential because they involve valued relationships and matters of great personal significance, but SIRCs are not the only type of conflicts associated with consequences. Conflict literature noted the occurrence

of consequences across a broad range of circumstances and contexts, including professional settings, parties with limited interdependence, and neutral topics.

Consequence–oriented conflict studies highlighted the individual, interpersonal, and organizational dimensions of well-being that were dynamically impacted as a result of altered behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. The interactive and overlapping conflict consequences often fall along a spectrum of severity and longevity and are ill-suited for a framework with precise categorical distinctions (Stackhouse et al., 2018; Witvliet, 2019). Essentially, the more serious a conflict is perceived to be, the greater the consequences may be, and the longer the conflict and effects may endure, across all relevant domains. Given these realities, a graded continuum model representing affected dimensions of well-being would better complement a consequence–oriented approach to conflict analysis.

Culture–Based Distinctions

Conflicts can be analyzed based on incompatibilities between the cultural value systems of the parties involved. This approach differs from content–based analysis because the conflict derives not from differing opinions about a momentary task, process, or goal, but from inculcated beliefs and core values about how people should interact, the measures of success, when to accept a loss, and the deeper implications of order, process, communication, reputation, and relationships (Corey et al., 2014). These priorities are determined by enduring cultural beliefs about the nature and importance of concepts such as honor, dignity, harmony, independence, authority, and profit. Culture influences the degree of consideration and attention given to interpersonal dynamics and how parties are expected to interact in various circumstances and contexts. Culture–based expectations reflect norms embedded so thoroughly into daily life that individuals may not be aware of their own imperatives until after an offense

has occurred. However, this initial lack of awareness does not hinder parties from morally judging one another based on subjective cultural assumptions.

Throughout the literature, various labels were used to categorize cultural distinctions. Brett (2018) provided clear descriptions of the dignity, honor, and face cultures, while Gunkel et al. (2016) explained the differences between individualism and collectivism cultures. Zhang and Wei (2017) analyzed Western and Eastern cultures based on polarized tendencies toward either conflict avoidance or harmony enhancement. In Jassawalla and Sashittal's (2017) study, cultural orientations to power and vulnerability determined how participants understood and demonstrated interpersonal respect. Some participants eagerly instigated conflict when they perceived disrespect, while others' sensitivity to power differentials precluded any notion of demanding respect from their superiors. This drastic cultural divide was found, not between groups from differing nations, but between groups from differing generations.

Cultural values have a functional effect wherein group members are conditioned to understand, expect, and prefer specific behaviors (Corey et al., 2014). These values produce distinct, implicit social rules that determine how individuals should respond to conflict, uncertainty, gender roles, and authority. These norms are inculcated so powerfully that the moral justification of any opposing worldview or social behavior may be inconceivable for many individuals. This becomes extremely relevant during SIRCs, because distinct cultural value systems are embedded into family groups, organizations, generations, and geographical regions. Even if parties offer gracious accommodations for obvious international cultural differences, they may be less understanding or tolerant of significant cultural differences that exist between parties of the same nationality, and even less so between members of a local community.

Universal Patterns

Conflicts can be analyzed by identifying the presence of universal patterns of group behaviors and mindsets. Specifically, the phenomena of intergroup polarization, conflicts of interest, and power values demonstrate ways of perceiving other parties that impact interpersonal and communal dynamics. These widespread occurrences can contain elements found within the other categorical models of conflict analysis, such as content (e.g., opposing opinions, competition for power), altered beliefs and attitudes (e.g., viewing the other party as the problem, negative emotions), and culture–based distinctions (e.g., the subjective value of power). However, this universal theme highlights phenomena that have been observed across cultures and circumstances, described as tendencies of human nature that transcend specific situations, and are often referenced within literature on cognitive biases, political science, diversity, and conflict mediation (Alipour et al., 2018; Shapiro et al., 2019). Conflicts influenced by these types of universal patterns are distinct from content disagreements or clashing cultural values, and large-scale analysis can offer insight about the driving forces behind communal friction and division.

The *us versus them* mentality has been observed extensively across contexts (Haidt, 2020; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Lee & Holyoak, 2020; McCoy et al., 2018; Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, et al., 2020; Rinker & Lawler, 2018), and is conceived as a type of cognitive bias and as a framework of identity based on threat perception (Shapiro et al., 2019). The concepts of tribalism and polarization signify attitudes of competition, where the goals of one party seem to directly threaten the goals of another, creating a zero–sum scenario (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Kearney, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018; Singh & Nayak, 2016). Shapiro et al. (2019) observed that when parties became polarized, reactive emotions drove conflicts forward and created

entrenchments that defied rational analysis. On an individual level, this universal tendency was observed through negative changes in parties' beliefs about one another's intentions, character, and power to threaten personal values and goals. However, this polarizing effect was also observed in group conflicts within an organization, or on national and international stages. This universal tendency is indicated whenever stereotypes are used to characterize people with ingroup and outgroup generalizations, like favorable versus unfavorable, moral versus immoral, educated versus ignorant, or oppressed versus privileged (Rinker & Lawler, 2018).

Karaszewska et al. (2019) studied universal patterns associated with *conflicts of interest*. When parties were simultaneously interdependent and irreconcilably divergent, they became blind to positive traits and solution possibilities, and they perceived the other party only as an opponent and obstacle to their objectives. These conflict-of-interest effects can transform people into pernicious caricatures and were associated with oversimplified cognitions and pessimistic withdrawal from problem solving. When parties in conflict become incapable of perceiving one another with innate personhood and cannot conceive the other's interests to be reasonable or sensible, they may be experiencing the blinding perception effects of a conflict of interest. The universality of these effects warrants incorporation into conflict analysis to avoid simplistic explanations of interpersonal impasses that place blame on the moral character of a problematic individual. Insights about these widespread norms can improve resolution strategies by promoting self-awareness, interpersonal compassion, perspective–taking, and disconnecting the person from the problem (Gutenbrunner & Wagner, 2016; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020).

The concept of *power* in relationships has been considered from many different directions. Individuals can possess varying levels of power derived from positional authority and

hierarchy, disposition and charisma, social standing and reputation, or control and influence over resources. Alipour et al.'s (2018) research examined the degrees to which individuals placed value on the benefits, control, status, and prestige that power provides. In their study, they made comparisons between individuals who did and did not desire power in group settings. They examined the effect that differing desires for power within a group had on overall group productivity and relational conflict. For groups comprising members with differing views about the importance of power, group productivity and relationship conflict were negatively correlated. Productivity was high and conflict low when some members took control and others willingly followed, but only when leaders created a climate of equity in communication, shared workload responsibilities, cooperation, and encouragement. Culture, temperament, and skill can all influence the way individuals value power, but the universal pattern is that power dynamics influence relationships and can be a central component of conflict.

Constructive Conflicts

Conflict sometimes prompts two parties to clarify misunderstandings, improve communication, and identify mutual goals, with great benefit to overall productivity and relational stability. This section addresses evidence of the positive conflict outcomes associated with certain types of attitudes and behaviors, which is contrasted with the negative elements and consequences of SIRCs in the next section. Much of the research about constructive conflict is oriented around organizational contexts (Benitez et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2018; Kazanský & Andrassy, 2019; Wong et al., 2019; Zhang & Wei, 2017), but there is also evidence of potential conflict benefits in marriage and family relationships (Curran & Allen, 2017; Scharp & Curran, 2018). Studies on the positive outcomes of conflicts measured increases in relationship satisfaction (Prager et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2017), increased diversity of viewpoints leading to

optimal solutions and decisions (Kozusznik et al., 2020; Mauersberger et al., 2018), enhanced community development and togetherness (Karaszewska et al., 2019), improved trust (Wong et al., 2019), increased individual and relational well-being (Halilova et al., 2020; Schumann, 2018), and greater appreciation for other perspectives (Lee et al., 2016).

In their study on constructive conflicts in family environments, Scharp and Curran (2018) observed increased intimacy between family members, greater understanding of others' goals and desires, and better overall family functioning. Smith et al. (2017) reported lasting benefits for children whose parents used conflicts as an opportunity to model empathy and effective apologies. Children exposed to these constructive conflict behaviors developed prosocial communication skills, which facilitated greater peer acceptance and positive conflict resolution. In working relationships, constructive conflicts benefited personal growth and performance, increased collaboration, self-awareness, empathy, improved self-regulation, development of life skills, and enhanced problem-solving and task clarity (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Additionally, Su et al. (2015) observed enhanced decision-making, job performance, and creativity among employees as an outcome of functional conflicts.

The literature contains abundant evidence for the potential benefits of conflict, and those studies also revealed consistent patterns in communication and behavior that influenced whether conflict outcomes were constructive or damaging. Wong et al. (2019) emphasized the need for a cooperative style of discussion, characterized by openness, thoughtfulness, appreciation of sincere opinions, commitment to moral and ethical resolutions, and concern for fair-mindedness. Cooperative discussions produced stronger relationship bonds, trust, and commitment, while competitive attitudes and demands for conformity yielded opposite results. In Gordon and Chen's (2016) study on conflict in close relationships, the feeling of being understood was the

significant determinant of conflict outcomes. Parties did not need to share the same point of view as long as they perceived that their partner understood their thoughts and feelings. Smith et al. (2017) identified apologies and forgiveness as important postconflict behaviors that reduced harmful emotions and reactions, increased positive perceptions, and effectively led to reconciliation.

In all these studies, there were no single conflict topics or catalysts that reliably promoted constructive conflicts. Conflict outcomes—either constructive or destructive—were determined by the perceptions, reactions, and interactions of both parties. As Kozusznik et al. (2020) elucidated, conflicts are generally negative, except when the conflicted parties respectfully concentrate on topical solutions, in which case conflicts can be productive and useful. In other words, conflicts are beneficial when they remain focused on solving problems without causing offense, but conflicts can be damaging when one or both parties take offense. Put another way, task and process conflicts are constructive as long as they don't escalate and threaten either party, at which point they are labeled relationship conflicts. Conflict outcomes are either harmful or beneficial, depending on how the parties feel and react (Scharp & Curran, 2018), which also determines the categorical label used in traditional conflict analysis.

Discussion on Conflict Etiology and Classification

This evaluation of research on constructive conflicts demonstrated an underlying circular reasoning embedded in prominent conflict literature. The categorical descriptions of task and relationship conflicts equated directly to the outcomes of constructive or harmful conflicts. The benefits of constructive conflicts were essentially the definition of task conflicts. Task conflicts were constructive because they avoided becoming harmful by promoting respect, collaboration, and mutual solutions. Relationship conflicts were harmful because they did not remain

constructive, due to attention shifted away from topical solutions toward interpersonal judgments, self-defense, and distrust. These distinctions simply represent different points along a progression from impersonal challenges to personalized threats. Rather than a conflict model based primarily on a mismatched dichotomy of task and relationship conflicts, a conflict continuum would more accurately demonstrate the escalating shifts from productive, constructive interactions toward unproductive, destructive interactions.

Thus far, this chapter examined literature addressing theories of conflict etiology, categorical analysis, and a wide range of possible conflict catalysts. Many researchers have sought to identify exogenous catalysts and interpersonal patterns that offer etiological explanations or can be used to improve the efficacy of resolution strategies. However, throughout the literature, external factors did not reliably predict each party's personalized responses to either take offense or find solutions to the problem. The subjective nature of conflict was acknowledged consistently in the studies, but researchers did not establish a means of operationalizing perception as the central and primary component for conflict analysis, diagnosis, and treatment. Instead, dichotomous distinctions were used inconsistently to classify and analyze conflict, and patterns in social behaviors and circumstances continue to be explored for explanations and solutions for this pervasive problem.

The conflict literature discussed throughout this chapter provides ample indication that interpersonal perceptions are the engines that move conflicts along an escalating continuum, and conflict outcomes correspond in parallel. By organizing and integrating literature on both conflict and perception, the necessary framework for a perception–oriented theory of interpersonal conflict begins to emerge. A continuum model clarifies the directive role of subjective perceptions during conflicts, and the nature and etiology of these perceptions are

examined and grounded in literature throughout the remainder of this chapter. The studies on constructive conflicts revealed numerous benefits generated by conflicts on the low end of a continuum, signified by parties solely focused on solutions who perceive and pursue interpersonal cooperation. The next section addresses the multifaceted consequences generated by conflicts on the high end of a conflict continuum, indicated by parties who perceive a significant violation or threat, or who summarily view the other party as the problem.

Significant Interpersonal Relational Conflicts

Conflicts on the high end of the continuum represent severe or significant conflicts. These conflicts are not defined solely by their consequences, nor by the topics being discussed, nor by self-professed motives of either party, but largely by the perceived intentions parties attribute to one another. Perceptions and attributions are the crux of SIRCs, which are associated with harmful outcomes for individual well-being, physical health, external behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and organizational stability and productivity. However, conflict is not solely determined by perceptions of hostile attributions. Adverse intentions perceived in a stranger, over trivial matters with no recognized importance, are unlikely to create lasting distress, a broken relationship, or intense emotional reactions. Conflict literature lacks detailed identification of the factors that determine whether or not individuals will experience an offense, engage in conflict, and suffer or benefit as a result. Available methods of conflict analysis offer descriptive content and cultural categories but lack a comprehensive etiology that exposes the essence of interpersonal conflicts.

In this section, the distinct, identifying characteristics of SIRCs are explicated and constructed into a comprehensive framework for etiological and diagnostic analysis. Harmful consequences associated with SIRCs are addressed according to internal, external, and

organizational outcomes. To complete this overall discussion on the essence, etiology, and effects of interpersonal conflicts, the CCM is presented and structured as a guide for the research and analysis conducted later in this doctoral study.

Definitive Characteristics

High Value Relationships

Interpersonal interactions can occur in limitless configurations and contexts, and literature reflected this variety with studies on conflict and relational dynamics between professional colleagues, romantic partners, family members, members of a local church, fitness clubs, shared–interest community groups, close friends, and social–media acquaintances (Clark et al., 2020; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Peterson et al., 2017; Scharp & Curran, 2018; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Disagreements and incompatibilities can occur in any relationship, but SIRCs imply that the relationship had a high value for at least one party. Valued relationships are entrusted with the power to bolster well-being, which exposes a risk for serious harm if the trust is violated (Grover et al., 2019; Petersen & Le, 2017). High value relationships comprise elements of interdependence and vulnerability that necessitate an expectation of positive intent (Berndsen et al., 2018; Kuster et al., 2017).

Conflicts tend not to be remembered as serious when the other party has no perceived relevance to an individual's personal or professional life. However, internal factors impel some individuals to assign relational value more broadly, or indiscriminately, if they have a high desire for approval, instilled obligation to please others, or strong fear of rejection (Peterson et al., 2017; Siem & Barth, 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Variations in the value of relationships can contribute to divergent experiences during and after interactions where opposing ideas were expressed. For example, a tense exchange between customers in line at a coffee shop could

produce significant internal effects of an interpersonal conflict for one party, while the other party might experience no residual concerns or memory of the event.

A close examination of the literature revealed that values assigned to various social groups may be altered and reordered during different stages of life. When older participants with a mean age of 69 recalled a serious, unresolved transgression, approximately 39% of their offenders were family members and 31% were romantic partners, while only 10% were colleagues and 8% were friends (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020). Conversely, young adults with a mean age of 20 primarily identified unresolved offenses with friends (56%), immediate family members (21%), and romantic partners (19%; da Silva et al., 2017). In Griffin et al.'s (2016) research with undergraduate students, 31% of the offenses were between friends, 24% with romantic partners, while 8% were with classmates and 12% with parents. Studies linking interpersonal conflict with suicide attempts consistently demonstrated the potency of conflict with romantic partners compared to other relationships. Sixty percent of Chinese women with a mean age of 33 attributed their suicide attempt to conflict with their spouse, while only 10% pointed to conflict with non-relatives (Li et al., 2012). Similarly, 46% of Swiss residents with a mean age of 37 attributed their suicide attempt to conflict with their partner, and only 5% with non-relatives (Stulz et al., 2018).

The value of relationships is directly related to an individual's desire for the other party's respect, cooperation, or support, and is indirectly indicated by the cognitive and emotional disturbances that occur when incompatibilities arise (Baker et al., 2020; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Semerci, 2019). When a severe incompatibility exists between parties with minimal perceived relational value, there is no power to threaten, harm, or trigger consequences, thus conflict does not escalate to the point of a SIRC. Relational value is created by emotional attachment to the

other party, value of the relationship itself, or by the other party's ability to threaten a matter of personal value. Accordingly, the first characteristic of SIRC is that it only occurs within relationships of high perceived value.

Threatened Matters of Value

Not every disagreement or incompatibility leads to a SIRC, even in highly valued relationships. The subject matter or interaction must be perceived as sufficiently offensive or harmful to then trigger negative emotional reactions such as anxiety, frustration, tension, resentment, mistrust, or fear (Benitez et al., 2018; Crenshaw et al., 2020). SIRCs are not defined by a particular conflict topic or emotional response, but by perceptions of a significant threat or harmful offense. Mauersberger et al. (2018) suggested that threats to fundamental human needs for social esteem induce emotions of hostility and distress, which give rise to strained and frictional interactions. Benitez et al. (2018) reasoned that individuals react this way when they perceive a threat to the most sensitive areas of their personal identity. The matters of value threatened by SIRCs are often intangible: they can include goals, opportunities, reputation, control, preference, autonomy, self-esteem, security, stability, confidence, acceptance, and pride (Kozusznik et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2017). When an interaction seems to harm these conceptual values, it is perceived as morally wrong and signals a potential threat to matters of utmost value, such as moral identity, self-worth, innate personhood, self-schemas (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Brännmark, 2017; Farmer & Maister, 2017; Leder, 2017; Zahavi, 2020).

In their study on interpersonal transgressions, Allemand and Flückiger (2020) found that the most common types of offenses related to emotional or verbal abuse, bullying, lack of appreciation, and disloyalty. Underlying these transgressions were violations of core values for love, fairness, and fidelity. Trust violations, as Grover et al. (2019) explained, represent a

betrayal of this mutuality through actions that intentionally caused harm or failed to promote well-being. In these cases, there is an external incident with some negative effect, but there is also damage to a deeper matter of value, like trust and security. These core values and the perceptions of threat or harm are not objective constructs, and parties in conflict rarely agree upon the nature of the initial violation or the deeper implications of that violation (Adams, 2016). Matters of value and the behaviors which threaten them are entirely subjective and personalized and are often valued to very different degrees by each party in the conflict (Crenshaw et al., 2020). Keser et al. (2020) addressed this power of individualized attributions toward self, others, the world, and the future, which determine perceptions of offense and reactions to conflict.

Social relationships have their own intrinsic value, and they also contribute to many aspects of personal well-being, physical health, stress, and mortality (Webb et al., 2017). The innate value of relationships can make them both the cause and cost of SIRCs. If a highly valued relationship seems threatened by one party's behavior, the ensuing cycle of negative emotional and behavioral reactions may be counterproductive to relational health. The harms caused by some SIRC reactions are paradoxically more damaging and significant than the initial act that signaled an offense (Kozusznik et al., 2020). The potential for disproportionate costs may clarify why individuals attempt to ignore, minimize, or overlook perceived offenses (Clark et al., 2020). Following conflicts, participants in Peterson et al.'s (2017) study attempted to reduce their internal discomfort and replenish connection and support through apparent social surrogates, such as Facebook, television, and comfort food. Peterson et al. explained those behaviors as driven by a fundamental need to belong, connect, and bond with others. Social rejection threatens interpersonal needs, triggering physiological reactions, neurological activity, and compensatory behaviors.

SIRCs signal that a matter of deeper personal significance, such as self-worth, respect, or inclusion, was directly or indirectly threatened by an external conflict event (Brett, 2018). Theories of identity and personality development have recognized core values that are common to all people. For example, family systems theory promotes the value of differentiation of self (Choi & Murdock, 2017), schema theory highlights universal needs for security, nurturance, and acceptance (Thimm & Holland, 2017), and self-determination theory emphasizes values of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Alkozei et al., 2018). Individuals also develop extremely personalized, subjective ways of understanding themselves, others, and the world, and these relational schemas regulate conflict personalization (Curran & Allen, 2017). Internalized ideas about identity, matters of value, meaning, worth, and relationships are deeply connected to and generated by PCFs (Egorov et al., 2019; Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Vanderveren et al., 2017, 2019; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017).

Though people generally desire moral identity, fairness, loyalty, and respect (Bassett et al., 2018; May et al., 2021), perceptions of what those concepts mean in an experiential context may vary significantly between individuals (Crenshaw et al., 2020). Myriad complex variables uniquely shape how matters of personal value are initially formed, the ways these values are symbolically represented in the material world, their degrees of instability and vulnerability to threats, and the interpersonal means by which they can be harmed. The abstract nature of core matters of value makes them exceedingly difficult to identify and measure with precision. Therefore, researchers often use indirect methods to approximate core values through the emotional and behavioral reactions correlated with a perceived threat (Clark et al., 2020; Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

Emotional and interpersonal consequences can reflect the severity of a conflict, but do not encompass the essential elements of the conflict itself, nor the underlying beliefs that determined the severity of the offense. However, consequences can provide indications about the fundamental values held by each party, and they can function as a signal when a threat or harm has been perceived. Disagreements and incompatibilities can occur over any topic or object, but only instigate SIRCs if the superficial argument or interaction threatens a deeper matter of personal significance. Affective and interpersonal reactions are external manifestations of the second underlying characteristic of SIRC; one or both parties perceive that the other party has harmed or threatened a matter of substantial value.

Unfavorable Motives and Morals

Innocent mistakes can produce painful consequences but are unlikely to contribute to SIRCs if there is no malicious intent behind the offensive act. Highly valued relationships involve vulnerability, trust, and mutual concern for well-being (Grover et al., 2019; Petersen & Le, 2017), thus, hostile or callous motives can disrupt interdependence between parties, harm the existing relationship, and threaten positive dynamics. Throughout the literature on conflict, the inferred or attributed intentions and integrity of the offender lay at the heart of the offense. When one party appears motivated to gain at the other's expense, indicating enmity or malevolence, or seems to pursue gain regardless of the other's expense, indicating indifference or selfishness, it destroys what Frawley and Harrison (2016) identified as the foundation of trust: integrity and benevolence.

SIRCs are characteristically difficult to resolve. This is partly due to a perception that the offensive event was a demonstration of one party's motives or moral character. As Wu et al. (2019) explained, conflicts can persist when the parties have an expectation of further threats,

suffering, or loss. Though initial assessment of another's motives may not be correct, the attribution of negative interpersonal motivations instinctively triggers a cycle of self-motivated reactions that escalate the conflict (Kong et al., 2020). An inverse spiral occurs when parties believe they share a desire for mutual well-being and happiness (Petersen & Le, 2017).

Attributions about threatening intentions or harmful character traits determine how the parties will respond to an initial conflict event and the quality of the relationship they will have in the future. Rungduin et al.'s (2019) research demonstrated this point through the relationship between interpersonal attributions, expressions of apology, and decisions to forgive. When conflicts are unfolding, parties gauge one another's motives and morals by their reactions to the offensive act. When one party violates the norms or expectations of a relationship, the use of apologies, excuses, or justifications reveals their awareness of the offense and explains their behavior as either a regrettable mistake, an uncontrollable event caused by an external source, or a circumstantial necessity (Mroz & Allen, 2020). Each of these three responses prompt different attributions about the offender's intentions, motives, and moral character, and give the offended party indications about the likelihood that the offense will be repeated (Frawley & Harrison, 2016; Grover et al., 2019). An offended party's response may entail granting forgiveness, minimizing the offense, compassionate understanding, or tense demonstrations of moral judgment, each of which will prompt offenders to make reciprocal character attributions, perceiving them as merciful, vindictive, gracious, or petty, which then further effects relational outcomes (da Silva et al., 2017; Raj et al., 2020; Witvliet, 2019).

When an offense occurs without any acknowledgement from the offender, a compounding effect can exacerbate the perceived offense (Mroz & Allen, 2020). In such cases, the offended party could choose to overlook and release the offense, reframe the experience

neutrally as a misunderstanding, or attribute the behavior to poor character and morals. Adams (2016), Grover and Hasel (2018), and Lee and Holyoak (2020) provided numerous examples of how moral judgments can be influenced by attribution errors and self-serving biases. Negative moral judgments about an unacknowledged offense could lead to an offender's silence being interpreted as evidence of self-absorption and callousness towards others, a demonstration of malicious character which knowingly and unapologetically caused harm, or a failure in social etiquette due to inferior family upbringing.

This third characteristic of SIRC is summarized as an attribution of unfavorable intentions or motives, or a negative judgment about the moral character of the other party. When an offensive act or conflict event is believed to be caused by internal, persistent traits of the other party, the presumption of benevolence and integrity is violated, which threatens the stability and health of valued relationships (Frawley & Harrison, 2016). However, if an offense is perceived as an unintended accident, unlikely to be repeated, and unrepresentative of the morals or intentions of the offender, forgiveness tends to be much more accessible (Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018; Rungduin et al., 2019). In cases of interpersonal conflict, negative attributions of unfavorable motives and morals are particularly powerful and escalate the conflict to a high point on the continuum.

Unpleasant Emotional Response

Perceptions of a serious offense are so closely associated with negative affective reactions that, although depicted previously as a consequence of conflict, emotions are also an interactive component of neurocognitive mechanisms of perception (Crum, 2019; Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Javanbakht, 2019; Kunzmann et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2018; Raimundo, 2020). Some conflict events so clearly violate expectations and core values that the perception of an

offense and the rapid emotional response are virtually simultaneous. Other conflicts may evolve gradually into a SIRC after the parties reflect on their interaction, interpret the actions or intentions as harmful, and then experience delayed affective arousal (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Stackhouse et al., 2018). Though the perception of a threat is conceptually distinct from an emotional response to such a threat, both are active elements of a SIRC. If an external incompatibility occurs within a valued relationship and seems to threaten a matter of value, but neither parties experience negatively valenced affect, then the conflict has not risen to the point of a SIRC on the continuum. Emotional reactions contribute energy to SIRCs and play a distinct role in the damaging intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational effects indicated by this degree of conflict (da Silva et al., 2017; Karremans et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019).

Certain attitudes, emotions, cognitions, physiological reactions, and lasting moods are consistently correlated with conflicts at the high end of the continuum. These aroused states of negative affect are relatively observable and identifiable, hence their use by researchers in lieu of a more precise definition of interpersonal conflicts. Baker et al. (2017) established betrayal, rejection, resentment, sadness, and anger as common unpleasant emotions associated with unresolved SIRCs. Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, and Tsang (2020) recorded physiological effects and negative feelings associated with unforgiveness, such as sadness, anger, and fear. Gordon and Chen (2016) emphasized the conflict–related sense of not feeling understood, which blends categories of affect and cognition. Brett (2018) highlighted similar blends of perception and emotion by linking perceived disrespect with thwarted needs for inclusion, undermined self-worth, feeling demeaned, and emotional reactivity. Curran and Allen (2017) labeled personalization, rumination, and stress reactions as psychological symptoms of distress during conflict, while others described conflict emotions of anger, depression, guilt, moral outrage,

violated autonomy, resentment, shame, troubled conscience, self-punishment, and desires for either retribution or forgiveness (Adams, 2016; Petersen & Le, 2017).

Researchers often present lists of affective conflict consequences without distinguishing between physiological states, ruminations, intentions, desires, and emotions. For example, Halilova et al. (2020) described conflict consequences with an assortment of internal and external effects: rumination, revenge, grudges, substance use, loss of relationships, and suicide attempts. Witvliet (2019) described conflict reactions as a general disruption of cognitive appraisal, dysregulated emotions, and physiological stress activation. In their study demonstrating emotional dysregulation and health risks associated with interpersonal stress, Allen et al. (2018) introduced *hostile conflicts* as a term for harmful interactions. Hostility in their study was indicated by aggressive behaviors, demeaning attitudes, undertones in speech, rudeness, and overpersonalization, all of which presume correct interpretations of others' actions and intent. This illustrates a general lack of clarity in conflict literature about the essence of emotions, due to indistinction between reactions, expressions, attitudes, cognitions, desires, intentions, notions, physiological sensations, moods, and feelings.

Though conflict literature does not clearly dissect emotional responses into distinct constructs, researchers who specialize in the study of affect offer methods for untangling emotion–related terminology. According to Barrett (2020), emotion is the embodied product of rapid, subconscious meaning–making, which launches biological processes to enable behavioral reactions implicated by that meaning. Emotions arise from the interplay between dynamic systems of the neural network, physiological arousal, cognitions, feelings, and facial patterns. Kunzmann et al. (2017) based their research on a similar model of emotional response systems, which led to a comprehensive conceptualization of emotion. Dimensions of facial expression,

physiological reactivity, and self-reported feelings overlapped with Barrett's model, while verbal expressions of affect provided a fourth measure of affective state. Notably, inner feelings are not necessarily expressed outwardly, and behavioral and verbal expressions of emotions do not necessarily coincide.

Throughout her work, Barrett (2020) elucidated the function—or dysfunction—of emotions to direct social interactions and behaviors. Similarities between prior emotional events and present somatosensory processes can trigger automatic associations that influence interpretations and habituated emotional reactions. Emotional arousal creates motivation and energy to respond rapidly in whatever way is needed. Kunzmann et al. (2017) demonstrated the power of perspective and personal relevance to determine the salience of an interaction, event, or memory and trigger proportional emotional arousal. They found that older adults experienced lower physiological arousal and less intense self-reported emotion, facial expressions, and verbalized affect while reliving personal memories characterized by anger. Age influenced which events were perceived as highly relevant, and adults experienced anger with less arousal and intensity as they aged.

Allemand and Flückiger (2020) measured various negative emotions related to unresolved conflicts, and feelings of avoidance, pain, and humiliation were the most prominent. Their study also identified characteristic conflict reactions of revenge, hostility, hatred, resentment, pervading grudges, and embitterment. Luginbuehl and Schoebi (2020) pointed out the protective function of anger when a violation of personal values has occurred. When individuals identified themselves as the cause of harm to a valued matter within a valued relationship, a stress response triggered self-conscious emotions of guilt, shame, and degradation (Griffin et al., 2016; Schumann, 2018; Syme & Hagen, 2019). Kunzmann et al. (2017)

demonstrated how negative feelings like anger, fury, and outrage can trigger intense arousal in the emotion response systems, which indicates an anticipated need for rapid physiological response during circumstances that evoke those particular emotions. Conversely, negative feelings like sadness, gloom, grief, and despondency are related to non-urgent circumstances of loss, and associated physiological states accommodate a different set of responses during those moments.

Though literature often presented lists of conflict consequences without distinguishing between physiological effects, ruminations, intentions, desires, and affect labels, there were consistent, strong connections between the perception of a substantial offense and negative emotional reactions (Bassett et al., 2018; Benitez et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2020; Mrkva et al., 2020; Rohr et al., 2018). High arousal, intensity, and external demonstrations of emotion are not always present in SIRCs. Tearfulness, self-blame, and withdrawal may be the primary responses for some individuals, while others may gravitate toward moral judgments and disappointment, or anger and cravings for revenge (Adams, 2016; Davis et al., 2018; Ripley et al., 2018). Parties experience various effects depending on the context of the SIRC, their personal disposition, associations with past experiences, and their emotional dynamic range (Barrett, 2020; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020). Regardless of the exact manner in which emotional response systems are uniquely activated in various circumstances, the fourth distinguishing characteristic of SIRC is the invariable involvement of an unpleasant emotional response.

Offense Durability

Interpersonal conflicts lower on the continuum might momentarily be perceived as offensive or threatening, but do not have time to escalate because the offense is quickly dismissed, forgotten, or modified as the moment passes and perceptions change. Fluctuating

concerns about the subject matter of the offense, the hostile intentions of the other party, and the potential threat posed by the other party can develop and then dissipate rapidly, but robust perceptions can persist for years or decades. Griffin et al. (2016) found that 60% of their participants recalled SIRCs that had occurred more than one year ago, 12% recalled SIRCs from the past year, 15% from the past six months, while only 12% described a SIRC from the past week or month. When older participants in Allemand and Flückiger's (2020) study recalled an unresolved SIRC, 32% had occurred at least a decade ago, 27% occurred more than five years ago, 7% more than a year ago, while 18% occurred within recent days or weeks. Another study (da Silva et al., 2017) observed that young adult participants reported SIRCs with an average elapsed time of 1.62 years. Participants who shared stories of painful conflicts in Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, and Griffin's (2020) research recalled events that had occurred 19 months ago, on average. Painful and unresolved SIRCs are readily recalled long after the original offense, while trivial conflicts are often forgotten within moments.

The durability of an offense separates momentary irritations and misunderstandings from genuine conflicts. In their research on offense durability, unforgivable offenses, and internal states of unforgiveness and empathy, Stackhouse et al. (2018) described co-occurring continuums of judgment and affect, one reflecting degrees of cognitive evaluation about forgivability and the other reflecting degrees of emotional ruminations of unforgiveness. All such ruminations and evaluations contributed to the overall robustness of the offense, which also indicated internal intentions about forgiveness and resolution. Rumination behaviors were consistently found to increase offense durability, feelings of anger, and perceived victimhood while also reducing empathy and forgiveness (da Silva et al., 2017; Siem & Barth, 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020).

Watanabe and Laurent (2020) framed this concept of conflict durability as the offended parties' perceptions about the forgivability of their offenders. They studied the specific characteristics and behaviors that encouraged an offended party to grant forgiveness, and offenders who demonstrated these traits and actions were perceived with much higher degrees of forgivability. Features that increased forgivability and decreased offense durability included repentant and remorseful attitudes, sincerity during apologies, and efforts toward atonement and reparation. Webb et al. (2017) described forgiveness as a motivational change that allows the offended party to repeal their initial rulings and sentencing of the offense and the offender, experience an increased desire to offer benevolence, and end the conflict. Gordon and Chen (2016) theorized that the feeling of being misunderstood is central to conflicts, and so the pursuit of understanding between parties plays a crucial role in resolution. Throughout conflict literature was indirect evidence that the durability of these perceptions guides the severity and longevity of conflict (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Bar-Tal, 2019; Karremans et al., 2020; Miller & Roloff, 2006; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Siem & Barth, 2019).

The greater the offense durability, the further a conflict moves toward the high end of the continuum, and the more difficult a conflict might be to resolve. Perceptions and assessments of interactions are dynamic and subject to constant revision as more information is revealed. Severe and lasting conflicts on the continuum inevitably have a definite, robust interpretation about the offending event, based on underlying perceptions about the value of the matter, the intention of the other party, and harmful effects of the offender's actions. Conflicts low on the continuum may have pliable perceptions, which are easily appeased by an apology or an internal determination that the offense was not intentional or harmful. Durability of perceptions about conflicts are an indication of an individuals' commitment to their own internal judgment about

the nature and significance of an event, as well as the steps they have determined are required to resolve the conflict.

Conflict resolution strategies like reflective listening, reframing, and apologies can induce changes to the original conflict perceptions (Alkozei et al., 2018; Devinatz, 2018). These approaches attack one-sided perceptions, weakening a party's certainty about what happened, who is to blame, the intentions of the other party, and the cost demanded for reconciliation. Bell and Georgakopoulos (2018) described this as a process of transforming conflict narratives to eliminate demonization and victimization, which then opens pathways to reconciliation. When an offense led one party to believe they were not valued by the other party, subsequent expressions of apology and remorse created a revised impression that the offender desired reconciliation, and therefore values the relationship (Watanabe & Laurent, 2020). Numerous studies have identified specific elements of apologies that most effectively transform initial conflict perceptions and promote possibilities of forgiveness (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Grover & Hasel, 2018; Grover et al., 2019; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Nigro et al., 2020; Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019; Schumann, 2018; Schumann & Orehek, 2019; Syme & Hagen, 2019; Weiss, 2018). Effective apologies most often contained expressions of care and value for the well-being of the offended party, acknowledgement of responsibility, desires to repair harm, and conveyed attitudes of honesty, humility, remorse, and sincerity, all of which challenged attributions of indifference, untrustworthiness, enmity, hostility, threat, and unfavorable intentions.

Compassionate reappraisal allows offended parties to retain their perception of an offense but positions the offender's actions as evidence of that person's need to change and grow in their own life journey, encouraging the offended party to view the offender with empathy and compassion (Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020). Kaleta and Mróz (2020)

identified a number of cognitive processes that challenged existing conflict beliefs, increased understanding of the other party's viewpoint, and promoted revised, reality–based perceptions. Bassett et al. (2018) referred to this transformation as empathy, which they found directly related to forgiveness. Because SIRC comprises strong and stable perceptions about the gravity of the offense and motives of the other party, resolution strategies that weakened the durability of these perceptions had the potential to deescalate the conflict to a lower point on the continuum.

Conflict resolution techniques have the power to weaken offense durability, but many common conflict reactions are found to strengthen negative perceptions about an offense. Withdrawing from the other party after an offense obstructed opportunities to understand the other party's point of view and pursue reconciliation (Prager et al., 2019). Withdrawal was often experienced by other parties as a means of punishment and resulted in rumination and delayed reconciliation. Parsons et al. (2020) described rumination as *recovery sabotage*, because it had a powerful effect of strengthening the negative perceptions about the conflict and the other party, increased sensitivity to further offenses, increased depressive symptoms, and solidified the conflict as a definitive element of that relationship. Withdrawal and rumination are common and natural reactions to a SIRC, and they represent behaviors that both reinforce and result from perceptions of gravity and durability.

SIRCs are created through co-occurring perceptions of threats to valued matters within valued relationships and perceptions of adverse motives and morals. The certainty and severity of these perceptions ignite proportional emotional response systems, and the resultant amalgamation of embodied cognitions generates attitudes about the possibility of reconciliation, along with provisional conditions for offense repair and conflict resolution. Intense and unwavering conclusions about the robust gravity of an offense, combined with perceptions that

conflict resolution and relational reconciliation will be difficult or impossible, indicate significant offense durability, which is the fifth and final definitive characteristic of SIRC.

Consequences of Significant Interpersonal Relational Conflicts

SIRCs are harmful stressors because they become ongoing, emotionally intense, defining characteristics of valued relationships that threaten matters of self-worth (Brett, 2018; Peterson et al., 2017), family stability (Scharp & Curran, 2018), job performance (Benitez et al., 2018), and psychological health (Curran & Allen, 2017). This is a problem of both clinical and societal significance because SIRC has a well-established negative relationship with nearly every aspect of life and well-being (Ilies et al., 2020; Keser et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2018). These types of ongoing relational problems not only harm individual mental health, but are known to damage the stability, longevity, productivity, and profitability of professional organizations (Ilies et al., 2020; Mroz & Allen, 2020). Previous research demonstrated significant direct and indirect relationships between SIRC and clinical problems with anger (Choi & Murdock, 2017), alcohol use (Rodriguez et al., 2019), self-esteem (Curran & Allen, 2017), depression (Roberson et al., 2018), subjective well-being (Alkozei et al., 2018), marital and family relationships (Sutton et al., 2017), family health (Scharp & Curran, 2018; Singh & Nayak, 2016), long-term medical issues (Allen et al., 2018), social attributions (Önal & Yalçın, 2017), employees and professional teams (Benitez et al., 2018), and organizational culture (Rockett et al., 2017).

The stressors of unresolved SIRCs negatively impact many facets of life (Mauersberger et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Semerci, 2019). Conversely, stable, healthy interpersonal relationships are associated with fulfillment, happiness, and meaning in life (Alkozei et al., 2018; Sul et al., 2016). In the following sections, literature on the impact of severe interpersonal

conflicts is addressed according to internal, individual effects, external effects on behaviors and interpersonal dynamics, and organizational outcomes.

Internal Effects

Implicit Stress. When matters of great value are perceived to be threatened by a person of personal significance who is perceived to be motivated by unfavorable intentions, the internal consequences can be widespread and long-lasting. Brodin and McLaughlin (2019) explained that fulfilling relationships are rooted in the mutual respect, recognition, and acceptance of core values, which are expressions of what each person deems important and distinct in their life. When SIRCs cause tension or damage to a valued relationship, there are effects on cognitive and emotional functioning, as well as physiological effects. The likelihood and severity of these negative effects increase when SIRCs remain unresolved or occur repeatedly. This cumulative effect is described within the stress generation model, which suggests that SIRCs produce behavioral and emotional effects that create a vicious cycle of further relational stress and additional, worsening consequences (Gabriels & Strelan, 2018; Keser et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2018).

Depression. One of the most prominent internal effects associated with SIRC is depression. Ripley et al. (2018) reported on the strong link between the health and stability of a marriage relationship and occurrences of postpartum depression in new mothers. Sutton et al. (2017) observed a clear link between negative couple interactions and increased depression in both spouses, and Roberson et al. (2018) posited that low marital quality leads to psychological distress and depression because important relational support is replaced by increased stress and hostility. Keser et al. (2020) approached this topic from an opposite direction of causality, describing depressive symptoms as a risk factor for interpersonal stress. Links were established

between adolescent depression and conflicts with family members or peers (Guan-Hao et al., 2019), and between unresolved conflicts and depression in older adults (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020). Kaleta and Mróz (2020) identified several mediating factors between SIRCs and depression, which included a sense of interpersonal rejection, unforgiveness, negative self-image, and loss of hope.

Subjective Well-being. Humans derive significant personal identity and self-worth from social interactions and relationships; hence, severe conflict can negatively impact an individual's self-worth, internal sense of value, and global assessment of quality of life (Alkozei et al., 2018; Brett, 2018). The cognitive, behavioral, and emotional patterns associated with SIRCs were demonstrated to diminish overall well-being, life satisfaction, physiological health, and many studies on this subject emphasized the powerful role of forgiveness (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Gabriels & Strelan, 2018; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018). Schemas developed during childhood influenced how interpersonal interactions were interpreted (Curran & Allen, 2017), and instilled beliefs about conditional forgiveness were found to significantly reduce well-being and health. When forgiveness was dependent on the offender's repentance, the offender was given control and power over the offended party's ability to forgive, which resulted in prolonged conflict and unforgiveness (Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018; Siem & Barth, 2019). Unforgiveness was strongly linked to health problems, decreased self-esteem, social withdrawal, psychological distress, and lower overall well-being (da Silva et al., 2017; Halilova et al., 2020; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020).

Health Problems. SIRCs and their ensuant states of unforgiveness and stress have immediate and long-term effects on physiological systems and health. Numerous studies measured physiological reactions to SIRCs and conflict ruminations, which produced increased

levels of proinflammatory cytokines, greater muscle activity, activated skin conductance, increased heart rate and blood pressure, slower heart rate recovery, and asymmetrical activity in the frontal brain (Allen et al., 2018; Bassett et al., 2018; da Silva et al., 2017; Prager et al., 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020). Studies on the cumulative effects of repeated or sustained SIRC stress revealed correlations with elevated concentrations of cortisol, suppressed immune functioning, inflammation, fatigue, greater use of prescription medications, premature aging, arthritis, osteoporosis, tumor formation, metabolic syndrome, higher blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, modified neural patterns, and impaired neurovisceral regulation systems (Alkozei et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2017; da Silva et al., 2017; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020; Witvliet, 2019). Many of these studies compared postconflict physiological states for conditions of forgiveness and unforgiveness or evaluated distinct health patterns in populations with ongoing exposure to discord, conflict, and hostility. Researchers directly and indirectly linked conflict with various health effects, with results indicating that mortality rates were impacted when individuals lacked social support or withheld forgiveness (Alkozei et al., 2018; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018).

Psychological Distress. Petersen and Le (2017) described psychological distress as both the marker of poor mental health and the inverse of subjective well-being. They found that conflicts can trigger perceptions of inequitable power and benefit, which was associated with decreased mental health, anger, depression, guilt, and diminished self-expression. Unresolved relational conflict has a well-established association with various manifestations of psychological distress (Alessi et al., 2019; Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Pierro et al., 2018; Syme & Hagen, 2019; Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis & Schumann, 2018). Models of conflict behaviors describe

avoidance as an effort to escape, deny, or withdraw from relational tension, and this common reaction hinders mutual understanding, increases anxiety, indicates low concern for self or others, and is generally ineffective for conflict resolution (Bultena et al., 2017; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Petersen & Le, 2017; Zhang & Wei, 2017).

Rumination. When conflicts generate realizations about personal shortcomings and undesirable internal traits, individuals may attempt to avoid focusing on themselves by decreasing their own self-awareness (Siem & Barth, 2019). An alternate reaction is to ruminate on interpersonal mistakes, which can damage self-esteem and trigger feelings of guilt, regret, shame, sadness (Adams, 2016; Pierro et al., 2018). Rumination is a powerful cognitive process which exaggerates initial perceptions and escalates emotions. Ruminations focused on personal mistakes can obstruct self-forgiveness, acceptance, and personal growth, and are associated with depression, anxiety, substance use, increased distress, and suicide attempts (da Silva et al., 2017; Halilova et al., 2020). When ruminations depicted a victim narrative about the SIRC, willingness to forgive and empathy tended to decrease, while anger, sadness, emotional and physiological stress, resentment, and indulgent behaviors were elevated and prolonged. (Adams, 2016; Baker et al., 2017; Siem & Barth, 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020).

Personalization. Emotional reactions, self-esteem, and overall well-being are all impacted by SIRCs, but not directly. It is not conflict, but the personalization of conflict that produced depressive symptoms and harms self-esteem. Curran and Allen (2017) demonstrated the mediating role of personalization in their research on family schemas, SIRCs, and communication styles. They found that family-of-origin norms influenced the ways that stressful interactions were managed and interpreted. Families who modeled constructive, conversational orientations to conflict produced members who could engage in conflict without experiencing

stress, threats, or personal attack. Tendencies to feel hurt and personalize a conflict were clearly connected to family-of-origin schemas about interpersonal interactions, relationships, and the implications of conflict. Baker et al.'s (2017) research produced similar insights about perceptions of injustice, reactions to stressful events, and the process of forgiveness. Emotional reactions and decisions to forgive were determined by cognitive appraisals of the conflict event, and positive or negative outcomes were directly related to internal shifts in perception. These studies demonstrated how the internal consequences of conflict were directly determined by underlying PCFs of cognitive schemas, interpretations, and perceptions.

External Effects

Spillover Conflicts. The external effects of SIRCs included changes in individual behaviors, relational dynamics, and family stability. When individuals perceived one another as a threat, their communication, body language, and motivations were noticeably affected. When a SIRC occurred, individuals scanned their environments with negatively biased expectations, which created reactive hostility and reduced positive behaviors (Roberson et al., 2018; Sutton et al., 2017). When individuals experienced a SIRC in one relationship, their thoughts, mood, physiology, and perceptions were impacted in a way that increased their risk of generating additional conflicts with the original party or others, which demonstrates *the spillover effect* (Bounoua et al., 2018; Kim & Beehr, 2020a, 2020b; Schubert et al., 2017).

Interpersonal conflicts in workplace and home environments tended to have bidirectional effects, wherein negative attitudes and perceptions generated in one setting also impacted relational dynamics in other settings (Carlson et al., 2019; Ilies et al., 2020; Matias et al., 2017). Sutton et al. (2017) studied mothers or caregivers with depression, and in that population, conflict with a romantic partner generated ongoing depressive symptoms and negative parental

practices with their children, such as anger, aggression, hostility, criticism, dominance, harsh discipline, withdrawal, and decreased warmth, support, and responsiveness. However, Mastrotheodoros et al.'s study (2020) did not replicate spillover effects between interparent and parent–child conflicts, but instead found that negative mood effected conflicts between family members directly and reciprocally. Members of family systems with dysfunctional conflict management tended to experience lasting consequences that extended far beyond the original family conflicts, impacting their individual development and future relationships (Kuster et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2019; Scharp & Curran, 2018).

Relational Damage. When an individual causes harm in a valued relationship, emotions of regret, guilt, and shame can further damage the relationship (Vazeou-Nieuwenhuis & Schumann, 2018). Griffin et al. (2016) identified common, harmful reactions by offenders after triggering SIRCs, which include shame, self-punishment, decreased self-esteem and empathy, deflection of responsibility, making excuses, evading blame, defaming the victim, and minimizing the offensive behavior and its effects. In marital conflicts, one party's withdrawal increased prolonged relational dissatisfaction and reduced intimacy for both spouses. Withdrawal behaviors were associated with depression in husbands and feelings of distance and dissatisfaction in wives (Parsons et al., 2020; Prager et al., 2019). Unforgiveness is another well-established effect of SIRCs that is associated with significant relational damage (Halilova et al., 2020; Ho et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2019; Stackhouse et al., 2018).

Maladaptive Coping. Numerous studies have found a relationship between SIRCs and problematic drinking and substance use. Rodriguez et al. (2019) explained this as a maladaptive coping strategy for individuals unable to handle the negative emotions instigated by the construals and attributions that compose SIRCs. Peterson et al. (2017) observed another example

of escape and avoidance coping strategies in their research about the use of social networking sites after a conflict interaction. When individuals experienced conflict, they spent much more time on Facebook in the evening, and then expressed significantly lower self-esteem the following day. Those behaviors were correlated with participants' early childhood schemas about relationships, described as avoidant, ambivalent, and insecure attachment styles, which guide perceptions of social rejection. Ambwani et al. (2015) identified interpersonal problems and perceptions of negative social interactions as factors which can maintain anorexic and bulimic behaviors, and they found that individuals with eating disorders experienced SIRCs more frequently.

Suicide Attempts. Numerous studies have identified connections between SIRCs and suicidal behaviors (Halilova et al., 2020). Depression and alcohol use were prevalent in cases of completed suicide and were both associated with SIRCs. Stulz et al. (2018) found that 68% of patients who attempted suicide described it as unplanned and impulsive, and 55% identified a SIRC as the trigger that prompted their action. Those patients provided life narratives shaped by abandonment, loneliness, rejection, lack of understanding, communication problems with their partner, and general interpersonal conflict. In Alessi et al.'s (2019) study, participants described their interpersonal motives for suicide with themes of revenge or punishment, demonstrating love, testing another's love, conveying inner suffering, and influencing another's choices. Kaleta and Mróz (2020) found that forgiveness—of self or of the other party—had the power to eliminate the correlation between domestic abuse and suicidal behaviors.

Organizational Effects

Toxic Breaches. In the workplace, repeated interactions perceived as rude, sarcastic, unreasonable, humiliating, or threatening were labeled as bullying (Rockett et al., 2017). An

employee who was offended by such treatment was at greater risk to experience reductions in physical health, emotional wellness, motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction. This was also linked with damages to the overall organization, workplace culture, and reputation. Studies on workplace bullying and harassment are increasingly prominent in literature and reflect a category of interpersonal behaviors formally and legally prohibited, externally observable, and objectively identified. Though these types of offenses have similarities with SIRCs in terms of internal consequences and pathways to healing, such actions do not reflect the theoretical essence of interpersonal relational conflicts, measured by subjective elements of perception and generated by PCFs. Criminalized actions of harm are best categorized per se, as they represent a fundamentally different dynamic of interpersonal exchange than those associated with SIRCs.

Reduced Productivity. Relationships that were oriented around a specific task or established in workplace settings were found highly influential to the operations and outcomes of all types of organizations. In collegiate and professional sports, athletes were at risk for reduced performance and limited development when they experienced ongoing conflict with their coach (Wachsmuth et al., 2018). Individuals who experienced SIRCs in the workplace were vulnerable to decreases in job satisfaction, cooperative and sharing behaviors, organizational commitment, performance, motivation, and productivity, and increases in complaints, turnover intentions, anger, rumor spreading, incivility, depression, anxiety, and perceptions of malice (Ayoko, 2016; DiFonzo et al., 2020; Gunkel et al., 2016; Ilies et al., 2020; Semerci, 2019; You et al., 2019). Those studies also documented knowledge hiding and reductions in innovation, creativity, and general engagement by employees who faced conflict at work, which is suggestive of the common conflict reactions of withdrawal and avoidance (Su et al., 2015).

Escalation and Contagion. As with individuals and close relationships, organizations are vulnerable to the vicious cycle of cumulative conflict effects on beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes that increase the likelihood of additional conflicts. Mroz and Allen (2020) described this as a compounding effect that exacerbates negative responses when social transgressions occur in the workplace, particularly when the offending party does not repair a mistake in the way others deem appropriate. Unrepentant violations of workplace norms and social expectations triggered feelings of anger and attempts to punish the offender. Team and group dynamics were powerfully affected by the perceptions and reactions of single members, and complaints or negative attributions influenced relationships throughout an organization. Benitez et al. (2018) found that feelings, attitudes, and expressions tended to automatically synchronize within teams, creating contagious emotions that transferred between group members. They reported that SIRCs in organizational teams were linked with collective emotional exhaustion, poor employee health, reduced team performance, motivation, and productivity, and elevated employee absenteeism and attrition.

The Conflict Continuum Model

Prominent strategies for conflict analysis emphasized descriptive elements of conflicts, namely, topical content, circumstantial catalysts, cultural frameworks, and emotional reactions, but lacked diagnostic insights about the underlying causes of interpersonal conflicts. Throughout the review of academic literature on the essence, etiology, and effects of conflict were constant references to subjective perceptions, interpretations, and attributions. When perceptions are repositioned to the center of interpersonal conflict etiology and analysis, the essence of conflict, which spans a continuum between constructive and destructive interactions, is seen with greater clarity. A perception–based model of conflict analysis promotes insights about the patterned

beliefs, expectations, and attributions that construct SIRCs. For this reason, I synthesized existing conflict literature into the CCM, which provided the analytic framework for research data presented later in this study.

When evaluated comprehensively, the literature revealed two themes present in all conflicts, regardless of severity, which are offered here as a balanced formula of interpersonal conflict etiology. The two elements which must both exceed a minimum threshold before any conflict can occur are the perceived threat of the incompatibility and the perceived relevance of the relationship. Both of these factors must be uniquely weighted according to each party's value for the belief, preference, or goal being threatened by another party, each party's beliefs about the fragility or vulnerability of that matter, and each party's value for the relationship with the other party. Altogether, an etiological explanation for the full range of interpersonal conflicts can be summarized as a perceived threat against a valued matter by a party with whom there is perceived relational significance. If neither party assigns sufficient significance to both the threat of the incompatibility and the relationship, the interaction does not satisfy the definition of conflict, as established at the beginning of this chapter.

To demonstrate the need for both elements in this basic formula of conflict etiology, the following hypotheticals are provided. If a highly valued relationship encounters a perceived incompatibility regarding an unimportant, irrelevant matter, the damage to affect and relational quality is negligible, thus insufficient to be defined as a conflict. Similarly, if two parties have incompatible beliefs about a highly valued topic but lack interdependent influence and place no value on their social relationship, the definitive elements and outcomes of interpersonal conflict are not present. The perception of threat against a valued matter by a person with relational value

composes the essence of conflict, and the outcome is a shift in affect, perspective, or interpersonal dynamics for one or both parties.

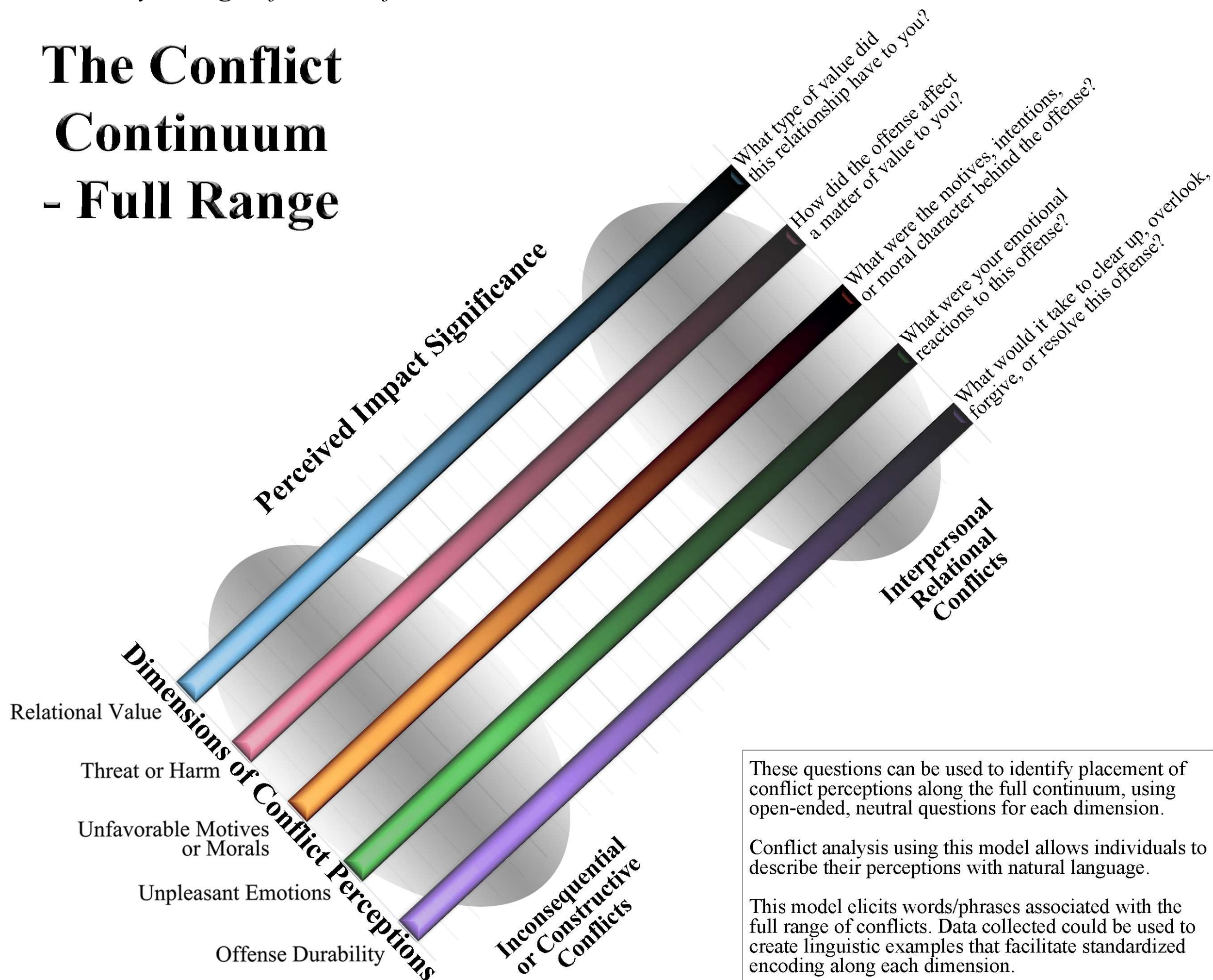
When conflicts escalate in complexity, salience, and consequence, an additional etiological element is necessary to account for the amplification of valence, significance, and impact. Attributions of intent and integrity become progressively relevant as conflicts escalate, and this third thematic component of conflict may contain the greatest power to influence overall conflict severity. When an offensive action is attributed to malintent, hostility, rivalry, a desire to cause harm or humiliation, indifference, scorn, contempt, superiority, or immoral character, the other dimensions of the SIRC are also intensified. Strong perceptions of unfavorable motives and morals may have particular relevance to emotional reactions and offense durability. When intentions are perceived as benevolent, however, the prognosis of an interpersonal conflict is far more positive. Therefore, etiological explanations of severe conflicts must inevitably involve a dimension of negatively perceived motives or morals.

Earlier in this section, five dimensions of perception were described in detail as definitive characteristics of SIRC, each established by extensive evidence presented in this literature review. Those dimensions of perception represent endogenous, dynamic, interactive components of SIRC, and were therefore used to construct a multidimensional continuum model of conflict. This preliminary model is represented graphically in Figure 1, with qualitative questions related to each dimension of conflict. The dimensions of perception that compose the conflict continuum are generated by dynamic and interactive PCFs, which are explored thoroughly throughout the remainder of this literature review. The forthcoming discussion on neurocognitive and cognitive literature addresses correlations between specific PCFs and the dimensions of perception established by the review of conflict literature. The qualitative research and data analysis

conducted as part of this study provided additional insights about the usefulness of the CCM to represent and elucidate the essence and etiology of interpersonal relational conflicts (addressed in Chapters 4 and 5). The preliminary CCM in Figure 1 was remodeled and expanded in Chapter 5 to reflect additional etiological layers introduced over the course of this study.

Figure 1

Preliminary Design of the Conflict Continuum Model



Note. The lower, left side of the conflict continuum indicates superficial incompatibilities, which provide constructive opportunities to build trust, mutual respect, appreciation, understanding, and willingness to address challenges together again in the future. The lower that all five dimensions of perception are rated in terms of perceived impact significance, the less troubling and

consequential is the conflict experience. At the opposite end of the continuum are volatile, memorable interactions that indicate perceptions of hostility, zero–sum competition, trust violations, and attributions of dubious character, integrity, intentions, and motivations. The higher all perception dimensions are rated, the more severe, intense, and harmful are the SIRC memories and consequences.

Using the conflict continuum as a guide and synthesis of the conflict literature reviewed and evaluated in this chapter, SIRC is hence defined as an adverse interpersonal dynamic within a highly valued relationship following an event or interaction that is strongly perceived to threaten or harm a matter of great value, imputed with certainty to undesirable motives or morals, wherein the perceived offense is interpreted as damaging and intractable by one or both parties, triggers negative emotional arousal, and disrupts further interpersonal interactions.

Discussion on Significant Interpersonal Relational Conflicts

The broad concept of interpersonal conflict has lacked a cross–context, comprehensive theory comprising a precise definition, an accurate depiction of the underlying essence, an explanation for inconsistent outcomes following interactions with conflict potential, and a method of diagnostic—rather than circumstantially descriptive—analysis. Explanations for these underlying issues of essence and etiology have not been found in external circumstances, topical themes, behavioral patterns, or categorical dichotomies, though researchers have extensively explored those possibilities. However, conflict literature consistently, albeit indirectly, revealed the universal role of personal, subjective perceptions, interpretations, and attributions as the engine that propels conflicts toward constructive or destructive outcomes.

With perceptions repositioned as the central, directive framework of interpersonal conflict, this section explored the distinct characteristics of severe, disruptive, and damaging

conflicts, termed SIRCs. Themes emerged from the literature about consequences, interpersonal dynamics, circumstances, topical patterns, emotional reactions, and processes of resolution associated with SIRCs, and these themes were synthesized into five dimensions of perception that construct the essence of conflict. By exploring the thematic characteristics of severe conflicts, an underlying explanation was found for conflict escalations. Perceptions about threatened matters of value and relationships of value, along with negative attributions of intent, are the reason seemingly superficial and inconsequential differences can sometimes escalate into SIRCs.

Thus far in this chapter, conflict was precisely defined, the essence of interpersonal conflict was presented as an endogenous etiological and diagnostic formula, and the thematic components of conflict were organized into a dynamic model depicting conflict as a multidimensional continuum of distinct perceptions. To comprehensively explore the etiology and essence of conflict, the next issue addressed is the etiology of perception. Although perceptions are uniquely personal, subjective, and often the product of subconscious, automatic processes, expanding fields of neurocognitive and cognitive science offer important, relevant evidence of PCFs that relate directly to perceptions about SIRCs. For the remainder of this chapter, literature on endogenous mechanisms of perception and motivated cognition is discussed in relation to SIRC and a perception–oriented theory of etiology.

Personalized Cognitive Filters

In the previous section, perceptions were established as the determinative elements in the etiology and essence of conflict. The essential next step in formulating a comprehensive theory of conflict is to clarify the etiology of perceptions, particularly those with direct implications for interpersonal relationships. Human perception is known to be strongly influenced by

personalized experiences, values, schemas, expectations, and biases. These preexisting filters are active while new experiences unfold, and they serve as interpreters and guides to help the mind focus attention on what is important, categorize sensory information, and make meaning of lived experiences. Because of this, people do not experience the world as a literal reality, but as a place they create, imbibed with meaning, coherence, and consistency (Vanderveren et al., 2019).

Ongoing improvements in neuroimaging technology have facilitated real time observations of brain activity, which benefited scientific understandings about the impressionable processes of perception and memory. For example, exogenous sensory data are integrated with emotions and subjective beliefs to create personalized composite memories (Bowen et al., 2018; Wante et al., 2018). The constructive and reconstructive processes of experience and memory are typically schema–consistent, which alludes to active biases in perception, interpretation, social beliefs, desires, motivations, and attitudes (Valdez et al., 2018; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017; Wagoner, 2017). These are all examples of PCFs, which create nuance and meaning within memories and have the power to distort individuals' perceptions of the world (Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). These filters actively shape perceptions of interpersonal interactions and may be the underlying determinant of relational conflicts (Keser et al., 2020).

The neurological processes and mechanisms of brain functions and embodied emotions are dynamic, interactive, and vastly complex. In this section of the literature review, I make no attempt to comprehensively describe all the functions of neurological systems, the intricate interplay between perception, cognition, and memory, or the psychophysiological constructs of emotion. Rather, in the following section, PCFs that generate perceptions about interpersonal conflict are bifurcated into two broad categories. Neurocognitive mechanisms comprise

subjective, fallible processes of perception, affect, and memory, while cognitive mechanisms refer to automatic and conscious appraisals based on schemas, heuristics, cognitive biases, cognitive distortions, and moral judgments. Altogether, this section highlights some of the primary endogenous processes that form PCFs, which then generate the perceptions that guide interpersonal interactions and determine the course of interpersonal conflicts.

Neurocognitive Mechanisms

Though it is commonly assumed that previous experiences direct future decisions, it is actually the thematically constructed, subjectively interpreted memories of those experiences that determine how individuals make decisions, interact with others, formulate expectations, and perceive future events (Carpenter & Schacter, 2018; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Literature about neurocognitive mechanisms of attention, perception, and memory is presented in this section, as well as documented effects of emotion that powerfully influence all of these internal processes. Theories and evidence about autobiographical narratives are used to explain the connection and interaction between preexisting cognitive filters and neurocognitive processes of attention, perception, and memory. This section concludes with a discussion on the phenomenon of confabulation and its significant implications for conflict–related perceptions about the intentions and motivations of self and others.

Attention

The mind can focus its attention on internal or external subjects, and attention can function as both a voluntary and involuntary mechanism (Mrkva et al., 2020). Activities such as rumination, reflection, remembering, and contemplating topics and past events are examples of internally directed attention, as well as future–oriented thoughts of worry, anticipation, and goal-setting. The activated focus of cognitive resources is a form of working memory, as current

internal and external stimuli are contemplated, processed, interpreted, and then disregarded or incorporated into an overarching framework of understanding (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2020; Poirier et al., 2019). Existing knowledge based upon previous experiences plays an important role in determining how and where attention should be allocated (Nobre & Stokes, 2019). People vary in their ability to control and maintain the focus of their attention, and many factors influence how long and how precisely individuals are able to sustain attentive focus on an internal topic or an external stimulus. This is because controlled attention, also called working memory, is conceptualized as a finite cognitive resource, which can become fatigued or depleted by overly stimulating environments, topics, and emotions (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2020; Mrkva et al., 2020; Plancher & Goldstone, 2020; Wante et al., 2018).

External environments are abundant with data accessible to human perception through the sensory organs, and selective attention identifies what information is relevant and important while also inhibiting awareness of irrelevant and distracting stimuli (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Mrkva et al., 2020). However, attention is not merely a neutral process of collecting sensory data while thinking about or reacting to unfolding life events. Attention is a self-motivated, biased process that prioritizes and focuses on potential threats, emotional information, and goal–relevant content (Alipour et al., 2018; Rungduin et al., 2019; Wante et al., 2018). Decisions about how to prioritize and allocate attention are often automatic and guided by expectations, predictions, and anticipations of what will happen next, based on previous experiences with similar situations, objects, interpersonal dynamics, communication patterns, and emotional signals (Nobre & Stokes, 2019; Puig et al., 2020).

Mrkva et al. (2020) found that attention enhanced the contrast between focal objects and nonfocal stimuli, with a result that unattended and periphery information was dampened while

attended objects were perceived with increased vividness, intensity, detail, and acuity. Emotional information is particularly effectual at commanding attention, and focused attention increases both the intensity of emotional experiences and the salience and accessibility of emotional memories. When attention is directed internally toward ruminations about mundane memories, emotions associated with those events become more reactive and valenced, simply through the intensifying effect of attention. Wante et al. (2018) studied the detrimental effects of negative emotional content on working memory for individuals with depressive symptoms. They found that emotionally negative information was particularly distracting, even when irrelevant to the situation, and depressed individuals had elevated difficulty disengaging from negative stimuli. Conversely, attention was biased toward positively valanced emotions for those without depressive symptoms. In a related study (Alkozei et al., 2018), those who regularly practiced gratitude allocated greater attention toward positive stimuli, while those with anxiety and depressive disorders demonstrated a bias toward negative and threat–relevant content.

In cases of interpersonal conflict, selective–attention effects and emotional arousal played a powerful role in prioritizing and inhibiting various information while the event unfolded, which determined how each party perceived the active event, as well as how they later remembered and made meaning of what took place (Engelmann et al., 2017; Karremans et al., 2020; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020; Reiheld, 2018; Siem & Barth, 2019; Sperduti et al., 2017). External events can trigger memories of previous hostile experiences and fit into behavioral patterns associated with threats and impending harm. In such cases, attention automatically concentrates on sensory content (e.g., facial expressions, body language) with anticipation of what will happen next, while other physiological systems become primed to react (Nobre & Stokes, 2019). A specific example of this was found in Jones et al.'s (2018) research on the influence of police officers'

expectations to distort or bias what they saw and remembered, in direct contrast to video footage recorded during those same events. When officers spotlighted their attention on threat–relevant objects, they were effectively blind to other stimuli, and misperceived what they saw due to powerful expectations and anticipations for what was about to happen and assumptions about the intentions of the other party. In another study, Ambwani et al. (2015) found that attention was biased to focus on and perceive negative social interactions for individuals with disordered eating and binging behaviors.

When external events are emotionally intense and demand greater cognitive resources, individuals may experience a reduced ability to inhibit or regulate ongoing attention, cognition, and emotional arousal (Bounoua et al., 2018; Matias et al., 2017; Wante et al., 2018). This means there is additional difficulty refocusing attention toward new, relevant information that might challenge initial negative interpretations and change perceptions about the meaning of an event (Quevedo et al., 2017; Witowska & Zajenkowski, 2019). According to the reviewed conflict literature, individuals who experience an SIRC have perceptions that a matter of substantial value was seriously threatened or harmed by another party, along with an awareness of their own significant, unpleasant emotional reactions. Both of these dimensions of conflict–related perceptions are directly impacted by the neurocognitive mechanisms of attention.

Altogether, the literature on the functions, methods, and effects of attention established that attention focuses on and enhances the valence and intensity of emotions and emotional memories, and attention also influences sensory data intake and perceptions based on previous experiences and expectations about interpersonal interactions. This means that attention, perception, and memory have multidirectional relationships. The finite resources of attention are allocated based on numerous personalized factors, such as pattern associations, emotional

valence and arousal, preexisting schemas, biases, and priming effects from recently activated memories. The complex interactions between these neurocognitive and cognitive systems are explicated further in the coming sections.

Perception

The neurocognitive processes of perception, which identify, categorize, and interpret sensory and cognitive information, emanate naturally from attention processes, which allocate resources to collect and preliminarily weight these data. Perceptions are constructed through an integration of both accurate and biased components, drawing from sensory data, comprehended based on previous experiences, and organized into conceptual categories (Berzins et al., 2018; Goldstone et al., 2017). The neurocognitive representations of self comprise embodied, sensorimotor experiences and a psychosocial concept of personal identity generated by interpersonal interactions and vast associative and semantic networks (Farmer & Maister, 2017). Perceptions about subjective quality of life and happiness are sometimes based on momentary experiences, but happiness is most often determined by broad, reflective evaluations and autobiographical narratives that highlight particularly salient peaks and end points (Kahneman, 2011; Miron-Shatz et al., 2009; Mogilner & Norton, 2019; Sul et al., 2016; Zygar-Hoffmann & Schönbrodt, 2020). However, in a study where participants were instructed to approach their weekends as if they were on vacation, they allocated greater attention to their momentary circumstances and reported increased perceptions of happiness (West et al., 2020).

Perceptions determine the meaning, relevance, and implications of lived experiences, newly acquired information, endogenous contemplations, remembered and relived events, and anticipated or imagined future events (Kunzmann et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2019). As Vranić and Tonkovic (2017) made clear, perceptions are strongly influenced by schematic expectations and

momentary moods. Negative affect has been found to improve systematic, analytic information processing and decrease memory errors, which is theoretically explained by heightened attention, triggered by threat–related signals (Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). However, Quevedo et al. (2017) observed that depressed individuals rigidly concentrated on negative content to the detriment of perception accuracy and self-attributions. Positive affect generally boosts the speed of perceptions through the use of heuristics, stereotypes, peripheral cues, and contextual assumptions, which all increase opportunities for incorrect interpretations and false memories (Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017).

Cognitive concepts are acquired, assimilated, and adjusted as a result of the continuous learning process that occurs innately during new and repeated experiences (Christopoulos et al., 2017; Doss et al., 2020; Goldstone et al., 2017; Hawkins et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2020; Schurgin, 2018). New experiences and information are generalized into thematic constructs based on stereotypical similarities, and these constructed concepts help people rapidly adapt to novel data and circumstances through the process of inductive prediction. Conceptual categories are constructed for broad themes, such as emotional states or material objects, and also for specific articles within each category, like anger, fear, and affection, or motorcycles, toys, refrigerators, and televisions. Each of these articles become represented by archetypal caricatures, developed by sampling and combining previous exposures to real-world variants of that construct. Representational concepts emphasize generalized patterns and characteristics that are used to identify any future, novel versions of a given concept and distinguish them from other similar conceptual categories. The effect is that previously identified emotions or material articles are not confused with new, slightly similar forms of emotional states or objects, like contempt, sadness, and amusement, or bicycles, tools, ovens, and computer monitors.

Perceptions about current and previous interpersonal interactions are dependent upon subjective interpretations of others' affective cues, intentions, behaviors, spoken and unspoken communication, along with other ambiguous elements associated with the event (Kuster et al., 2017). Personal goals and attachment orientations influence which details receive the greatest focus and weight during active or remembered exchanges, which can skew perceptions to support preexisting insecurities and negative expectations. Regular practices of gratitude can bias perceptions of ambiguous situations in the opposite direction, prompting recollections of positive memories and creating perceptions oriented toward appreciation and positive interpretations (Alkozei et al., 2018). As Korteling et al. (2018) explained, people see what they expect to see, while simultaneously neglecting to consider what alternate perspectives and information are being overlooked, misinterpreted, or discounted as irrelevant. Kahneman (2011; Kahneman & Klein, 2009) described this phenomenon as an illusion of validity, which prioritizes expectation– and schema–congruent information with naïve confidence that what is known is all that exists.

Priming is an effect that draws upon associative processes of neurological networks, which continuously construct, adapt, and strengthen connections between the neurons most frequently activated together (Cleary et al., 2020; Doss et al., 2020; Fu et al., 2020; Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Korteling et al., 2018; Valdez et al., 2018). The brain is highly sensitive to perceived patterns and relationships within the components of attention, cognition, emotion, physiological reactions, and external stimuli correlated with salient internal experiences. When internal or external patterns are reinforced, neural circuitry related to those functions are strengthened and pre-activated when their use is anticipated, in order to increase reaction efficiency and processing speed. In a study on the effects of priming for emotional information processing, Rohr et al. (2018) observed that brief exposures to valenced facial expressions of

anger, fear, and joy resulted in misattributions and perceptions of those primed emotions when viewing neutral faces. Neurological processes of priming, anticipation, efficiency, and pattern prediction occasionally create associations between unrelated stimuli, which can produce inaccurate correlations and attributions, such as confabulation, superstition, and magical thinking (Flinkenflogel et al., 2019; Gantman et al., 2017; Korteling et al., 2018; Rungduin et al., 2019; Prati & Giner-Sorolla, 2018; Schubert et al., 2017; Stavrova & Meckel, 2017).

These studies and theories on the neurocognitive processes of perception have obvious implications about how stimuli are interpreted during the emotionally arousing, schema–inducing interactions associated with SIRCs. When individuals have preexisting, negative beliefs about relationships or interpersonal expressions of emotions, their neural networks rapidly activate associated thoughts and memories while they experience new relational interactions (Önal & Yalçın, 2017). Those associated memories serve as perception filters, which interpret information to confirm and reinforce existing beliefs and maintain consistent, coherent schemas about relationships (Gordon & Chen, 2016).

Valanced judgments of social information such as intentions, attributions, and emotional cues occur immediately, even when there is extremely limited information upon which to base such conclusions (Egorov et al., 2019; Klein & O'Brien, 2018; Oostermeijer et al., 2017; Schubert et al., 2017). Perceptive interpretations and emotional and physiological reactions unfold simultaneously, and initial expectations and interpretations strongly influence how all subsequent information is processed (Bowen et al., 2018). Once a party is attributed with hostile attributions, perceptions are markedly resistant to updates and modifications (Grover et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2016; O’Rear & Radvansky, 2020; Prager et al., 2019; Rungduin et al., 2019).

Berzins et al. (2018) identified categorical patterns observed in perceptions between romantic partners, which included assessments of the partner's present state of emotions, cognitions, and interpersonal intentions, assessments of the partner's enduring characteristics and typical motives, and presumptions of shared similarities in motives, beliefs, and characteristics. They found that romantic partners were relatively accurate in assessing one another's underlying, short-term motives, but simultaneously assumed that their partners shared their own personal motivations about the relationship, and they were generally inaccurate in assessing one another's long-term motives. Jones et al.'s (2018) research also identified patterns of inaccurate or contradictory perceptions between parties who viewed the same event, and those differences were connected to personalized filters of internal motivations, biases, past experiences, training, ideologies, and expectations.

Assessments and interpretations of other parties' thoughts, feelings, and intentions are managed by mechanisms of perception. These perceptions determine what individuals confidently believe is occurring during a lived conflict event, the meaning and significance they will attribute to that interaction as it is preserved in their memories, and how those memories will be modified and distorted when conflicted parties later recall and ruminate about the event and its implications for the future of their interpersonal relationship. Each of these stages of perception are vulnerable to associative biases and errors, information blindness due to incorrect predictions, anticipations, and expectations, and mood–induced amplifications. The perception–filtering roles of emotional response systems and mechanisms of memory consolidation, retrieval, and reconsolidation are discussed in the following sections.

Emotion

Emotion enhances memory. This statement permeates literature on memory and cognition, and the evidence of emotion's power to affect, influence, and modify attention, perception, cognition, memory, and inferences of significance and meaning is exhaustive and conclusive (Bowen et al., 2018; Haj & Miller, 2018; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Lieder et al., 2018; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). Emotions are often described as feelings, which accurately reflects the embodied experience of activated emotional response systems. In fact, emotional arousal is often measured by physiological variations in heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductance of electricity, stress hormones, and body temperature (Bassett et al., 2018; Witvliet, 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020). Once emotional arousal is initiated, all other physiological, neurocognitive, and cognitive systems are impacted, with immediate and lasting effects on behavior, comprehension, and memory (Bowen et al., 2018).

Garcés and Finkel (2019) described many various functions of emotions, such as automatically triggering customized arrangements of physiological systems to support anticipated reactions needed in any specific circumstance. Emotions also function as an alert system, which activates attention and directs it toward matters of perceived importance. Negative emotions narrow the focus of attention toward central details of utmost urgency and relevance to the moment, while positive emotions broaden the scope of awareness toward thematic associations between the past and present (Puig et al., 2020; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Emotions trigger whatever actions or reactions are warranted, but unfamiliar or atypical stimuli can produce uncertainty, confusion, or inappropriate reactions (Garcés & Finkel, 2019).

In addition to triggering physiological and cognitive arousal, emotions contain and assign valence, which is often simplified into dichotomous categories of positive or negative, good or bad, favorable or unfavorable, desirable or distasteful, and painful or pleasurable (Imbir, 2017; Milhau et al., 2017; Prati & Giner-Sorolla, 2018; Schubert et al., 2017). During each new encounter, emotions draw upon available memories of past experiences to determine the valance and anticipate likely responses. Emotions function as internal indicators for attention, awareness, and perception about the valenced nature of an exogenous event or endogenous cognition or sensation. The primary response of the emotional system is stress, which effectively initiates both physiological arousal and valenced perceptions (Garcés & Finkel, 2019). Stress can manifest as either negative distress or positive eustress, as reluctant dread, or eager anticipation.

Emotional salience directs valenced attention to matters of perceived relevance, importance, and intensity, and salience has been found to enhance memory formation (Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Kunzmann et al., 2017; Lieder et al., 2018; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). This can benefit learning processes and recall availability but can also create generalized perceptions wherein emotionally extreme experiences are overrepresented. Emotional events are perceived as more important, so memories associated with emotional arousal are more readily and rapidly recalled, retained with greater detail, encoded with stronger elements of context, and are more resistant to fading and forgetting (Bowen et al., 2018; Doss et al., 2020; Haj & Miller, 2018; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020).

Although emotionally salient memories are more vivid, detailed, and available for instant and associated recall, this does not mean the details are necessarily accurate or stable over time (Falzarano & Siedlecki, 2019; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Memory retrieval and rumination place memories in a pliable state, vulnerable to distortions by current moods, information learned

after the event that becomes incorporated into the memory, intensified perceptions and conclusions about the previous experience, and unrelated disruptions during recall that become attached to the memory (Doss et al., 2020; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Korteling et al., 2018). Bowen et al. (2018) and Kensinger and Ford (2020) explained that negative memories produce a stronger neural signature and generate a neurological and sensory state that resembles what was originally experienced when that memory was first encoded. This means that active negative emotional memories stimulate real sensations of reliving or reexperiencing the original event, as is the case with PTSD (Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Mrkva et al., 2020; Scher et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2018).

In a study on emotion–driven misconceptions about vaccines, Trevors and Kendeou (2020) found that aroused emotions of confusion, fear, anger, and disgust became connected with negative beliefs about vaccines and healthcare professionals. Additionally, those arouse emotions prompted social propagation of critical messages about vaccines and impaired cognitive capabilities for complex learning and perception of topically relevant information. That study provided an example of *stimulus generalization*, which addresses the effects of emotions on perceptions, memories, and behaviors (Asok et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2020; Javanbakht, 2019). Generalization and transference occur when negative emotions are extended from threat–related content onto all individuals subjectively associated with the threat. In Trevors and Kendeou's study, the perceived threat of vaccines stimulated negative emotions, which were extended toward all healthcare professionals. As Javanbakht (2019) explained, this is an effect of associative learning, in which emotions and perceptions are overgeneralized and transferred onto undeserving subjects.

Individuals experience elevated physiological and emotional stress during SIRCs, and emotional states have powerful influence over the allocation of attention, how stimuli are perceived, and how those events will be remembered and associated with broader internal beliefs about self, others, and relationships (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Oostermeijer et al., 2017; Smeijers et al., 2020). When individuals experience unpleasant emotions during a SIRC, they fall subject to the active influence of their own preexisting expectations, associated memories, and unrelated cognitions and mood-states that were present when the conflict unfolded. Afterwards, perceptions about the pain of those emotional experiences are further intensified and distorted through repetitious cycles of remembering, reliving, and reexperiencing the SIRC (Bowen et al., 2018).

Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, and Griffin (2020) found that ruminations about SIRCs caused individuals to relive their offense, which reactivated the event–related emotional and physiological stress, elevated anger, and reduced motivations and intentions to forgive. Emotions create the filters of valence through which conflicts are perceived as severe, offensive, upsetting, and threatening. Emotions arouse physiological systems associated with imminent threats, aggression, and danger, which further skew attention and perceptions as conflicts unfold. The impact of emotional response systems on perceptions, memories, and cognitive biases is also acknowledged in forthcoming sections, in order to explicate the endogenous mechanisms that create PCFs and determine the course of SIRCs.

Memory

PCFs not only direct and comprise the interactive processes of attention, perception, motivation, interpretation, emotion, expression, and reaction that occur throughout interpersonal interactions; PCFs also encompass the complex facets of memory. In this section, I address the

stages and processes of memory chronologically, and discuss their contribution to PCFs and ensuant perceptions that generate SIRCs. As Vranić and Tonkovic (2017) expressed so adeptly, "remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were" (p. 358). Memories are not literal recordings of experienced events, readily available for repeated mental viewings, reliably rendering the original events with precision and objectivity (Jones et al., 2018; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Regardless of perceptions to the contrary, life is not initially experienced with such objective precision (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Klein & O'Brien, 2018; Korteling et al., 2018; Kuster et al., 2017; Rohr et al., 2018). Accordingly, perceived experiences retain even less objectivity after passing through numerous filters of comprehension, meaning–making, and bias that facilitate the formation of emotional memories. Given the relevant influence of memory during the processing of SIRCs, literature is highlighted that explains potential errors and distortions associated with each stage of memory formation in the following sections of literature review.

Encoding and Binding. Encoding and binding are elements of implicit learning and describe the subconscious, automatic formation of neural network connections and associations between conceptual constructs (Bowen et al., 2018; Egorov et al., 2019; Korteling et al., 2018). Not all experiences and perceived sensory data gathered throughout each day are ultimately encoded into long-term memory storage, and not all detailed or contextual elements of an experience are incorporated into the encoded information (Alves & Mata, 2019; Bisby et al., 2018). Motivation, emotional valence, and arousal can predict what information will be encoded, and encoded memories determine how motivation and emotions are directed in the future (Alves & Mata, 2019; Bowen et al., 2018). Positively valenced perceptions and experiences that enhance self-esteem and align with existing goals and beliefs are far more like to be encoded as

retrievable memories in healthy individuals. This healthy, positive bias in memory promotes confidence, optimism, and expectation that future desires can be obtained and future goals accomplished. However, extensive literature demonstrates an opposite propensity in depressed and avoidance–oriented individuals to encode negatively valenced experiences, which creates and confirms expectations that similar negative outcomes will be perpetuated in the future (Engelmann et al., 2017; Hitchcock et al., 2020; Kuster et al., 2017; Quevedo et al., 2017).

The neurocognitive processes of perception can be likened to an efficient office assistant who is constantly collecting important documents and files from all around the office, organizing everything into meaningful, topical piles, prioritizing any content that is relevant to the CEO's daily agenda, and evaluating the quality of the paperwork as well as everyone who created it. In this analogy, memory encoding is personified as a night manager who examines all the documents collected throughout the day and then decides which ones to staple together and place into folders (binding), which folders are important enough to store in the permanent filing cabinets, how the folder should be labeled, and what additional labels should be indexed as keywords (associations) in the office database to facilitate efficient identification and retrieval during future projects. (The exact placement of folders within the enormous warehouse of filing cabinets is analogous to subsequent memory processes of consolidation and storage.) The encoding principle (Kendeou et al., 2019; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020) implies that office filing cabinets maintain permanent possession of all documents placed within them, and if encoded files ever require correction or updating, tech support will inform office staff that the information from permanent files are never fully erased from the database.

Encoding processes are influenced by schema– and mood–congruent biases and contribute to anchoring heuristics that guide future information processing (Bowes et al., 2020;

Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Encoded memories are resistant to updating, even after individuals discover that their initial learning or perception was objectively incorrect (O'Rear & Radvansky, 2020; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). Emotional associations and inferences based on the initially encoded information were found to influence ongoing attitudes and decisions after corrections and retractions were received. Experiences that correspond with personal goals, beliefs, and motivations are more likely to be retained and drawn upon to guide future cognitions and empower ongoing achievements (Reiheld, 2018; Vanderveren et al., 2017).

SIRCs are emotionally arousing by nature and comprise perceptions of highly valued relationships and seriously threatened matters of personal significance, and thus, SIRCs have the salient qualities likely to be encoded as lasting memories. The perceptions of harm, malintent, and emotional stress that occur during the SIRC are bound together in the memory of the experience, but other details are less likely to be included in the binding process. Based on the literature about binding and encoding priorities during memory formation, elements of a conflict event that are not consistent with the overall emotional conclusions may be unattended in the moment and left out of the encoded memory, as *non-encoded data* (Reiheld, 2018). This produces an effect wherein individuals sincerely report no memory of words or actions that the other party claims occurred during their conflict (Jones et al., 2018; Jussim et al., 2018).

Consolidation and Storage. Encoded memories are organized and prioritized within long-term memory storage based on the perceived importance of the memory, anticipated need for quick access during future retrievals, and associations with thematically and contextually similar memories (Bisby et al., 2018; Reiheld, 2018). Memories create the basis of knowledge, and are consolidated into patterns that generate opinions, expectations, beliefs, and correlations. Memories are strategically stored within broad systems of comprehension, which innately seek

consistency and coherence (Koriat, 2018; Korteling et al., 2018; May et al., 2021). Therefore, consolidation and storage of memories are part of an ongoing construction process that invites revisions to enhance existing knowledge but resists information that would destabilize foundational beliefs and schemas (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Nam, 2020; Reiheld, 2018; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Vanderveren et al., 2019).

Memory consolidation and storage is guided by salience, accuracy, and relevance associated with the encoded memory. Those features are strengthened by repeated exposures to the same information and by halo effects based on high personal regard and respect for the source of the information (Cleary et al., 2020; Hughes et al., 2020). Repeated memory exposures can occur both exogenously, through stimuli such as repetitious stories heard in the news, and endogenously, through rumination (Alves & Mata, 2019; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020; Siem & Barth, 2019). Memories of perceived importance are stored in highly accessible ways that prime them for rapid reactivation. Primed memories are recalled automatically when new experiences recreate similarities in mood, context, relational patterns, or topical relevance (Alves & Mata, 2019; Bowen et al., 2018).

Networked systems of stored memories are automatically organized to emphasize self-relevant themes, create autobiographical narratives, recognize patterns within lived experiences, and then establish expectations and beliefs about personal identity and capability, cultural values, and interpersonal norms, which are the elements of schemas (Vanderveren et al., 2017; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Once beliefs have been constructed through the consolidation of salient, thematically connected, encoded memories, people have a strong tendency to reject any new information that challenges or contradicts these established beliefs (O’Rear & Radvansky, 2020). Consequently, cognitive reappraisal is an important and effective component of clinical

treatment for many mood and behavioral disorders, as well as severe relational problems (Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020). Before new beliefs and perspectives about the patterns, principals, values, and motivations of others and the world can be considered, existing belief systems and the memories by which they were constructed must be reexamined and reconsidered. Techniques of reappraisal, reframing, and perspective–taking were found useful for deconstructing dysfunctional belief systems so that updated information and healthier perspectives could be perceived, encoded, and consolidated into revised, more productive understandings (Berndsen et al., 2018; Gutenbrunner & Wagner, 2016; Ho et al., 2020; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Mauersberger et al., 2018; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Retrieval. Each time a memory is retrieved, the neurological patterns, emotions, and perceptions encoded during the initial experience are effectively reexperienced, in conjunction with new mood states, updated knowledge, and motivations that are active at the time of memory retrieval (Bowen et al., 2018; Reiheld, 2018). When memories are retrieved, the recapitulation of that encoded neural signature recreates moods and perceptions that resemble those from the original event (Kensinger & Ford, 2020). Put more simply, reflecting on a memory reshapes current perspectives and feelings to resemble those from the memory. Memory retrieval involves a conglomeration of past and present neurological patterns, motivations, perceptions, and emotions, and as a result, both the present endogenous state and the encoded memories are slightly modified each time they are actively remembered (Reiheld, 2018).

Memory retrieval can be an intentional process of recalling specific knowledge from the past or an automatic process activated by mood–congruent or context–congruent associations (Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Reiheld, 2018; Visser et al., 2020). In their research on emotional encoding and memory retrieval, Macri et al. (2020) found that participants were able to recall

significantly more contextual details from an event if they experienced negatively valenced emotions (triggered by an unpleasant odor) during their initial experience. Relatedly, Lin et al. (2018) reported on numerous studies that identified scent as the prominent sensory catalyst for reactivating emotional, vivid memories. Individuals with posttrauma stress experienced uninhibited reactivation of intensely negative memories triggered by broad associations of mood and context cues, while simultaneously suffering from decreased abilities to retrieve episodic details (Vanderveren et al., 2017).

Active emotional states prime neural networks to retrieve memories encoded with similar emotional traces, and this can create a detrimental, self-reinforcing pattern for individuals with negative self-cognitions and depressive tendencies (Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Macri et al., 2020; Quevedo et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2018). Events encoded with negative emotional significance had disproportionate vibrancy, salience, cognitive accessibility, and emotional recapitulation upon retrieval (Bowen et al., 2018; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020; Visser et al., 2020). Such studies are particularly relevant to the context of SIRCs, which are correlated with physiological, neurological, and relational stress; high emotional arousal and negative valence; and intensifying effects associated with memory retrieval. Memories of conflict events and perceptions about the actions and intentions of the other party are likely to intensify and strengthen when repeatedly retrieved from memory storage. Ruminations about SIRC events create additional risks for distortions and exaggerations during memory reconsolidation, which is addressed further in the next section.

Rumination. The cognitive activity of rumination is understood more by its correlation with harmful effects than by precise parameters. Rumination is an internally focused, repetitive, continuous process of dwelling upon negatively valenced emotions, memories, and

overgeneralized conclusions (Kong et al., 2020; Vanderveren et al., 2017, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). Ruminations typically comprise abstract themes of sadness, depression, bitterness, anger, victimhood, self-condemnation, unjust suffering, and negative generalizations about the self and the future. Self-control and selective attention were negatively correlated with the passive, unproductive process of dwelling in the embodiment of negative emotions, while rumination was positively associated with depression, unforgiveness, and aggression (Kong et al., 2020; Önal & Yalçın, 2017).

Rumination is a common response to interpersonal stressors and SIRCs, and often involves repeated retrievals of the painful memory, which reactivates the encoded emotions, perceptions, and reactions, and subsequently increases feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, and anxiety (Baker et al., 2017; da Silva et al., 2017). The cycle of rumination perpetuated and intensified perceptions of offense and pain, strengthened motivations of anger and revenge, and entrenched perceived inability and unwillingness to forgive another party (Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Wu et al., 2019). Accordingly, rumination was a significant component of disordered anxiety, depression, eating behaviors, and substance use (Baker et al., 2017; Carlucci et al., 2018). SIRC–focused rumination also activated physiological stress responses while inhibiting parasympathetic calming systems (da Silva et al., 2017; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020).

Reiheld (2018) explained the harm caused to both parties in a SIRC as a result of continuous, deliberate, mental rehearsals of the painful offense. Such ruminations strengthened distorted memories by suppressing relevant details that could generate empathy and de-escalation, while progressively intensifying the emotions and beliefs re-encoded into the reconstructed memory. Carlucci et al. (2018) observed similar destructive patterns and outcomes

from social rumination, when close friends disclosed personal conflict narratives and then affirmed one another as they rehashed negative speculations, critical judgments, causal attributions, pessimistic predictions, and self-justifying conclusions. Both social and intrapersonal ruminations about SIRCs were consistently self-serving, minimized personal responsibility, emphasized ongoing suffering, suppressed detailed reflection and empathy, and contributed to overgeneralized autobiographical self-narratives (da Silva et al., 2017; Vanderveren et al., 2017, 2019).

Retrospective Reconstruction. Each time an episodic memory is retrieved and reactivated, it increases in perceived salience and trustworthiness, but it also becomes malleable for alterations, enhancements, distortions, updating, biases, and additional information—possibly erroneous or inaccurate—obtained from other contexts, all of which may be incorporated into the reconstructed memory when it is returned to storage (Bowen et al., 2018; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Korteling et al., 2018; Reiheld, 2018). A broader cognitive process of *reflection* extends beyond episodic memories, and instead utilizes the vast networks of consolidated experiences to create generalized representations, thematic perceptions, and broad belief systems (Falzarano & Siedlecki, 2019; Farmer & Maister, 2017). This is the point in the self-reinforcing cycle of cognition when patterns between previous experiences and learning are organized into conceptual categories, representational caricatures, and predictive templates that guide and direct attention and perceptions in the future (Berzins et al., 2018; Goldstone et al., 2017; Kunzmann et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2019).

Zygar-Hoffmann and Schönbrodt (2020) described the process of *retrospective assessment* as a summative reflection on experiences, which constructs global evaluations about subjective well-being, relationship satisfaction, and the dispositional traits of self and others.

Retrospection is vulnerable to similar biases present throughout the previous stages of perception and memory formation, due to an overreliance on the most recent, salient, accessible memories, which often represent experiential peaks in mood, intensity, and distinctiveness (Kahneman & Frederick, 2005; Miron-Shatz et al., 2009; Sul et al., 2016). Although retrospective assessment has the theoretical potential to foster reflective insights, reduce unfounded or overstated conclusions, balance peak experiences with neutral, unremarkable interactions, and correct intuitive misconceptions, this is rarely the natural outcome (da Silva et al., 2017; Kendeou et al., 2019; Mauersberger et al., 2018; O'Rear & Radvansky, 2020; Sul et al., 2016).

Schemas are both the product and directors of retrospective reconstructions, and the more established a belief system is, the more powerfully it guides ongoing reflections and conclusions to confirm and affirm what is already believed to be true (Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). The resistant power of well-constructed knowledge can overwhelm and backfire against efforts to reevaluate and correct false information, resulting in unintended reinforcement and amplification of misconceptions, attributions, offense narratives, and dysfunctional beliefs (O'Rear & Radvansky, 2020; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Pluviano et al., 2017; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). Vanderveren et al. (2017) theorized that negative schemas were disproportionately robust due to the heightened attention and arousal associated with negatively valenced perceptions, and those schemas motivated retrospective meaning–making based on schema–consistent narratives about personal identity and the overall experience of life. Cognitive reconstruction is not just a matter of theoretical adjustments in attitudes and associated beliefs. It requires neurological alterations and pruning of neural networks, which were initially constructed for coherent efficiency, and consequently, are organically schema–reinforcing (Garcés & Finkel, 2019).

Researchers have worked diligently to identify effective methods to instigate retrospective reconstruction as a means of treating mood and behavior disorders and promoting growth in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and subjective well-being (da Silva et al., 2017; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Witvliet, 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020). Javanbakht's (2019) research on clinical treatments for fear, anxiety, and PTSD identified effective combinations of extinction learning (adding positive emotions to negatively valenced memories) and memory reconsolidation (removing emotional components from encoded memories). Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, and Tsang (2020) observed significant physiological and perspective improvements as a result of cognitive reappraisal techniques that emphasized both personal benefits from past adversity and compassion toward an offender. Önal and Yalçın (2017) and Noreen and MacLeod (2020) found that participants experienced emotional forgiveness by reframing and reconstructing their schema-based motivational attributions, assumptions, expectations about interpersonal relationships and their specific offenders.

Autobiographical Narratives

Autobiographical memory does not represent any specific stage within the neurocognitive processes of memory formation. Rather, it indicates the overarching self-narrative focus that saturates assessment, interpretation, meaning–making, motivation, and organization of all attentive, perceptive, reflective, affective, and cognitive processes (Rubin et al., 2019; Stanley & De Brigard, 2019; Vanderveren et al., 2017). Autobiographical implications are centralized and foremost during any momentary experience or generalized contemplation. Each new life experience automatically contributes to an unfolding life story, and those stories are constructed thematically, with valenced casts of supporting characters and belief systems that construct the

universe in which the story is told. Each person's autobiographical narrative began with very few clues about the genre of the story, but almost immediately, attachments and formative experiences with caregivers created frameworks for ongoing narrative constructions (Bishop et al., 2019; Özen & Güneri, 2018; Schumann & Orehek, 2019). Autobiographical memories reflect the way that life has been uniquely experienced and understood, which then determines the range of coherent explanations for future events.

Some cognitive filtering mechanisms create similarly biased perceptions within all populations, regardless of demographics like developmental stage, culture, or gender. An example is the self-enhancement bias, which organizes information and lived experiences according to self-serving motives, reduces awareness of negative self-traits, elevates perceived autonomy, prefers relationships and contexts that provide positive feedback, claims responsibility for desirable outcomes, and generally promotes a positive sense of self and subjective well-being (Cusimano & Goodwin, 2020; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2018; Seshia et al., 2016; Zell et al., 2020). Self-enhancement was prominent throughout autobiographical narratives associated with mental health and productivity (Hitchcock et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2019). Conversely, autobiographical narratives that were overwhelmingly pessimistic, self-depreciating, vague, and overgeneralized were associated with pathology and internal incongruence, such as depression and confabulation (Vanderveren et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2019).

In addition to the self-enhancement bias, there are many other cognitive filters that benefit healthy self-perceptions and promote functional, motivational, autobiographical narratives, such as the fading affect bias (Hitchcock et al., 2020; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Rubin et al., 2019). Other PCFs, like cognitive distortions and early maladaptive schemas, promote negative, discouraging autobiographical themes about self, others, and the world (Brazão et al.,

2017; Buschmann et al., 2018; Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019). Autobiographical narratives are construed as both the source and the cause of each person's customized collection of PCFs. Once early life experiences initiate implicit learning processes, dispositional traits intersect with environmental elements and create a self-perpetuating, self-fulfilling, self-confirming cycle of autobiographical narratives, beliefs, expectations, perceptions, interpretations, and predictions (da Luz et al., 2017; Farmer & Maister, 2017; Rinker & Lawler, 2018). This cycle effectively summarizes the concept of PCFs, which actively influence the generation of SIRCs and the means by which they can be resolved (Bar-Tal, 2019).

Confabulation

One final neurocognitive phenomenon that contributes to the PCFs that generate SIRC perceptions is nonclinical *confabulation*, which is the tendency for individuals to spontaneously perceive and remember their underlying rational or moral motivations when asked to explain previous choices and behaviors (Keeling, 2018). Confabulation is the propensity to unintentionally fabricate post hoc rationalizations and justifications about personal preferences and decisions. Numerous studies demonstrated this instinctive compulsion to confabulate motivational explanations of past behavior, even when research participants were asked to explain decisions they had not, in fact, made (Bar-Anan et al., 2010; Cochran et al., 2016; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Urban et al., 2019; van Helvoort et al., 2020). The decisions or information that were manipulated in confabulation studies comprised a range of contexts, including patient reports of medical symptoms, clothing and color preferences, gender preferences for teachers, enjoyment of difficult activities, and pain perception. The results consistently demonstrated memory malleability about previous decisions, coinciding with strong impulses to defend preferences with coherent rationality (Adriaanse et al., 2018).

Confabulation demonstrates an innate propensity to believe that personal decisions and actions are driven by rational and moral processes that justify past choices and behaviors. However, experiments structured to instigate confabulation typically induced participants to describe personal decision–making processes that never actually occurred (Bar-Anan et al., 2010; Cochran et al., 2016; Gantman et al., 2017; Nauts et al., 2019; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Stammers, 2020; Urban et al., 2019; van Helvoort et al., 2020). Participants' selections were secretly altered during the course of those experiments, and the changes were undetected by the majority of participants. After being presented with altered selections and reminded (falsely) that those were the participants' original choices, participants were prompted to explain their selections. In these studies, participants consistently attempted to provide rational explanations for the choices they believed they had made.

These experiments demonstrated a memory error called *choice blindness,* and which indicates a flexible and somewhat arbitrary human attachment to stated preferences (Chen et al., 2021; Gantman et al., 2017). Confabulation responses demonstrated a powerful motivation to believe that personal choices were driven by moral and rational factors. Once those rationalizations were expressed, participants were likely to maintain their fabricated explanations and affirm their unknowingly altered selections, which demonstrated the integration of misinformation into memory storage (Cochran et al., 2016; Merckelbach et al., 2018; Urban et al., 2019; van Helvoort et al., 2020). In his research, Raimundo (2020) described the tendency for the mind to be completely convinced and certain about whatever it created. The propensity toward self-certain assumptions of rational intent was consistently observed in confabulation studies.

Bar-Anan et al. (2010) described their experiments as priming manipulations, and they emphasized resultant implications that participants were generally unaware of the underlying mechanisms that motivated their choices, preferences, actions, and emotions. Adriaanse et al. (2018) and Leder (2017) expressed similar conclusions about the prominence of erroneous self-knowledge. Their participants misattributed experimentally manipulated actions and choices to personal preferences, self-initiated goals, personality traits, or mood, and demonstrated a strong unawareness of the influence that external, contextual cues had over the choices they made. Across the variations of these experiments, participants were consistently confident in their self-knowledge and demonstrated ongoing attachment to their confabulated explanations for their actions, reactions, choices, and preferences (Bar-Anan et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2021; Merckelbach et al., 2018; Urban et al., 2019; van Helvoort et al., 2020). Self-enhancement bias and self-schemas of autonomy and moral character were theorized as possible cognitive motivations for confabulation (Adriaanse et al., 2018; Alessi et al., 2019; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Gantman et al., 2017; Nauts et al., 2019; Stammers, 2020).

This topic is extremely salient to research on SIRCs, given the association between rumination and negatively valenced, emotionally arousing experiences (Carlucci et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Vanderveren et al., 2017). When individuals ruminate about a SIRC, they may unintentionally confabulate self-enhancing narratives about their motivations and intentions during the conflict event, along with self-justifying rationalizations for what they said and did as the conflict unfolded. As the literature on nonclinical confabulation and choice blindness grows, it is clear that this is the same cognitive mechanism that constructs self-serving autobiographical narratives.

The qualitative research conducted as part of this doctoral study invited participants to share narrative descriptions of a previous SIRC, along with introspective reflections related to the various dimensions of conflict perceptions in the CCM. In light of the literature about confabulation behaviors, numerous factors associated with perception biases, memory distortions, and autobiographical motivations to create self-enhancing narratives, the qualitative data collected in this study were not presumed to be precise or objective recapitulations of conflict events. Instead, the conflict narratives in this research were approached as representations of SIRC perceptions, overtly influenced and colored by the unique PCFs of each participant. Thus, research results represented a taxonomy of verbal expressions associated with perceptions about SIRCs, generated by highly personalized and subjective neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of attention, perception, memory, emotion, and cognition.

Cognitive Mechanisms

Neurocognitive mechanisms entail processes of sensory intake and identification, emotion, attention, interpretation, perception, memory, and autobiographical narrating, many of which are associated with observable patterns of physiological and neurological activity. Cognitive mechanisms entail modes of thinking, believing, understanding, reasoning, judging, interpreting, and knowing, which are internally motivated by principles of efficiency, association, consistency, predictability, goal-attainment, and identity (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Imbir, 2017; Spaulding, 2020; Toma et al., 2016). These universal mechanisms of cognition filter thoughts in specific ways, toward specific outcomes. The overarching tendencies of cognitive mechanisms follow predictable patterns within general and clinical populations (Korteling et al., 2018) but are incredibly individualized in terms of the specific and circumstantial content, conclusions, and perceptions they generate.

Exogenous conflict catalysts cannot trigger SIRCs without an endogenous, intermediary filtering process (Haj & Miller, 2018). When an undesirable or painful interaction occurs, cognitive filters rapidly process the circumstantial details, preexisting beliefs about the other party, and expectations unique to that relationship (Spaulding, 2018). Automatically generated perceptions can trigger rapid feelings of offense or can defuse the moment by framing interactions as non-offensive (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Smeijers et al., 2020). Taxonomies of maladaptive cognitive filters were reliably and consistently correlated with symptoms of mood disorders and behavioral problems (Bach et al., 2017; Brazão et al., 2017; Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Godlonton et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2018; Reddy et al., 2020; Thimm & Holland, 2017). The various modes of cognitive mechanisms described in the following sections provide specific examples of reasoning and understanding that relate directly to perceptions about SIRCs.

Schemas

The concept of schema is prominent within many theories of cognition, originating with Frederic Bartlett's (1932) pioneering research about memory reconstruction and the schematic organization of cognition (Wagoner, 2017). Schema theory suggests that memories and autobiographical narratives are constructed by integrating new experiences with existing knowledge and beliefs, and these constructions produce global conclusions about the internal and external world (Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Schematic constructions are theorized to begin forming very early in life, as soon as infants experience predictive patterns in the responses and availability of caregivers (Bishop et al., 2019), and continue throughout the lifespan, as ongoing experiences strengthen or modify existing beliefs (Kaleta & Mróz, 2020). *Schemas* are representational cognitive templates that address the nature, value, valence, predictability, and purpose of essential elements of life, such as interpersonal relationships, identity,

interdependence, agency, causality, trust, power, community, communication, humanity, life, the order of the world, morality, spirituality, pain, emotion, and the future (Curran & Allen, 2017; Egorov et al., 2019; Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Scher et al., 2017; Thimm & Holland, 2017; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017).

Schemas are initially generated through implicit learning, repeated and consistent experiences, inculcation, and role modeling, but they quickly gain the power to guide perceptions and influence expectations and interpretations of interactions (Egorov et al., 2019). Schema–based expectations are sometimes more influential and self-trusted than sensory data, which is why encoded memories about an event might exclude sights and sounds that contradicted what an individual believed or expected to occur (Falzarano & Siedlecki, 2019; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017). Individuals who develop negative core beliefs about self, others, and relationships will experience interpersonal interactions in accordance with those preexisting expectations (Buschmann et al., 2018; da Luz et al., 2017). Schemas function as filters that perceive and interpret which exchanges are offensive, threatening, harmful, unforgiveable, hostile, and malicious (Grover & Hasel, 2018; Smeijers et al., 2020).

Many core beliefs about self and others have the potential to influence the valence, intensity, and durability of SIRCs. Those core beliefs were researched extensively in studies related to populations with childhood adversity, trauma, behavioral and mood disorders, interpersonal problems, and personality disorders (Bach et al., 2017; Brazão et al., 2017; Carlucci et al., 2018; da Luz et al., 2017; Kaynar & Komurcu, 2019; Rankin et al., 2019; Thimm & Holland, 2017), and findings often referenced Young et al.'s (2003) taxonomy of early maladaptive schemas. Appendix A provides examples to illustrate schemas that were demonstrated to negatively influence interpersonal relationships.

Heuristics

Tversky and Kahneman’s (1974) article on heuristics and biases was pivotal for scholars in behavioral economics, psychology, neurocognitive science, education, political science, and many other fields interested in predictable, patterned errors in human judgment, memory, intuition, and perception (Alves & Mata, 2019; Bowes et al., 2020; Christopoulos et al., 2017; Fu et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2018; Jordan & Rand, 2020; Koriat, 2018; Lieder et al., 2018; Surry et al., 2018; Vriens & Martins Alves, 2017). Their initial study emphasized three general heuristic principles of representativeness, availability, and anchoring that were found to create systematic errors related to perceptions of probability, salience, and commonality. *Heuristics* are generalized correlations, associations, categories, patterns, and stereotypes believed to be reliably true, upon which intuitive judgments are based (Graham et al., 2018; Kahneman & Frederick, 2005; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Markovits et al., 2019). Perceived patterns within the world create cognitive associations about and between various concepts, and heuristics are rules, based upon those patterns, which facilitate rapid information processing. These automatic, heuristic–driven, cognitive shortcuts are strengthened by adaptively efficient neural networks (Korteling et al., 2018).

Although pattern prediction and generalized associations are beneficial for rapid thinking and reacting, errors can occur when the heuristic rules do not accurately apply to a specific situation (Haj & Miller, 2018). For example, when an individual does not conform to stereotypes associated with their external traits of gender, race, age, academic achievement, ethnicity, body weight, hair color, or socioeconomic status, heuristic reasoning based on those stereotypes will produce inaccurate judgments about that individual. Some heuristic shortcuts fall prey to counterintuitive realities, which create predictably inaccurate conclusions that are consistently

skewed in specific directions (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020; Cusimano & Goodwin, 2020; Greene, 2014; Lieder et al., 2018; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2020). Such predictable patterns of faulty conclusions based on rapid, inaccurate judgments are called cognitive biases.

Ongoing studies have expanded the taxonomy of identified heuristics, and researchers created practical and clinical applications based on insights about common rules of thought. Heuristics represent patterns of judgment and reasoning that were observed consistently in general populations, some of which have obvious implications for perceptions about interpersonal dynamics. To demonstrate the structure and content of heuristics, Appendix B contains an illustrative list of heuristic rules related to social intuitions.

Cognitive Biases

Cognitive biases are thematic patterns of perception and self-motivated styles of interpretation, assessment, and comparison, based on inaccurate, intuitive correlations and generalized expectations and beliefs (Streeb et al., 2018). In other words, cognitive biases derive from faulty heuristics and schemas. These biases guide perceptions about self and others in a way that aligns with and bolsters internal motivations, goals, beliefs, and priorities (Jussim et al., 2018; Toma et al., 2016). Given their subjective, personalized motivations, cognitive biases are not clearly delineated constructs with precise boundaries. Instead, they are patterns of biased perceptions observed by researchers within myriad experimental and real–world contexts (Ellis, 2018; Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2018; Korteling et al., 2018; Krans et al., 2019; O'Sullivan & Schofield, 2018; Raimundo, 2020; Sfärlea et al., 2020; Vrijsen et al., 2019; Zapf et al., 2018).

These patterns often receive descriptive labels and are constructed into taxonomies reflective of the interests of each study, resulting in many overlapping concepts that describe similarly biased tendencies. It must be acknowledged that biases can be challenged and

overcome with systematic reasoning (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2018), and many prominent clinical techniques involve identifying and challenging problematic cognitive biases (Alkozei et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2018; Leder, 2017). Examples of cognitive biases that influence interpersonal perceptions salient to SIRCs are provided in Appendix C.

Cognitive Distortions

Based largely on research by Beck (1979) and Ellis (2003), *cognitive distortions* represent specific categories of dysfunctional and irrational thoughts, which are habitually utilized to interpret life circumstances and predictions of the future. In the same way that faulty heuristics create cognitive biases, maladaptive schemas produce specific configurations of cognitive distortions (Buschmann et al., 2018; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020). Though similar to schemas and heuristics in their automaticity, thought distortions are theoretically more superficial and directly linked with emotional and behavioral reactions, making such thoughts more accessible and identifiable for individuals who choose to reflect on their own inner-thoughts and self-talk (Brazão et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Oostermeijer et al., 2017). As a result, cognitive distortions are easier to expose and challenge as irrational and inaccurate, which is a core component of many effective and prominent psychotherapies (Javanbakht, 2019; Kaplan et al., 2017; Quigley et al., 2019).

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is well established as an efficacious treatment model, and it entails identification and reevaluation of irrational, illogical, and inaccurate thoughts (Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Crum, 2019; Gautam et al., 2020). By highlighting the obvious dissonance between lived experiences and unrealistic predictions and interpretations, individuals are often able to make changes in their cognitive habits and develop new tendencies in their perceptions of

social relationships and future events. During this therapeutic process, individuals are often pressed to identify the underlying schemas and core beliefs that produce their habitual cognitive distortions (Gautam et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2018). As Leder (2017) pointed out, the nature of underlying beliefs, autobiographical narratives, cognitive biases, and other complex mechanisms of PCFs is that they are not easily identifiable and are powerfully resistant to change and challenge. Given the evidence that confabulation is the automatic means by which post hoc, self-reflective explanations are generated, it is plausible that self-assessments about core beliefs are simply spontaneous, moral rationalizations, guided by ever-present, self-enhancing cognitive biases, heuristics, and schemas (Hagá et al., 2018; Ilies et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Mata & et al., 2019).

Although self-assessments about PCFs might not be precisely accurate, efforts to intentionally raise awareness of automatic thinking and direct thoughts and interpretations to promote positive outcomes is established an effective and beneficial process (Brazão et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2018; Leder, 2017). Active thought monitoring and self-awareness allows individuals to gain more control over the content and direction of their thoughts, exercise cognitive reappraisal where needed, and influence the types of perceptions their PCFs will generate in the future (Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Crum, 2019). Cognitive distortions have general themes of exaggeration, oversimplification, mindreading, overgeneralization, and polarization, and negative predictions, and habitual interpretations of social interactions using such distorted filters prime individuals for conflict (Buschmann et al., 2018; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Oostermeijer et al., 2017). The taxonomy of cognitive distortions in Appendix D provides examples of thought patterns that have obvious implications for interpersonal relationships.

Moral Judgments

In addition to the previous categories of cognitive biases and distortions, interpersonal interactions often include elements of moralization. The most prominent aspect of moral attributions is desirability. Individuals judge themselves to be good and moral as a core part of their identity, and routine immoral behaviors do not diminish these self-perceptions (Stanley & De Brigard, 2019). Moral valence is attached to many components of life, including persons, actions, belief systems, objects, and events (Lindström et al., 2018). This process of applying moral valence occurs both instinctively and emotionally, called *moral intuition*, and through contemplative rationalization, termed *moral reasoning*. The distinctions and competition between these dual cognitive processes are an ongoing topic of debate among moral and neurocognitive psychologists, philosophers, and many others (Białek & De Neys, 2017; Conway et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Greene, 2014; Greene & Young, 2020; Huang et al., 2019; Markovits et al., 2019; May et al., 2021; Waytz et al., 2019; Zollo et al., 2017).

The source of intuitive perceptions of morality is a topic in which scholars and theologians express many differing opinions. Moral judgments are often conceptualized as emotion-driven perceptions that involve complex PCFs (Jordan & Rand, 2020; May, 2019). From that perspective, emotions are the catalysts for moral judgments, and emotional valence drives moral, coherent, rational, mood-congruent explanations and justifications for emotional reactions. Ilies et al. (2020) suggested that moral standards develop endogenously, automatically, and function as self-regulating schemas. Social norms and behavioral frequency play a powerful role in establishing prescriptive standards for interpersonal transactions, which support the culture, public good, and societal stability (Everett et al., 2017; Lindström et al., 2018). Moral intuitions can be strongly influenced by these implicit social norms, rather than by rational

deliberations or references to an objective code of morality (Egorov et al., 2019; Haidt, 2001; Haidt et al., 1993).

Post hoc rationalizations are inseparable from theories of moral judgment, and morally valenced, retrospective justifications often emphasize the consequences of an action to determine its morality (Conway et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Greene, 2014; Reiheld, 2018; Zollo et al., 2017). *Consequentialism* is a prominent concept of moral philosophy that plays an active role in moral judgments and individual assessments about SIRCs. In such cases, people determine societal and interpersonal ethics based on the consequences, rather than any preexisting, absolute standards. By age 4, children were found to morally judge actions based on how the outcomes harm or benefit other people (Bahník et al., 2021; May et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2017). As people grow older, the intentionality behind a harmful action places an increasingly important role in determining its perceived morality (Grover et al., 2019).

Morality is historically tied to religious faiths, and Dunaetz and Greenham (2018) addressed the significant problems that arose when members of the same faith disagreed on the application of their beliefs for specific contexts. In those cases, individuals claimed the authority of holy texts to support their opinions, turning all disagreements with their position into a moral violation against God. Aspects of life deemed sacred are endowed with a sense of divine significance, and perceived violations of sacred purposes, beliefs, relationships, objects, or goals are particularly robust and resistant to efforts of forgiveness and conflict resolution (Bassett et al., 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2019).

Moral judgments, whether intuitive or deliberative, often draw upon religious, civil, cultural, consequential, or societal standards to justify self-motivated conclusions (Lee & Holyoak, 2020). Particularly in situations involving personal identity, goal-related priorities,

emotions, and interpersonal relationships, moral judgments are part of the PCFs that create perceptions, interpretations, and attributions (Bahník et al., 2021; DiFonzo et al., 2020; Egorov et al., 2019; Raj et al., 2020; Watanabe & Laurent, 2020). This is particularly tied to perceptions about the durability of an offense during SIRCs. Moral judgments address issues of responsibility, deserved consequences and emotional punishments, requirements for forgiveness and restoration, and nonverbal communications and attitudes directed toward perceived offenders (Adams, 2016; Bassett et al., 2018; Berndsen et al., 2018; Grover et al., 2019; Lindström et al., 2018; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Raj et al., 2020; Reiheld, 2018; Watanabe & Laurent, 2020).

Discussion on Personalized Cognitive Filters

The mechanisms of perception through which people experience and interpret the world are complex, vast, multidimensional, and powerful. Academic literature addresses these endogenous systems through a rapidly expanding collection of specialized research, drawing from a wide range of fields. Intense and emotionally arousing events induce interactive neurocognitive and cognitive processes that direct attention toward salient targets, interpret interactions according to personal significance, organize the experience coherently within preexisting schemas and autobiographical narratives, and fill in any gaps in memory and understanding with rational and moral post hoc justifications. Researchers have established extensive evidence about each of the systems associated with the concept of PCFs, and the synthesis of this literature clarified the components of PCFs and highlighted their ability to generate subjective perceptions related to interpersonal conflicts.

Cognitive mechanisms are oriented to produce valenced perceptions that depict the self in the best possible light, while constructing a general understanding of the world that is favorable,

predictable, and efficient. Neurocognitive mechanisms direct sensory intake, imbibe conceptual constructs with relevance and meaning, trigger emotional response systems, and drive the cyclical stages of memory formation. Processing modes of autobiographical narration, confabulation, and moral judgment utilize motivated cognitions and malleable states of memory to generate perceptions, interpretations, and meaning. Altogether, the neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of perception function as personalized filters during salient life experiences. Literature on the subjective, self-motivated purposes and methods of PCFs offered clarity, insight, and explanations for the perceptions of harm, offense, threat, intent, and culpability associated with SIRCs. The multidimensional perceptions built into the CCM are best understood as products of the various modes of PCFs addressed throughout this section. Therefore, PCFs are essential components of the etiological foundation for a perception-oriented theory of interpersonal conflict.

Theoretical Framework

One of the underlying concepts associated with the conflict continuum is that perceptions about life experiences are influenced by both conscious and automatic processes. Dual-processing theory offers a relevant framework to explain these aspects of experiential and reflective processing, particularly during and after emotionally arousing events. The literature reviewed in this chapter described neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of attention, perception, memory, emotion, and cognition, all of which are supported by a dual-processing theoretical framework. Research conducted by Daniel Kahneman is of particular relevance to this study on PCFs and SIRCs because he associated dual-processing theories with outcomes on self-perceptions of happiness, decision–making, heuristic patterns of cognitive efficiency, and cognitive biases of perception and memory. Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt also made salient

contributions to dual-processing theories in the realm of neurocognitive mechanisms of social intuition and moral judgment. The following sections describe dual-processing theory, criticisms of the theory and implications for SIRCs, and the contributions that Kahneman, Greene, and Haidt made to this theoretical framework.

Dual-Processing Theory

Dual-processing theories rest on an assumption that working memory, which is conscious, focused attention, is a limited resource (Kahneman, 2003). When contexts and tasks are familiar and predictable, reactions and decisions occur rapidly and automatically. This promotes cognitive efficiency and reserves limited cognitive resources for challenging and novel tasks that require greater deliberation. Theories about dual dimensions of cognitive processes are widespread and increasingly established within specialized areas of psychology, such as emotional regulation, memory coherence, moral cognition, neuroscientific philosophy, and social judgments (Białek & De Neys, 2017; May et al., 2021; Shenhav et al., 2017; Surry et al., 2018; Vanaken et al., 2020; Wills et al., 2016). Dual-processing theory was also studied by and incorporated into many other fields of scientific discipline, like business economics, clinical medicine, education and learning, marketing, and neurophysiology (Miller-Cotto & Byrnes, 2020; O'Sullivan & Schofield, 2018; Siew et al., 2018; van Zeeland-van der Holst & Henseler, 2018; Vriens & Martins Alves, 2017).

Components of Dual-Processing Theory

Dual-processing theory suggests that people respond to stimuli through two distinct cognitive processes. The differing natures and purposes of these processes were observed consistently by various theorists, who have the dual cognitions as either automatic/heuristic or deliberative/controlled (Devers & Runyan, 2018; Imbir, 2017; Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Korteling

et al., 2018), intuitive or reflective (Bowes et al., 2020), bottom-up or top-down (Bowen et al., 2018), reptilian or neomammalian (Handley et al., 2019), experimental or rational (Esnard & Dumas, 2019), habitual or goal–directed (Christopoulos et al., 2017), or as a heart versus mind dichotomy (Imbir, 2017). In fields of philosophy and moral psychology, these dual processes were positioned either as deontological, intuitive, and effortless or as utilitarian, deliberate, and working–memory dependent (Białek & De Neys, 2017; Plunkett & Greene, 2019). Dual-processing theory was embraced by many areas of study, and their terminology varied in small degrees, but the general concepts of this theory were consistently expressed throughout the literature.

According to dual-processing theory, people respond to experiences, challenges, interactions, and circumstances using these two types of cognitive processes: System 1 (automatic–fast) and System 2 (deliberative–slow; Ellis, 2018; Fu et al., 2020; Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Korteling & et al., 2018; Markovits et al., 2019; Seshia & et al., 2016; Surry & et al., 2018; Vriens & Martins Alves, 2017). Working memory and executive cognitive processes were established in previous studies as a limited resource. In order to prevent cognitive systems from becoming overloaded, the mind functions according to an efficiency principle, and initiates automated, habitual responses whenever a familiar or predictable event occurs (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Spaulding, 2018). This allows the conscious mind to remain free from the distraction of simple processes and fully available to respond to unfamiliar, challenging, or complex cognitive tasks. In other words, System 1 intuitions keep valuable cognitive resources available for System 2 analytics. The tension between these two processes is one of accuracy versus speed (Białek & De Neys, 2017; Shenhav et al., 2017).

The automatic, intuitive, rapid, and reflexive processes of System 1 are facilitated by an autonomous set of cognitive systems and emotional response systems which rely on habits, heuristics, schemas, past experiences, biases, and stereotypes (Bowen et al., 2018; Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). These subconscious shortcuts generate rapid, effortless reactions to predictable stimuli, which also preserves limited cognitive resources for more complex, deliberative, System 2 processes (Seshia et al., 2016; Zollo et al., 2017). Particularly during emotionally arousing events, System 1 reactions occur instantly, while System 2 rationalizations and behavior justifications follow later. These theoretical processes of cognition are strongly supported by the studies on attention, perception, autobiographical narratives, and confabulation, addressed earlier in this chapter.

Slow, sequential, deliberate, rational, analytic, controlled, and reflective cognitions are System 2 processes. These require purposeful effort, intention, and cognitive resources in order to produce complex, abstract, logical, and hypothetical knowledge. Despite its presumption of rationality, System 2 thinking is not free from cognitive biases and distortions. While moral—or immoral—intuitions and judgments are produced by System 1 thinking, System 2 processes enact post hoc rationalizations, defenses, explanations, and justifications for decisions, reactions, and behaviors (Egorov et al., 2019; Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Zollo et al., 2017). Existing cognitive biases such as attribution errors, confirmation bias, and hindsight bias influence System 2 processes to evaluate past decisions and emotional reactions as if they had been rational and reasonable, thereby creating a retroactive defense of System 1 reactions (Greene, 2017; Haidt, 2001; Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Morewedge & Kahneman, 2010; Shenhav et al., 2017). Hence, heuristics and cognitive biases are both components and consequences of dual-processing systems.

This study constructed a continuum-based conflict model to represent dynamic, multidimensional perceptions that generate SIRCs. The source of these perceptions was framed as PCFs, which are the innately customized product of System 1 and System 2 processes of instinctive reactions and retrospective rationalizations (Renshon & Kahneman, 2017). PCFs influence perception and memory in both automatic and deliberative ways, through a variety of paradigms and mechanisms. Social interactions that trigger SIRCs are retroactively justified by self-defending and other-blaming moral interpretations (Haidt, 2001; Haidt & Joseph, 2008). For example, when an individual makes an automatic choice to commit an immoral act, System 2 processes quickly create rationalizations to justify the act, which protects the individual's self-perception as a moral person (Greene & Haidt, 2002).

Origins and Development

Dual-processing theory was constructed progressively, with scaffolded contributions from varied experts. Bartlett's (1932) experiments on perception and memory were foundational, and inferential statistics and Bayesian analysis were influential (Winkler, 1967), along with early studies on perception and attribution dissonance (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). In 1960, Bruner published one of the first illustrations of dual-processing cognition, which entailed a dichotomy of intuitive and analytic thinking. Theoretical consolidation was significantly benefitted by Kahneman's early publications and insights on heuristics, cognitive biases, judgment errors, and norm theory (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984; Kahneman et al., 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, 1981). Over the course of his career, Kahneman used dual-processing theory as the theoretical framework for extensive and ongoing research about subjective evaluations of happiness, decision errors, judgment, loss aversion, heuristics, cognitive biases, and perception distortions in memory (Kahneman, 2003; Kahneman et al.,

1991; Miron-Shatz et al., 2009; Morewedge & Kahneman, 2010; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Kahneman's 2011 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, was a published collection of studies and explanations that demonstrated System 1 and System 2 cognitive processes and introduced dual-processing theory to a broad audience.

Haidt began his research with an interest in ethics and social intuition, asking evocative questions like why it is wrong to eat your dog (Haidt et al., 1993), and later expanded into the field of moral psychology. He incorporated theories of dual processing into his research on intuitive, moral judgments and self-enhancing biases, and his results helped clarify the key concepts associated with dual-processing theory and demonstrated human limitations for objective, unbiased, rational analysis (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001). Haidt (2006, pp. 4–5) described the dual systems of cognition with an analogy of a man (the rational mind) riding an elephant (the emotional, intuitive mind). Theoretically, the elephant walks wherever it chooses, and the rider is carried along while sincerely claiming that he purposefully intended to travel along the path the elephant chose. The rider's confident sense of self-determined autonomy represents an overconfidence bias and the illusion of control (Ellis, 2018; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017), which Haidt called *the rationalist delusion*. Through this analogy, potential biases associated with System 1 and System 2 errors were better understood. Additionally, Haidt's analogy offered insights about other PCFs addressed in this literature review. For example, confabulation is suggested by the rider's post hoc explanation about his reasons for choosing to travel to whatever destination the elephant had carried him.

Beginning in 2001, Greene's research utilized early dual-processing concepts to explain neurocognitive processes of moral judgment and the impact of emotions throughout those processes (Greene, 2017; Greene et al., 2001, 2004, 2009; Greene & Young, 2020). This

eventually led to Greene's dual-processing theory of moral judgment (Greene, 2014, 2017), which described System 1 processes as deontological (driven by emotional heuristics and intuition) and System 2 processes as utilitarian (driven by deliberative reasoning). His research frequently utilized technology measuring brain activity and reaction times while participants considered morally and emotionally valenced decision dilemmas. Those studies demonstrated measurable differences in neural activity associated with difficult and easy moral decisions. Greene's unique research also contributed objective data supporting the dual-processing theory, including the limited capacity of cognitive load and automated systems promoting neural efficiency (Greene et al., 2008). He provided evidence that neurocognitive processes influence perceptions, interpretations, reactions, and memories, which adds support to the current study about SIRCs.

As a result of previous and current contributions by Kahneman, Haidt, and Greene, dual-processing concepts provided a strong framework through which many complex and abstract elements of cognition, perception, and memory are tested and understood. Dual-processing theory undergirds ongoing studies about heuristics and biases, neurocognitive morality, social intuition, as well as many other fields of research. This current study is one of the first to address interpersonal conflicts using a dual-processing paradigm of perceptions and PCFs.

Criticisms and Controversies

Since the 1990s, experimental validation of dual-processing theory continued to strengthen, and principles of this theory are now found embedded into social expressions about automatic thoughts, brain overload, and cognitive biases. In academic circles, nuanced distinctions within the dual-processing model continue to be debated, tested, and relabeled. For example, theorists do not agree whether System 1 and System 2 are competing processes or if

they function in parallel and cooperatively allocate use of finite cognitive resources (Conway et al., 2018; Markovits et al., 2019).

A controversy indirectly related to dual-processing theory and cognitive biases is the failure of researchers to reproduce certain outcomes from previous, well-known experiments (Chopik et al., 2020; Koriat, 2018; Millroth et al., 2019; Smaldino & McElreath, 2016; Spellman & Kahneman, 2018; Staddon, 2019). Some of Kahneman's experiments were brilliantly constructed and produced fascinating examples of bias, but those effects relied on highly controlled laboratory manipulations, and were not replicated in real world contexts. Concerns about replication led to increased demands for accountability and reproducibility in future research, particularly in the field of social psychology.

Summary

This literature review was a synthesis of research addressing distinguishing characteristics of general and severe interpersonal conflicts and the endogenous mechanisms of PCFs. The sections of this literature review comprised in-depth analysis, critique, and elucidation of SIRCs and PCFs in the context of their relevance to one another. Myriad studies identifying the specific components of interpersonal conflicts and PCFs indicated a strong association between these topics. PCFs were conceptualized as processes that influence interpersonal perceptions outside of direct awareness, intention, or discernment. Interpersonal conflicts were defined as perceived incompatibilities of beliefs, preferences, or goals, resulting in at least one party experiencing a shift in affect, perspective, or interpersonal dynamics.

In this chapter, I thoroughly examined the theories of interpersonal conflict, endogenous and exogenous components, catalysts and consequences, prominent methods of analysis, and categorical labels. This critical analysis of existing theories about conflict highlighted the

limitations of prominent categorical labels and demonstrated widespread ambiguity about the essence of interpersonal conflict. Peer-reviewed studies established that perceptions play a causal role in the full spectrum of interpersonal conflicts, and the etiology of perception was ascertained by studies on the mechanisms of PCFs. As a synthesis of these insights, I constructed a continuum model of conflict, comprising of five dynamic dimensions of perception.

The literature on PCFs addressed neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms, which facilitate attention, perception, emotion, memory, autobiographical narratives, confabulation, schemas, heuristics, biases, distortions, and moral judgments. The means by which PCFs exist and generate circumstantial, valenced perceptions were explicitly demonstrated. The expanse of research related to PCFs strengthened support for a theory of conflict oriented around perceptions, generated by PCFs. Dual-processing theory provided a theoretical explanation for the phenomena of PCFs and was incorporated into the overall discussion on the progression from PCFs to perceptions to SIRCs. The multidimensional CCM introduced within this chapter constructed an analytic framework for conflict analysis that was utilized by the research conducted as part of this doctoral project.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Significant interpersonal relational conflicts (SIRCs) have a well-established relationship with negative life outcomes and clinical disorders (Benitez et al., 2018; Curran & Allen, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Scharp & Curran, 2018). These prevalent and damaging conflicts are often treated and tested by clinicians and researchers who lack a comprehensive theoretical foundation upon which to explain and generalize their findings. Conflict literature from numerous fields of study (e.g., cross cultural management, organizational psychology, business relationships, psychophysiology, sociology, family dynamics, etc.) presented categorical, topical, circumstantial, cultural, and relational dynamics as factors that determine and describe interpersonal conflicts in various contexts (Brett, 2018; Corey et al., 2014; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Mauersberger et al., 2018; Su et al., 2015; You et al., 2019). Those approaches generally promote an externally oriented framework for conflict analysis and etiological theory, which lacks a transferable, comprehensive conception of the definition, essence, and underlying causes of SIRCs (Khatib et al., 2018). Additionally, a notable gap exists between scholarly descriptions and the way conflicts are individually experienced, perceived, explained, and quantified by the general population (Alkozei et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Choi & Murdock, 2017; Raimundo, 2020; Shapiro et al., 2019).

Literature on conflict consistently incorporated the concept of perception into descriptions of etiology and analysis but did not overtly place perception in the central and determinative position of a comprehensive theory of conflict etiology and analysis. An abundant library of research established the power of neurocognitive and cognitive filtering mechanisms to generate subjective perceptions, interpretations, memories, and reactions to emotional and

stressful experiences (Adams, 2016; Bassett et al., 2018; Engelmann et al., 2017; Grover et al., 2019; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Reiheld, 2018; Watanabe & Laurent, 2020). The relationship between perceptions and SIRCs was strongly supported throughout existing literature (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Egorov et al., 2019; Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Raj et al., 2020), but research was needed to demonstrate the qualitative and thematic manifestations of perception within lived experiences of SIRCs. Qualitative data comprising personalized depictions of conflict, linguistic expressions of perceptions, and indications of personalized cognitive filters (PCFs) was needed to clarify the role of endogenous factors within conflict etiology. Additionally, a perception–oriented theory of conflict generated by constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodologies represents great potential benefits for the field of conflict research and the need for a comprehensive understanding of SIRC.

The research questions addressed in this study were:

RQ1. What words and phrases do participants include within their conflict narratives that are indicative of subjective perceptions and/or specific modes of PCFs?

RQ2. Do participants incorporate morally valenced terminology into their conflict narratives?

RQ3. Do thematic components of SIRCs identified within participants' conflict narratives correspond with the thematic dimensions of the conflict continuum model?

RQ4. How do participants describe their SIRCs when guided by multidimensional questions in the conflict continuum research instrument?

RQ5. What do participants identify as the key factors that determined the cause, durability, and consequences of their SIRC?

Research Method

This doctoral project utilized a qualitative study of conflict narratives to address research questions about the qualities of individual perceptions about interpersonal conflicts. The problem addressed through this research related to the inconsistencies and lack of clarity within conflict literature about the comprehensive definition, essence, and etiology of interpersonal conflicts. The literature review in Chapter 2 substantiated the central and determinative roles perceptions play during conflicts, which was most evident in studies addressing SIRCs and endogenous mechanisms of perception, interpretation, attribution, and meaning-making. However, it was also clear that the full spectrum of conflict experiences were not accurately portrayed by academic structures of conflict analysis and categorial dichotomies.

In order to avoid contributing further to imprecise patterns within conflict literature, it was essential that a novel, qualitative theory about the essence and etiology of conflicts be grounded in data comprising the perceptions and linguistic depictions of conflict as they were naturally remembered and expressed (Boström, 2019). It was for this reason that the doctoral project and research goals would not have been satisfied by a qualitative, systematic literature review. Insights from the exhaustive literature review presented in Chapter 2 were beneficial, but the qualitative analysis of research data was essential for the overarching goals of this study. Quantitative and mixed research methods were never a consideration, due to priorities of updating and grounding a comprehensive theory of conflict etiology and explicating the qualitative essence of interpersonal conflicts.

The design of this qualitative study was CGT, which is a research method that allows for open-ended, comparative exploration of qualitative data without biasing the data analysis or interpretations to fit into preexisting theories or hypotheses (Ali et al., 2020; Bryant & Charmaz,

2019; Salvini, 2019). The constructivist approach is distinct from classic grounded theory methodology in that it allows relevant, existing theories and researcher insights and experiences to be reflexively involved in the thematic and categorical analysis of new research data about SIRCs (Subramani, 2019). This degree of flexibility to respond to new ideas and creatively reorganize and integrate existing research made constructivist methodology within a qualitative study the most appropriate strategy to address the goals and research questions of this doctoral project. Data analysis entailed the process of identifying themes within each interview related to participants' beliefs about what influenced the course and outcomes of their SIRCs. The key themes found within each interview were organized into groups and patterns that represented the overall perspectives of the sample (Salvini, 2019; Zaidi, 2019). Literature addressing the endogenous source of perceptions and their effect on interpersonal interactions was incorporated into the grounded theory of conflict essence and etiology presented in Chapter 5.

Participants

Interpersonal conflict is not a phenomenon unique to any population; it is generally an unavoidable aspect of the human social experience. Conflict has been studied and observed across nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, generational groups, genders, relational contexts, and social roles. Given the evidence presented in Chapter 2 about the personalized filtering mechanisms that shape individual perceptions, expectations, interpretations, and beliefs about interpersonal relationships, the specific expressions of those perceptions are likely to be distinct between populations influenced by different underlying schemas related to cultural rules, social standards, relational norms, and moral judgments (Brett, 2018; Noh & Chow, 2019). In order to identify thematic patterns of perception that did not merely demonstrate cultural, moral, and generational differences, this study utilized a research population with similarities in the general

external factors that influence internal beliefs. At the same time, in order to maximize the relevance of these research findings toward a universal and comprehensive theory of conflict etiology and diagnostic analysis, the largest population group and most representative demographics within that group were established as the participant selection criteria.

Millennials are the most populous generational group in American and are commonly identified as those born between 1981–1997 (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; Frey, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019). At the time of this study, Millennials spanned ages 23 through 40. Fifty-six percent of Millennials are White, 49% identify as Christian, and 67% have at least some postsecondary education. Initial purposive sampling focused on Millennials who fit those mean demographic criteria, recruited through social media networks with snowballing methods. Participants fitting those primary demographic criteria were accepted for the study if they confirmed that they grew up within the continental United States of America, could recall a SIRC from their past that they were able to comfortably discuss, had access to some form of technology that supported Zoom software, had availability to schedule a 25-minute interview within two weeks, and contributed to an overall balanced gender ratio within the sample. Additionally, volunteers were asked which state they primarily grew up in, and any initial imbalance or bias toward a small number of states would have influenced participant selection during the latter half of recruitment.

It was assumed that the demographic criteria for this study represented a population generally familiar with the use of technology, capable of participating in a Zoom interview, with access to a device that could facilitate their virtual interview. Subjects were invited to participate via posts on social media, which was an appropriate method of recruitment for Millennials. In order to minimize any bias associated with my single, personal, social network, and to maximize

the representativeness of the participants in this study, no volunteers were selected for the study who were direct contacts on my social media accounts. By utilizing outer concentric networks of social media and snowballing recruitment methods, the participants of this study theoretically represented the perspectives of individuals in the mean demographic of American Millennials (Das, 2014; Laniado et al., 2018; Wickramasinghe et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Studies on relationship marketing have demonstrated that the widespread use of social media across platforms creates access to populations from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, sociopolitical beliefs, and geographic locations. Based on data collection procedures in other qualitative, grounded theory studies (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Guest et al., 2020; Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Sun et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2019), theoretical saturation and data adequacy was estimated to occur within 25 qualitative interviews.

Instrumentation

The data from this study was collected during individual, retrospective interviews, which comprised three methods of data collection (Interview Guide; Appendix E). Initially participants were asked to share a personal story about a previous SIRC, with minimal guidance about how to narrate their experience. The linguistic data from transcriptions of those conflict narratives was used to answer Research Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5. Upon completion of their relatively unstructured conflict narratives, participants were asked follow-up questions, to address details about the conflict that may not have been clear or mentioned during their story. Follow-up questions asked how long ago the conflict event occurred and the nature of the relationship between the primary characters of their story. These questions collected data about the types of relationships perceived to have sufficient value to generate SIRCs, the duration of SIRCs, and the salience of SIRC memories after the passage of time. Additional follow-up questions

included, “what was the final relational status at the end of this conflict?” “why do you think this conflict turned out the way it did?” and “what didn’t happen that needed to happen to resolve this conflict quickly?” These questions addressed qualities of perceptions and underlying PCFs that theoretically construct the essence and etiology of SIRCs, as explicated in the literature review of Chapter 2. Data from the follow-up questions contributed to the results for Research Questions 1, 3, and 5.

The third stage of the interview utilized a list of additional open-ended questions, structured to elicit retrospective insights, expressed as concise, written responses. The form used to collect written responses was labeled the *conflict continuum research instrument* (CCRI). As part of the critical analysis and evaluative review of literature presented in Chapter 2, evidence related to the essence and etiology of conflict was synthesized as a multidimensional continuum model, representing dynamic and interactive themes of perception. In contrast to prominent descriptive, categorical models of conflict that orient toward external and interpersonal factors, the conflict continuum was constructed as a perception-oriented framework that depicted the essence of conflict as an endogenous process of interpreting and responding to external circumstances. Further literature review elucidated the power of PCFs to generate and dictate perceptions about interpersonal relationships and interactions. All five research questions of this study addressed internal, subjective perceptions about SIRCs, so qualitative and constructivist methods were chosen to ensure the data highlighted qualities of conflict-related perceptions.

The thematic dimensions of perception about conflict used to construct the conflict continuum were developed as a synthesis of the exhaustive literature review. Theoretical synthesis is an important first step in CGT research, but does not constrain or influence the types of themes identified during stages of data analysis (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019, Chapters 7-8). By

eliciting unstructured conflict narratives from participants prior to any guided questions, narrative data comprised only the elements of conflict that participants readily chose to incorporate into their stories, while the follow-up questions drew out responses addressing deeper, more introspective aspects of relational beliefs and expectations that some participants had not expressed until they were presented with those questions. CGT methods allowed the emergent thematic dimensions of conflict to be grounded both in existing literature and in the qualitative data from this study.

To further prompt participants to express their internal, subjective perceptions about the SIRC, while avoiding priming or biasing effects, the conflict continuum was modified into a research instrument with thematic, open-ended questions (i.e., CCRI). The CCRI questions directly represented the dimensions of perceptions within the conflict continuum, but were written to be appropriate and understandable for a broad range of participants, without demanding an unrealistic degree of individual insight and awareness about self-schemas and underlying beliefs. Each written answer on the CCRI was limited to 150 characters, and these data were used to answer Research Questions 4 and 5. In order to minimize potential technology challenges of asking participants to complete a digital form during a virtual interview, I created an Adobe PDF with fillable forms and a button programmed to automatically send the completed form to my California Southern University student email address. Colorized versions of the CCRI were used during the study to increase intuitive comprehension and decrease the need for verbal instruction. Grayscale versions were presented in Appendices F and I.

Data Collection

Recruitment of research participants consisted of posting a flier with a general description of the study and participant selection criteria onto my personal Facebook and Instagram

accounts, and emailing this flier to my social network of contacts (Recruitment Flier; Appendix G). Individuals who received the flier were encouraged to share it further throughout their social networks and to send referrals. No volunteers were accepted who were direct, personal contacts on any of my social media accounts. This snowball sampling technique was intended to maximize variability of participants within the selection criteria. Interested individuals were instructed to email me, and I responded to all emails by offering to discuss any questions they have, and only after all questions were addressed did I send the Letter of Informed Consent (Appendix H), which described the purpose of the study, the virtual interview process, potential risks, benefits, time commitment, and rights of voluntary participants. The research subject selection criteria was also presented and affirmed on that form. Individuals who desired to participate in this study were able to digitally initial each page and sign the bottom of Letter of Informed Consent using any computer, tablet, or smart phone.

Participants were selected by convenience, based on the order that Letters of Informed Consent were submitted and on availability to schedule the virtual interview. Once an interview was scheduled, participants were emailed a link to join a private Zoom meeting room at the agreed upon time. Whenever a volunteer submitted their consent form, Adobe Sign automatically authenticated and finalize the document, and both the participant and I immediately received a copy of the agreement. Once recruitment began, all interviews were scheduled to accommodate participant availability, and recruitment and interviews were estimated to be completed within a time frame of one month. In the latter stages of recruitment, the gender and home state of volunteers were optional additions for the selection criteria of participants, if it became necessary to promote equitable representation in the sample between male and female participants from a wide range of locations within the United States.

At the beginning of each virtual interview, the description of the study and voluntary nature of participation was verbally restated. Participants were asked to verbally reaffirm their willing participation, to express understanding that they would be describing a personal conflict from their past, and that their voice would be recorded while they told their story and during the follow-up questions. The audio recordings of conflict narratives and follow-up questions were created using the Voice Memo App on an iPhone, and the audio files were later uploaded into Microsoft Word and digitally transcribed.

In grounded theory research, the preferred method of qualitative data collection is unstructured, retrospective interviews (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). This allows participants to tell their own story about a personal experience, from beginning to end, including reflections about meaning and significance attributed to that event. The re-experience and re-enactment of any distressing emotions that were part of the original experience is to be expected, and indicates a valid interview (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019, pp. 149-150). In this study, the 25-minute virtual interviews were retrospective, but had varying degrees of structure during three progressive stages of data collection. The stages of the interview follow a funneling technique that increasingly guided and focused participant responses (Williams et al., 2019).

Participants were asked to tell a story of a previous, personal SIRC, and were encouraged to structure it with a beginning, middle, and end, including their perspectives about what happened and why. In order to encourage conflict narratives with minimal identifying information about the participant or other parties, and to foster valenced expressions of the participants' underlying beliefs and judgments, participants were instructed to tell their story from a third person perspective and to replace the names of all characters in their story (including themselves) with descriptive labels. Participants were also encouraged to complete the entire

story in no more than 8 to 10 minutes, although they were not prevented from exceeding that suggested timeframe. Following the relatively unstructured, retrospective conflict narratives, participants were asked follow-up questions to clarify any missing information in their story, such as the length of time since the conflict occurred, the nature of the social relationship between the parties, which character in the story represented themselves, the quality of the relationship at the conclusion of the conflict, and the reasons the conflict unfolded as it did. If salient elements of the conflict story were missing or unclear, open-ended, neutrally valenced questions were asked to ensure the full range of data was collected.

The final stage of the interview was in written form, and so was not included in the audio recording or subsequent transcripts. In order to clarify the underlying perceptions, expectations, emotions, and beliefs that participants had about their past conflicts, they completed the CCRI (Appendices F and I). This created linguistic data about underlying perceptions that may not have been fully evident during the unstructured conflict narratives. The CCRIs were emailed to participants during the Zoom interview, and participants were instructed to open the file and share their screen as they complete the questions. When technical challenges arose, the file was alternatively opened and shared from my computer screen within the Zoom application, and participant answers were written into the document and saved on my computer when finished. Participants wrote concise answers to introspective questions about their beliefs, interpretations, expectations, emotions, and attributions during the conflict, and also indicated the subjective severity of each of these dimensions of their experience by placing a mark on a continuum next to each question. The CCRI questions prompted some participants to reflect on their conflicts from a different perspective than the one represented in their story and allowed them to more directly consider the role their personal beliefs played in their conflict experience.

Upon submission of the written portion, participants were informed that they had completed the interview. Conflict researchers have demonstrated the potent effects of practicing gratitude and cognitive reappraisal to improve negative cognitions and emotions that are reactivated when participants reflect on past conflicts (Alkozei et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2020; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020). In order to promote beneficial outcomes for participants of this study, participants were invited to verbally reflect on any specific ways they imagined that they grew as a person or gained valuable insights and lessons as a result of their SIRC experience. They were asked what they learned about themselves along the way, and how they approached relationships or conflicts differently based on those personal insights. Finally, participants were asked to identify a few things that were present within their lives during the resent month that they were grateful for, and then explain why those things were meaningful to them. This brief discussion at the conclusion of the interview was intended to reduce emotional discomfort associated with the topic of conflict, to benefit participants by promoting positive effects of gratitude and reappraisal, and to encourage new insights and evaluations about previous interpersonal conflicts.

During and after data collection, all research data existed in digital form only, and was stored in a private, offline, encrypted, external hard drive. It was explicitly stated to participants and the IRB that all data would be stored on the offline hard drive for seven years following the completion of the study, and then would be permanently destroyed. The only record of participant names was their signatures on the consent forms. All consent forms were given a random numeric code, and all participant data were contained in digital folders identified only by the codes. Upon completion of the study, all email communications between participants and the

researcher were deleted, and the student email account was also routinely destroyed by the university following successful defense of the doctoral project. After each interview, the audio file was transcribed into text using encrypted, offline software within Microsoft Word, verified for accuracy by myself , and deleted from the iPhone. Any identifying information or distinct details contained within conflict narratives were irreversibly redacted from the transcript or replaced with generic nouns. The information about participants retained as part of the research data was age, gender, education, state where the participant grew up, length of time since conflict occurred, and the nature of the relationship between parties in conflict. Those demographic data were considered while interviews were conducted to ensure a representative sample was collected, but demographic information were never be presented as individually identifiable profiles connection to participants' conflict descriptions.

Data Analysis

Kathy Charmaz developed the constructivist approach to grounded theory research and published several methods books, handbooks, and instructive articles that guided data collection and analysis throughout the study (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014, 2017). CGT requires continuous acknowledgement and reflection of researchers' motivated contribution to the content, contextualization, and conclusions of their research. Constructivists consciously grapple with the influence of their personal values and preconceptions as they communicate with participants, structure research questions, and interpret sociolinguistic data (Zaidi, 2019). CGT assumes and accepts that previous research and theoretical foundations influence present research processes. Reflexivity helps researchers maintain awareness of personal biases and assumptions (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). Existing theoretical perspectives are not forbidden, but they

must undergo the same rigorous critique and critical skepticism that is applied to research data analysis as new, integrative theories are constructed.

CGT conducts data collection and analysis simultaneously and emphasizes constant comparison, which allows the researcher to adapt to emergent themes and modify analysis to reflect what is discovered along the way (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014). The analysis process was planned to begin with open coding of words and phrases from the interview transcripts and written answers, in relation to the research questions of the study. Data collection and analysis are iterative processes that entail ongoing memo-writing, reconceptualization of the initial codes, possible refinement of interview questions to focus on emergent themes, and constant reflexive analysis of how the researcher's own theoretical assumptions, value positions, and sociolinguistic constructs are influencing outcomes. The categories that develop during initial coding were later to be reassessed, clarified, and regrouped based on similarities between emerging themes. The deeper processes of focused coding and sorting were intended to create higher-level categories and subcategories of key thematic perceptions about SIRCs expressed by participants.

The CGT methods place direct attention on the potential for researchers' preconceptions to bias results (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014). Considering my personal background, experiences, and belief system, along with many cultural, societal, and gender-related factors, the objectives and theoretical interpretations within this doctoral project were likely influenced by my high value for autonomy and internal locus of control. Accordingly, a personal belief that motivated the current study was that SIRCs are not adequately explained or defined by external, circumstantial factors; rather, they are driven by endogenous mechanisms that are subjective and individually personalized. Constructing a study to identify the internal perceptions associated

with SIRCs could plausibly be interpreted as a demonstration of confirmation bias. This type of ongoing reflexivity is embedded throughout CGT methodologies, and open acknowledgement of my outcome expectations helped me remain constantly circumspect as I analyzed data, constructed themes, and drew conclusions.

Thematic categories were constructed and reconstructed as new transcripts contributed additional qualitative data that affirmed, challenged, or expanded the emergent patterns (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical saturation signified an endpoint based on adequate representation of the full range of participant perceptions about SIRCs (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). When ongoing interviews no longer produced data representing novel properties, data collection would cease, and the categories were then be sorted into integrated, theoretical statements that answered each of the research questions, respectively. Based on similarly designed studies, up to 25 interviews were estimated as necessary to saturate the data and foster valid and reliable conclusions (Guest et al., 2020; Rai & Agarwal, 2017; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019).

The results of this study are presented in Chapter 4 as answers to the research questions. Themes that emerged from the data were defined and explained, using linguistic examples to clarify concepts. The systematic processes of initial and focused coding and theory construction, dictated by CGT methodology, have been argued to produce results of equal empirical and utility value as non-qualitative methods of research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2017; du Plessis & van der Westhuizen, 2018; Levitt et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). The reliance upon qualitative inductive and abductive reasoning as a logical process of inference allows grounded theory research to generate original theories through rule-governed methods that are replicable and promote valid conclusions. Validity and reliability of grounded theory studies are established

by the research process, and quality of CGT studies are measured by the strategies utilized throughout data collection, coding, and analysis (Berthelsen et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Theories generated by CGT methodologies are best evaluated by qualitative criteria of originality, credibility, usefulness, and resonance (Berthelsen et al., 2017; Charmaz, 2014).

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The relationship between perceptions and significant interpersonal relational conflicts (SIRCs) was strongly supported throughout existing literature (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Egorov et al., 2019; Lee & Holyoak, 2020; Raj et al., 2020). This study addressed a deeper layer of conflict psychology by focusing on the qualitative and thematic patterns of perceptions that are demonstrated when individuals describe and reflect upon their personal experiences of SIRCs. All 25 participants in this sample creatively narrated stories of previous SIRCs and then answered open-ended questions in spoken and written form. This progressively guided process of introspection and reflection revealed participants' perceptions about conflict events, beliefs about relationships, the essence of their conflicts, and personalized conditions of conflict etiology. Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) processes of inductive and abductive data analysis and constant comparison generated emergent themes that were most prevalent and salient within and among participant interviews (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019; Charmaz, 2014).

The research questions addressed in this study were:

RQ1. What words and phrases do participants include within their conflict narratives that are indicative of subjective perceptions and/or specific modes of PCFs?

RQ2. Do participants incorporate morally valenced terminology into their conflict narratives?

RQ3. Do thematic components of SIRCs identified within participants' conflict narratives correspond with the thematic dimensions of the conflict continuum model?

RQ4. How do participants describe their SIRCs when guided by multidimensional questions in the conflict continuum research instrument?

RQ5. What do participants identify as the key factors that determined the cause, durability, and consequences of their SIRC?

Participants

The mean demographics of American Millennials provided the criteria for participants in this study (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Council of Economic Advisers, 2014; Frey, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019). Accordingly, all participants identified themselves as White, Christian, born between 1981–1997, with some postsecondary education. Due to an initial abundance of female volunteers, the sample contained the maximum number of estimated participants approved by the IRB (*N* = 25), and recruitment efforts primarily targeted men in order to produce a gender-balanced sample. In order to avoid biasing the sample with distinct cultural schemas associated with specific regions of the country, participants were asked to identify the state where they grew up. Although no single state displayed an overpowering presence in the sample, there was an observable proximity between the states associated with participants in this study, and a notable absence of representation from western states, as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Geographic Distribution of Participants' Home States

In order to fully protect the confidentiality of all participants of this study and the detailed information each individual provided about a SIRC in their past, the demographic data were presented as summaries of the full sample, without demographic profiles of individual

participants that might expose their identities when combined with their narrative data. The specific, nuanced quotes from participants about their SIRC experiences were essential elements of the research presented in this chapter. Data were credited to individual participants only when necessary and were labeled with randomly assigned participant identification numbers (P-No.).

Table 1

Sample Demographics Compared to Millennial Population Averages

GENDER	***n***	**% of sample**
All Participants	25	100
Women	13	52
Men	12	48

AGE	**Range of birth years**	**Lowest age**	**Highest age**	**Mean age**	**Median age**
All Millennials	1981–1997	23	40	31.5	
All Participants	1981–1997	23	39	32.12	33
Women	1981–1993	27	39	34.2	35
Men	1981–1997	23	39	29.8	28.5

EDUCATION	**Some college** (associates degree or bachelor's in-progress)		**Bachelor's degree or higher**		**Master's degree or higher**	
	n	% of group	*n*	% of group	*n*	% of group
All Millennials		28		39		
Women				43		
Men				36		
All Participants	4	16	21	84		
			12	48	9	36
Women	1	8	12	92		
Men	3	25	9	75		

Note. Millennial demographic data is from Bialik and Fry's (2019) report.

The gender ratio of participants in this study was evenly balanced between men and women. Table 1 provides demographic descriptions of this research sample in comparison with the overall population of Millennials. This sample represented the full range of birth years associated with Millennials. The median and mean ages of participants in this study were slightly

higher than the mean for Millennials, and female participants were older than the men within the sample. The education levels of participants were far above averages in the general population, and 36% of participants had obtained a master's degree or PhD. However, the elevated ratio of women versus men with college degrees was similar to that of all Millennials.

Participants were recruited for this study through an informational recruitment flier (Appendix G), which was posted on my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts and emailed to less than 20 of my close, personal contacts. No participants were accepted who were direct contacts on any of my social media or email accounts. Individuals were encouraged to distribute the flier throughout their own social networks, and these snowball sampling methods rapidly produced inquiries from interested volunteers. The flier was posted daily on my social media accounts until a balanced sample of men and women had agreed to participate. Recruitment began on March 5, 2021 and ended on March 16, 2021. Volunteers were accepted based on convenience sampling, in the chronological order that the Letters of Informed Consent (Appendix H) were signed and interviews were scheduled. The maximum IRB-approved number of female participants volunteered within the first 24 hours, and 13 interviews with women were conducted March 6–13, 2021. In order to balance the gender ratio and generate a representative sample, the heading of the recruitment flier was modified on March 6 to state, "MALE Volunteers Needed!" The 12 male participants were interviewed March 8–16, 2021.

Three volunteers submitted signed consent forms without proceeding to schedule interviews because the maximum number of participants had already been reached. One additional participant was interviewed, but because her relational conflict was still actively unfolding without any identifiable end point for her to reflect upon, her data were not retained as part of this study. The instructional script was modified after her interview to emphasize the need

for participants to discuss a conflict from their past that had reached some point of conclusion, even if consequences were ongoing. As interviews were conducted, participants repeatedly asked clarifying questions about specific aspects of the interview instructions and the post-narrative follow-up questions, as well as the first two questions on the original CCRI (CCRI v.1, Appendix F). Written phrases in the research instruments were modified following the initial 11 interviews, to improve clarity and consistency in instructions for all participants and to decrease the need for verbal clarification during interviews. The revised phrases in the Interview Guide 2.1 (Appendix J) were indicated by bold font. A modified CCRI (CCRI 2.1; Appendix I) was used for the final 14 interviews.

As was predicted for participants in this generational population, none of the participants indicated a lack of familiarity using the Zoom application for video meetings, and participants did not indicate any struggle with the virtual interview process, regardless of whether they used phones or computers. During each interview, participants provided data about their conflicts through progressive stages of guidance, beginning with an unstructured, third-person narrative about a previous SIRC, followed by open-ended spoken questions, and ending with written completion of the CCRI. The CCRI was completed directly by participants on their own devices during the initial five interviews, but due to malfunctioning auto-save and auto-email features within the Adobe document, the final 20 participants completed their CCRI by viewing my shared screen within the Zoom application and dictating their answers, which I typed verbatim into the text boxes on their behalf, along with edits and corrections they instructed me to make. Following the interviews, the audio recordings of spoken narratives and follow-up questions were transcribed into a Word document, reviewed for accuracy, and edited with punctuation to

reflect each participant's verbal phrasing. Specific, identifying details, such as city names or unique occupations, were redacted from the written transcripts of the interviews.

Interviews lasted between 25 and 75 minutes, with an estimated average of 50 minutes. Nearly all participants told their conflict stories within the 5–10 minutes allotted in the instructions, but some also required 5–10 minutes of preparation before beginning their narrative, due to difficulties imagining how to recount their personal experience from a third-person perspective or indecision while creating a descriptive label for the individuals in their story. Participants frequently chose to provide lengthy answers to the follow-up questions, and often expanded greatly on their stories during this section of the interview. During this time, participants' beliefs about relationships, attributions about the other party's motivations, perspectives about the requirements for forgiveness, and autobiographical reflections were elucidated, and these discussions were all retained in the written transcripts of the interviews. In general, the participants told stories of SIRCs that had a significant and meaningful impact on their lives, and they desired to discuss these topics with greater detail and length than was initially anticipated in the design of this study. The post-interview questions were created solely to provide benefits to the participants and promote aftereffects of well-being and hopefulness. In approximately half the interviews, these questions prompted an additional 10–20 minutes of reflective comments from the participants, with observably positive effects on their affect and outlook.

Participants were instructed to describe any significant relational conflict that they personally experienced in the past. No further guidance was provided regarding the nature of the relationship they had with the other party, the impact or duration of the conflict, or the recency of their experience. Of the 25 SIRCs presented in this study, 44% were with a member of the

family-of-origin, 24% were with a spouse, 20% were with a friend who was also a colleague or mentor, and 12% were with in-laws. The implicit importance of family members and impact of conflicts in these relationships was apparent, and when all family roles were combined into one category, 80% of the conflicts in this sample were with a family member. Tables 2 and 3 present descriptive details about the conflicts that participants in this study chose to discuss.

Table 2

Relational Roles of Other Parties in Participants' Conflicts

Relational category	Relational role	All participants		Women		Men	
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Family-of-origin	Mother	4	16	3	23	1	8
	Father	1	4	0	0	1	8
	Both parents	1	4	0	0	1	8
	Sibling	4	16	2	15	2	17
	Relative	1	4	0	0	1	8
Family through marriage	Spouse	6	24	3	23	3	25
	Mother-In-Law	2	8	2	15	0	0
	Both in-law parents	1	4	0	0	1	8
Purposeful	Friendships with colleagues	3	12	3	23	0	0
	Mentors/Leaders	2	8	0	0	2	17
Mothers	Mothers and Mothers-In-Law	6	24	5	38	1	8

Note. The Purposeful and Mothers categories suggest significant differences related to gender.

Table 3

Distance and Duration of Participants' Conflicts

		All participants	Women	Men
Time since the conflict began	Range	1 week–20 years	1 year–20 years	1 week–15 years
	Mean	6.4 years	7.6 years	5.1 years
	Median	3 years	4 years	3 years
Time since the conflict concluded	Range	1 week–18 years	2 weeks–18 years	1 week–12 years
	Mean	3 years	3.7 years	2.2 years
	Median	11.5 months	1.5 years	9 months
Duration of the conflict	Range	1 day–14 years	1 week–13 years	1 day–14 years
	Mean	3.4 years	3.9 years	2.9 years
	Median	2 years	2 years	14 months

Results: Research Question One

The first research question sought to identify the words and phrases within participants' conflict narratives that were indicative of subjective perceptions and specific modes of personalized cognitive filters (PCFs). The structure of this question presumed that participant narratives would discernably indicate the presence of specific modes of PCFs and subjective perceptions. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 provided the theoretical basis for this assertion, as well as the distinct categories of PCFs that framed the results of RQ1. Interview transcripts were initially and continuously analyzed using CGT methods, which prioritize emergent thematic findings without constraints of preexisting theoretical assumptions. CGT analysis generated a taxonomy of novel categorical and thematic constructs associated with remembered experiences of SIRCs (presented in Table 4), which was utilized to enhance RQ1—3 presentations of results and subsequent discussions. The perpetual phases of CGT analysis identified clear indications of PCFs within the sociolinguistic data of the interview transcripts. RQ1 results were organized by the thematic categories of PCFs presented in the literature review, beginning with three distinct modes of neurocognitive mechanisms, followed by results indicative of cognitive filters, and ending with data demonstrating a particularly salient theme of moral judgments.

Participants in this study were instructed to tell a story about a personal SIRC experience, and they were encouraged to emphasize their perspectives about what happened and why. They constructed and expressed their stories using a wide range of creative, emotional, valenced, and culturally nuanced styles. Some participants told stories in a relatively objective manner, while others were far more animated and emotionally aroused while recollecting their subjective experience, their retrospective appraisals of the conflict, and their assessments about the other

party. The open-ended follow-up questions invited participants to add clarifying details and express opinions about underlying causal factors, lingering effects on the relationship, and reactions that may have ameliorated the outcome. The progressive stages of these retrospective interviews produced an expansive collection of sociolinguistic data infused with subjective perceptions, and many distinct modes of PCFs were directly and indirectly indicated.

Interview transcripts were analyzed through inductive and abductive CGT processes of evaluating the aspects of the experience most salient to each participant and the story they intended to tell, while also identifying implicit relational expectations, assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs embedded within their narrative. Words and phrases throughout the transcripts were coded with constant consideration of contextualized, intended meaning, and iterative reflexivity was used throughout all stages of coding to promote accurate representation of the participants' perspectives. Descriptive and attributional statements about either party's identity, emotions, intentions, moral character, actions, reactions, and obligations were coded accordingly. Statements were also coded when they directly demonstrated or indirectly implied core beliefs, schemas, cognitive biases and distortions, moral judgments, processes related to forgiveness and reconciliation, relational value, issues impacting personal identity and worth, and autobiographical interpretations.

Because all the allotted slots for female volunteers were filled prior to initial contact from any male volunteers, the total number of participants was determined by the need for a balanced ratio of male and female perspectives. In order to avoid possible biasing effects caused by analyzing all of the female transcripts first, transcript analysis was conducted in random order after all interviews were conducted. Initial codes and emergent themes underwent constant cycles of reconstruction and reconceptualization, and the overarching structure of categories and

themes was in its final form by the midpoint of data analysis, based on concepts that arose from the first 13 transcripts that were analyzed. The remaining 12 transcripts established theoretical saturation, enriched and crystallized the thematic constructs, and strengthened distinctions between male and female perspectives and experiences. Table 4 contains the taxonomy of results, which comprised identifying labels and definitive properties for seven higher-level categories and 28 thematic subcategories depicting the essence of SIRCs.

Approximately 5–7 themes were identified within each transcript that represented the major viewpoints and core issues that were overtly emphasized by the participant, and these were labeled “directly salient.” Additional themes were often present, relevant, and meaningful to the framework of the narrative, but were labeled “indirectly relevant” if not intentionally acknowledged by participants as a central focus of their story. Transcripts from men contained a mean of 5.9 direct themes and 8.4 indirect themes. Transcripts from women contained a mean of 6.2 direct themes and 8.5 indirect themes. Table 5 reported the prevalence of these themes within sample, categorized by their direct or indirect representation of participants’ beliefs. The descriptive properties of these themes (Table 4) alongside evidence of their prevalence within subsets of the sample (Table 5) demonstrated the products of inductive and abductive processes connecting spoken words and phrases with theoretical modes of PCFs.

Table 4

Thematic Concepts Depicting the Essence of Interpersonal Relational Conflicts

Category label and definitive properties	Theme	Definitive properties of the theme
Identity protection The conflict is perceived as a threat to personal identity and deep human needs for acceptance, validation, and worth. Identified by efforts to protect, defend, and define oneself.	**Trust-violation**	Broken trust in matters where mutual concern and care were expected. When issues of core importance, interdependence, value, or reliance were entrusted to the other party, and there were violated with a nuance of personalized betrayal, perceived to be targeted specifically against oneself.
	Vulnerability	Acute fears of rejection or deep desires for acceptance and validation. Expressed feelings of risk and vulnerability, threatened by active, direct rejection or passive acts of being ignored, dismissed, or criticized.
	Identity	Statements defining self-worth, personal identity, qualification, and worthiness. Emphasis is on defending oneself against threats to personal character, integrity, reputation, or innate value.
	Motivated-summary	Simplistic statements that summarize conclusions about events to support self-narratives and desired outcomes. Summary interpretations that affirm self/life schemas, create meaning, validate personal choices, or suggest oversimplified solutions.
Judgmental attributions Explaining conflicts as a product of the faults and flaws of the other party, based upon assumed universal standards of morality, maturity, and appropriate behavior.	**Selfish-control**	Depicting the other party as seeking control or attention with selfish and self-serving motivations, at the expense of others.
	Right-and-wrong	Presenting the conflict in terms of moral absolutes, depicting the other party as guilty, placing blame, or condemning their actions, attitudes, or beliefs. Expressed desires for justice or admission of wrongdoing. Involves an implicit presumption that oneself is morally right.
	Slander	Repeated references to gossip and rumors, which play a primary role in the conflict. Communication between other parties that criticizes oneself or undermines personal reputation.
	Excuse	Core offense is focused on the other party's refusal to take personal responsibility for a harm done, and on making excuses or justifications.
	Insecurity	Depicting the other party as deeply jealous and insecure, and explaining their behaviors by these motives and deficiencies.
	Communication	Poor communication is identified as the source of harm or reason for prolonged, unresolved conflicts. Describing the other party's communication as harmfully aggressive, harsh, presumptuous, passive, absent, avoidant, or indirect.
Aftereffects Interpersonal responses to identified conflicts, beliefs about how conflicts should be resolved, or descriptions of the damaging effects and costs of unresolved conflicts.	**Resolution**	Actions steps, strategies, methods, and beliefs about how to resolve conflicts, including various portrayals of forgiveness and subsequent alterations to interpersonal dynamics. Resolution behaviors may involve willful decisions to release or forget the offense, or may depict efforts to apologize, make amends, rebuild trust, and increase understanding.
	Repercussion	Negative or diminished relational dynamics following a conflict. Reports of ongoing tension, hostility, criticism, relational and conversational boundaries, and self-protective motivations. Restrictions, avoidance, or termination of ongoing communication and interaction. Emotions of helplessness, antipathy, grief, injury, regret, and disappointment.

Category label and definitive properties	Theme	Definitive properties of the theme
Mega-Category: **Expectations** — **Self/Life schemas** Core beliefs and assumptions about self-identity, the nature of life and the world, predictable events, and acceptable human behaviors. Often revealed indirectly as the implicit framework of the narrative.	**Caught-off-guard**	Behavior, interaction, or information unfolds in an unexpected context, or violates relational norms and expectations in a sudden or surprising way. The atypical, unexpected unfolding of events plays an important role in the perception of offense.
	Rules-of-life	Matter-of-fact statements that reveal deeply held assumptions about how life works. Reducing complex dynamics to simplified rules, depicting the way things are and must be. Violations of these rules trigger conflict, and rules establish optional actions and reactions following the conflict event.
	Bad-reaction	Impulsive and harmful reactions to unmet expectations or assumptions, which then significantly escalate the conflict or become a central component of offense.
	Moral-self	Actions or choices based on an inner duty to do the right thing and take personal responsibility. Depicting oneself as self-sacrificing and morally upright, or superior to others during conflict events or responses.
Interpersonal relational schemas Core beliefs and assumptions about the nature of relationships and specific social roles, the foundations of social interactions, interpersonal dependence, and the stability of relationships, roles, and norms.	**Relational-rulebook**	Assumptions and expectations about the nature of a specific relationship, who will do what and how, and the range and tone of acceptable interactions. Rules are based on established dynamics and norms, or may come from underlying personal beliefs, desires, or stereotypes about the roles of genders, spouses, and family positions. Rules address loyalty, etiquette, reconciliation, fairness, social status, and power levels.
	Permanence	Beliefs, desires, and expectations for relational permanence, stability, security, and mutual commitment. A confidence that the relationship is impervious to threats and unconditional. If conflict exposes limitations, vulnerability, or conditions in the relationship, this becomes the primary threat and offense.
	Agreement	Belief that agreements and promises are trustworthy and unbreakable. An unequivocal expectation that agreements must be kept, and life choices must be guided by honoring promises.
	Zero-sum-choice	Opposing desires for decisions with significant mutual impact, in which the belief or goal of one party directly contradicts the other's will. The opposing goal is perceived as a threat to a deeply held moral belief, personal safety, agency, or identity.
	Change	Well-established roles, norms, and relational dynamics are revised or modified due to circumstantial or intrapersonal growth in one party, and this triggers resistance, refusal, criticism, or hostility from the other party. Emphasis is on a perceived threat associated with these changes.
Transcendence The influence of higher-level values that overrule impulsive reactions and reframe perspectives about the conflict. Efforts to rise above the conflict based on core value systems.	**Growth**	Statements reflecting personal growth, maturing through stages of life, identity development and transformation. Presented as a means of distancing oneself from unresolved conflicts, a period within conflict wherein one gains new perspectives, or lessons learned from past conflicts. Emphasis is on gratitude or pride in personal growth.
	Empathy	Acknowledging the other party's perspective, emotions, circumstances, or motives in a non-critical or compassionate way. Expressing care and concern for the other party. Addressing others' needs and innate worth.
	Spirituality	Placing beliefs about morality, faith in God, and spiritual identity above other interests. Evaluating the conflict and deciding how to respond based on explicit values from a personally defining, deeply held faith.

Category label and definitive properties	Theme	Definitive properties of the theme
Understanding A high value for agreement of thoughts, ideas, and interpretations between conflicted parties. Effort is directed at increasing understanding individually and between both parties.	**Lack-of-understanding**	Conflict is explained as a neutrally valenced misunderstanding or misinterpretation, without verdicts of guilt, fault, or blame. One or both parties had insufficient information and interpreted events through differing viewpoints.
	Feeling-understood	Emphasis is placed on personal motivations, intentions, desires, and perspectives. Clear indications of an unfulfilled desire to be understood, or of deep feelings of being misunderstood or mischaracterized during the conflict. Events are framed by the impact on oneself, which the other party did not acknowledge, appreciate, or comprehend.
	Seeking-to-understand	Demonstrated belief that conflicts can be resolved with wisdom, insight, and understanding. Reacting to conflict by seeking out advice and wise counsel, working with professional counselors, with efforts directed in pursuit of mutual understanding.
	Looking-back	Ascribing current attitudes and behaviors to negative experiences from the past, particularly during childhood. Suggestions that previous, unresolved trauma, abuse, habits, or unhealthy family dynamics are influencing the actions, reactions, and capabilities of oneself or others.

The data in Table 5 demonstrated how some themes were consistently background components of conflict narratives, while others tended to dominate the storyline. Indirect themes such as motivated-summary, resolution, and repercussion were frequently present, and often reflected breaks in the plot wherein the narrator inserted retrospective interpretations and connected conflict events with lingering personal effects. Themes that served primarily salient functions, such as vulnerability, right-and-wrong, and identity, addressed the matters of great personal value that had been threatened or damaged by the conflict. Some themes revealed a significant variance between the beliefs and behaviors of men and women, such as the propensity for women to explain current problems by looking-back, or the damages men attributed to bad-reactions.

Table 5

Number of Direct and Indirect Themes in Participants' Conflicts

Category	Theme	All participants		Women		Men	
		Indirectly relevant	Directly salient	Indirectly relevant	Directly salient	Indirectly relevant	Directly salient
Identity protection	**Trust-violation**	6	7	4	5*	2	2
	Vulnerability	0	12*	0	6*	0	6*
	Identity	6	12	3	7*	3	5
	Motivated-summary	17	0	9	0	8	0
Judgmental attributions	**Selfish-control**	1	4	1	1	0	3
	Right-and-wrong	3	10	1	7	2	3
	Slander	2	1	0	1	2	0
	Excuse	2	3	1	2	1	1
	Insecurity	2	6*	2	4*	0	2
	Communication	9	9	4	5	5	4
Aftereffects	**Resolution**	17	2	8	0	9	2
	Repercussion	17	1	10	1	7	0
Self/life schemas	**Caught-off-guard**	10	6	4	3	6	3
	Rules-of-life	10	6	3	5	7	1
	Bad-reaction	3	5	1	1	2	4
	Moral-self	9	9*	5	4	4	5*
Interpersonal relational schemas	**Relational-rulebook**	11	12*	5	6	6	6*
	Permanence	5	3	2	2	3	1
	Agreement	1	2	1	1	0	1
	Zero-sum-choice	9	3	5	2	4	1
	Change	11	6	6	4	5	2
Transcendence	**Growth**	7	5	5	2	2	3
	Empathy	11	2	4	1	7	1
	Spirituality	4	4	1	1	3	3
Understanding	**Lack-of-understanding**	7	3	4	1	3	2
	Feeling-understood	10	11*	6	5	4	6*
	Seeking-to-understand	12	5	8	2	4	3
	Looking-back	9	2	7	1	2	1

Note. The "All participants" sample ($N = 25$) is the sum of male ($n = 12$) and female ($n = 13$) participants. The category of identity protection comprised the most significant and weighty class of definitive, salient themes.

* Reflects the key themes that played the most central, definitive role whenever they were present in a narrative.

Statements Indicative of Subjective Perception

Perception was one of the neurocognitive mechanisms addressed in Chapter 2, and includes selective—attention process of filtering sensory data, making meaning of momentary and broad life experiences, identifying salient information, interpreting subjective cues, constructing and protecting a concept of personal identity, and evaluating the emotions, intentions, and behaviors of others (Egorov et al., 2019; Farmer & Maister, 2017; Klein & O'Brien, 2018; Kunzmann et al., 2017; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Rubin et al., 2019). The data from this sample were saturated with examples of subjective perceptions related to self-identity, attributions about the other party, relational stereotypes predicting interactions, mood disorders drawing attention to negative content, and interpretations of past events that determined future predictions.

P-3 (randomly assigned participant identification code: P-No.) told a conflict story with directly salient themes of vulnerability, caught-off-guard, identity, bad-response, communication, and looking-back. P-3 made several statements depicting a personal identity based on being a caregiver and provider, but details within the transcript suggested a possible counter-narrative, based on P-3's limited material resources and patterns of personal struggles. Phrases verbalized by P-3 that indicated subjective self-perceptions included:

> I'm very empathetic, very communal. If people around me aren't happy, I'm not happy. … [Using personal income] to sustain [myself], [my] mother, [my] roommate, and some other people, in this kind of a pipeline. … I devoted myself entirely to this. … I just like helping people. … Every suicide attempt was some variation of that: me wanting to help somebody and not being able to, because of what I was or wasn't.

Words and phrases demonstrating P-3's subjective assessments of the emotions, intentions, behaviors, and priorities of the other party (OP) included:

> Malice. … Doesn't have a lot in the way of compassion, emotion. … Responded in a very cold and calculating manner and blamed [me] for everything. … Once [OP] found out the damage that it would do … [OP] didn't care. … Is robotic almost. … Doesn't want my forgiveness. … The anger that [OP] has for me is palpable.

Participants made frequent attributional statements, based on their subjective perceptions about the other party's emotions, motivations, and beliefs. Examples of the words and phrases demonstrating assessments about others included: "She realized I wasn't going anywhere. It became almost an attention thing, like I was taking the attention away from her. And I was taking her baby … away from her" (P-12; selfish-control theme). "[OP] just felt jealous or intimidated by another guy" (P-10; insecurity theme). "And [OP], I think, felt like some guilt, and probably also, for more reasons like that, started to not reach out as much" (P-20; empathy and right-and-wrong themes). "[OP] was like, straight face, no emotion, no empathy, and just didn't say anything. … [OP] completely shut down. [OP] was not at all interested in what [I] had to say" (P-14; vulnerability theme). "If [she] disagreed, it was because she did not appreciate his leadership style and his authority as the man in the relationship" (P-13; relational-rulebook and rules-of-life themes). "[My] baby was getting more attention than her baby was. … A lot of it had to do with jealousy. … I think she just needed a scapegoat" (P-11; insecurity theme). "You're choosing this now … it's willful ignorance on your part. … It's [OP] choosing to play the victim in this situation" (P-16; moral-self and right-and-wrong themes).

P-23 had a conflict comprising directly salient themes of identity, caught-off-guard, agreement, right-and-wrong, communication, and feeling-understood. P-23 made the following

statements revealing stereotyped beliefs about mothers-in-law that influenced personal attitudes toward the mother-in-law in this conflict:

> Basically, just dismissal of most of [her] concerns. … [She] may not have said all those things, or been quite so harsh or rude, if her [family-of-origin] had been on the call. … I think mother-in-law relationships are kinda always going to be a little bit difficult. My [spouse] definitely had a tough relationship with [her] growing up. So, we already weren't super close, and so, I hadn't put a ton of work into investing in that. … If it was someone that I was closer to, or had talked to more, … or whose advice I took more seriously, I might have more reevaluated.

Seventeen participants demonstrated an indirect but relevant presence of the motivated-summary theme, which entailed statements of meaning-making, summaries reflecting a broader life narrative, and salient moments that became life-defining symbols. P-16 made the following synopsis, which demonstrated subjective perceptions of a distinct life narrative: "Everybody came to the wedding. It was a great wedding. It was an awesome party. There was great drinks. Parents were there. Everybody had a great time. … We all think back on that wedding as a sweet, wonderful experience." P-19 demonstrated similar broad conclusions about a conflict outcome, but with a valenced life narrative distinctly different from that depicted by P-16:

> I was under the impression, my entire life… that my family had my back, that they were good people. … I can't even look at old photos now, because it's like the image I had of them is not what it is. It's all tainted. It's all erased. It's all gone. … [I] was left having to grieve the loss of [my] entire family and [my] entire existence.

Subjective perceptions of the participants often directed narrative attention toward circumstantial details that were personally displeasing and in opposition to the opinions of the

other party. Examples of words and phrases depicting this included: “I was like … ‘I don't feel safe.’ But [they] always brushed me off. Like, ‘It's fine. That's how guys react. He's a guy” (P-10; vulnerability theme). “[I] realized that the dishes are still in the sink. Why are these dishes not done?” (P-2; right-and-wrong and rules-of-life themes). “If that means that you need to control the little things about my life, then I think it's an unhealthy thing” (P-24; relational-rulebook and insecurity themes). “I’m not asking for anything big. … I'm just asking for basic things. Like, I want to be a part of the decisions that affect me … respect me and respect our story. … That's just marriage!” (P-14; identity, vulnerability, and relational-rulebook themes). “[I] would always find expired foods and things that were just unsanitary. … I am not comfortable preparing food in an environment that hasn't been sanitized or has cockroaches” (P-21; right-and-wrong and rules-of-life themes).

Statements Indicative of Remembered Emotions

Emotional arousal has the power to affect all other modes of PCFs directly and indirectly (Bowen et al., 2018; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). Neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms are fundamentally interactive, hence the emotions recalled by participants in the context of this study may differ significantly from emotions that were activated when the events first occurred. However, it is the participants’ retrospective perceptions about their conflict experiences that influence lasting beliefs and behaviors. Terminology depicting emotion was directly expressed in 100% of the interview transcripts (presented in Table 6), and the valenced qualities often changed and evolved along with progressive stages of the conflict story.

Table 6

Participant Expressions of Personal Emotions Associated With Conflict

Most salient themes in each story		Emotion words in the transcript	Participant ID code
Vulnerability *	**Trust-violation ***	Broke trust; very turbulent; not ready; disagreed vehemently; fears; self-protective; protected; willing	P-4
Vulnerability *	**Trust-violation ***	Resented; don't feel safe; dumbfounded; awkward; stress; so torn; numb; very guarded; guilt; misses; really sad	P-10
Vulnerability *	Feeling-understood	Unfair; betrayal; a lot of anger and hurt; significant amount of anger; anger and frustration	P-15
Vulnerability *	Feeling-understood	Control; sought love and belonging; tired of making up excuses and lying and hiding; depression, anxiety, suicidal; did not feel understood; wrestled; big conflicts with myself; wasn't thrilled; wished; felt a lot better; a lot of release; not feel comfortable; internal resolution; inner peace	P-9
Vulnerability *	Relational-rulebook	Hoped; trying; hurt; didn't have a voice; so hard, so vulnerable; honest and open; flooded; shock	P-14
Vulnerability *	Caught-off-guard	Stress; suicide attempts and thoughts; very dark; emotions were haywire; very upset; no remorse; very curtly; rage that was there was palpable; endeavor to forgive; ire; it hurt a lot; I can't let go; I feel responsible; not being able; greatly relieved; free	P-3
Vulnerability *	**Identity ***	Loved each other dearly; a lot of love, care, hope; no longer … joyous; wanted to understand; trying to be understood; most … tough thing I've ever had to endure	P-18
Identity *	**Trust-violation ***	Awkward; frustrations; I failed; very hurtful; took the trust out; victim; healing, hope-giving	P-17
Identity *	Caught-off-guard	Burnt-out; a giant shock; determination; dismissal; angst	P-23
Identity *	Growth	Loved; very stuck; complete brokenness; reject; very dirty; resentment; bitterness; pain, anger; super tumultuous; hating; trauma; tired, sick, hopeless, giving up; suicidal; healing; growing; forgiveness; free	P-1
Relational-rulebook	Growth	Awestruck; fear of rejection; selfish; angry; did not understand; didn't end up happy; dissatisfaction; willing to be mean; trying; completely fulfilled	P-13
Relational-rulebook	Insecurity	Something is amiss; tension; tried; didn't know what to say; I was kind of the scapegoat; awkward; it's okay	P-11
Relational-rulebook	Insecurity	Frustration; tensions; really concerned; heart … was soft; guardedness; respect; a lot of love	P-24
Relational-rulebook	Spirituality	Some bitterness; a lot of anger, bitterness, entitlement; bitterness and resentment; forgiveness; more peace; love	P-20
Relational-rulebook	Moral-self	Frustrated; growing in frustration; delightfully; love	P-2
Moral-self	Empathy	Fell in love; pretty sweet; convictions; thankfully; respect; it's very important; really opened up to try; had a great time; sweet, wonderful;	P-16
Moral-self	Right-and-wrong	Really enjoyed; loved; exciting; tension; wanted to understand; try to make sense … to heal; not willing	P-7
Moral-self	Right-and-wrong	Happy; guilt; couldn't believe it, couldn't fathom; shocked, hurt; scariest; ignored; tried; grieve; completely alone; angry and upset; depression; huge struggle; accepting; not angry anymore	P-19
Moral-self	Agreement	Hurtful; left out; on the defense; struggling; really, really hard; sorry; forgive; love; really sad	P-6
Selfish-control	Change	Tension growing, conflict brewing; don't feel comfortable; didn't really want to trust; hurt, wronged; faded	P-8

Most salient themes in each story		Emotion words in the transcript	Participant ID code
Feeling-understood	Selfish-control	Ticked off; burned; didn't care	P-12
Feeling-understood	Insecurity	Heated; really hurt	P-25
Feeling-understood	Bad-response	Pretty defensive; so much shame; shut down; backed into a corner; anxious and agitated; traumatizing; berated; damaging; a lot of anger and resentment; scary; healing	P-22
Permanence	Insecurity	Really vulnerable, really hurtful; scary; surprising; very heavy, very burdened, very uncertain; trusting; love	P-5
Communication	Caught-off-guard	Always struggled; concerns; not comfortable; anxiety; stressful	P-21

Note. Underlined words indicate moral valence. Bold themes with asterisks are in the identity protection category.

Statements Indicative of Retrospective Neurocognitive Filters

In addition to perceptions and emotions, neurocognitive modes of PCFs include the dynamic processes of memory and meaning-making through autobiographical narratives and confabulation. The activity of narrating a previous, significant conflict experience required participants to engage in memory retrieval, which concurrently reactivated emotions and perceptions that were encoded during the initial event and were reconstructed during all subsequent retrievals and ruminations (Bowen et al., 2018; Reiheld, 2018). This process of retrospective reactivation was particularly observable when participants demonstrated emotional arousal and tearfulness, which was associated with stories about SIRCs that ended in the total loss of a valued relationship.

Some participants acknowledged uncertainty about specific details of their experience, which highlighted aspects of the story that were less salient to the encoded memory, but which were required for the activity of presenting the story as a chronological series of concrete events. For example, P-23 stated, "honestly, some details are probably gone by now, but, I'm pretty sure [I] did not ask." Other participants identified salient details related to their experience, which they had not been able to ascertain. As an example, P-10 stated, "I did try to get to the bottom of it. I do remember a time where, years before … I tried to sit everybody down in the family, like,

'what's going on?" P-10 later described ongoing concern about unexplained events and motives in the conflict: "No one ever got to the bottom of it. We never figured out what this story was. Was it real? Was it true? … Did it happen? Did it not? Nobody knows." In contrast, some gaps in memory identified information that participants were motivated to forget. P-9 indicated this type of motivated retrieval inhibition with the statement: "[I] got a letter from [OP] and [OP] said things like, '[I] was going to hell,' and [I don't] remember everything else."

P-22 described a SIRC containing an event that was personally traumatic, and then described the memory of the event in a way indicative of rumination effects and mood-congruent activation: "That memory does stick out, every once in a while. [I] go back to that memory and it is a very difficult thing to process." Some participants made statements revealing that the other party held a contradictory narrative about the details of the conflict event. In cases of discrepant recollections, participants spoke with unwavering certainty about the accuracy of their own encoded memory, and then indicated that they were just as offended by the other party's conflicting account as by the initial conflict event. As an example, P-12 stated:

> We asked them to go with us for the food tasting and they chose not to go with. And then, post-wedding, saying, "well you never let us be involved." It was, the, we went out of our way to be, let you be involved, and you chose not to be all along.

In all interviews, participants made statements indicative of autobiographical narratives, wherein they placed the SIRC within the broader narratives of their lives, and often incorporated events from the SIRC to support their general concept of self-identity. Examples of such statements included: "I felt I needed to hide information because that was how I looked for love. Doing the right things, knowing the right things, saying the right things, was how I sought love and belonging" (P-9). "[I], having pretty strong rejection issues, sensed immediately that [the

problem] was something [I] had done" (P-22). "That created a barrier between [OP] and [me]. … For a couple of years, [OP] and [I] started to grow apart. … It took many years for [me] to really come to grips with what happened" (P-25). "[I] learned a lot about fears and different states of the brain that [I] learned to survive in as a child that were playing out in [my] adulthood" (P-4). "[He] had spent the first two years of his married life thinking about what others, specifically the bride, could do for him. He realized that he had been put on the earth to serve others and not himself" (P-13).

P-1 employed allegory to narrate the story of her conflict, and the following quote demonstrates a significant autobiographical interpretation of her SIRC:

> [She] began to understand that the tribe's way was not the way. That suddenly, after she got a bath, and she got cleaned up, and she began healing, she found something growing on her face. And she wasn't sure what it was because no one else looked like her. But then, when she joined a new tribe, she began to understand that it was a unicorn. That is what she actually was. And she wasn't a little muddy horse. She wasn't a reject, and she wasn't sickly after all. That she was just displaying signs of the changes that need to happen before she could become the unicorn, and sometimes old things have to break off for the new things to be able to emerge.

Statements Indicative of Cognitive Filters

Although identification of cognitive PCFs required greater degrees of inductive and abductive analysis, there were myriad examples of various PCFs within and throughout the narratives. Some linguistic expressions of PCFs were challenging to label objectively using only transcripts, and many of the schemas about self, life, and relationships were clearly stated, but often did not fit perfectly within the existing, generalized taxonomies in literature, which were

discussed in Chapter 2 and presented in Appendices A—D. However, schema-based expectations were shown in Table 4 to constitute the largest conceptual category from the data, and novel thematic labels were developed to encapsulate the SIRC-related schemas and the other categorical constructs from this study. There were a limited number of interviews suggestive of confabulation, when participants appeared to spontaneously construct rational explanations and honorable motivations for their previous behaviors. However, no transcripts provided an example of confabulation sufficiently definite to warrant inclusion in these results. In Table 7, representative excerpts from the transcripts demonstrated the types of participant statements that were interpreted as demonstrations of various modes of cognitive filters.

Table 7

Examples of Participant Statements Indicative of Cognitive Filters

Mode/Label of cognitive filter	Representative excerpt (with contextualized explanation as needed)
Schema	
Self- sacrificing	P-4: "[She] decided to support [OP], and … feels that her strengths lie in growing where she's planted and building community wherever she is … and she would like to use that strength of hers to help [OP] to be happy."
Abandonment	P-9: "[I] knew that this was not something that could be even really discussed with [OP] … that certain things can't be talked about. Certain things can't be named. … I felt I needed to hide information because that was how I looked for love. That doing the right things, knowing the right things, saying the right things, was how I sought love and belonging. And therefore, when I had feelings and thoughts that were not the right things to do or say, I hid that information. … [My] expectations were confirmed. … [OP] said things like, '[I] was going to hell.' … Once [I] knew that [my] actions were something that were approved of … by [OP], then [I] knew that [I] could talk to [OP] about other things. … [I] realized that you can't change people, and what you can change is very limited. It's yourself, basically. … [I still do] not feel comfortable in the relationship with [OP]."
Punitiveness	P-19: "Holy crap. Like, how do they not see the disconnect here? That what [OP] did was wrong and [OP] needs to be held responsible and accountable for that. And you, yourself, need to be held responsible for that. … There's a difference between having a matter of opinion and something being right and something being wrong. … [I] realized that [I] had to officially leave [OP] and go no-contact with them. … [OP] is well alive and healthy but they are dead. There was no going back to that. No turning back to the way that things used to be."
Heuristic	
Salience	P-3: "I saw my dad die, and it was a situation in which I, looking back on it, I could have helped him, but I didn't, and that's something that I have to live with. And it, it reoccurs quite a bit, particularly in relationships. … I just like helping people … and I feel responsible. … Every suicide attempt was some variation of that: me wanting to help somebody and not being able to, because of what I was or wasn't."

Mode/Label of cognitive filter	Representative excerpt (with contextualized explanation as needed)
Priming	P-22: "When [I] arrived at home, [OP] had this look on [her] face that was concerning for [me]: eyes was looking down and to the left, difficulty making eye contact, very clearly, angry. [I], having pretty strong rejection issues, sensed immediately that the thing that was bothering [her] was something [I] had done, and so [I was] already pretty defensive going into the conversation."
Availability (also depicts the false consensus effect)	P-6: "And thinking that that would be the end of the discussion and the end of the conflict, we agreed to that." (P-6's schemas about conflict resolution influenced prediction of the other party's response. Personal beliefs were indicated by statements: "We don't want this to be something that continues to hinder our relationship. … We forgive you. We love you. … That happened. There's no reason to bring it up again. … I'm not one who tends to hold on to things. Like, when it's over, it's over. … From [my] point of view, that is the end of the conflict. There is no ill will. … As far as [I am] concerned, it's over and there's no reason to revisit it.")
Reductionism	P-18: "Beginning of the relationship was, I was the son that they never had. … Towards the end, [I] was, quite literally, of the devil, or one of the worst people that could ever hit this earth."
Cognitive Bias	
Fundamental attribution error	P-15: "[My] mentor had now suddenly turned the tables, and rather than trusting [me] for information about this relationship, had trusted an outside source. … Told the mentor that [I] wanted nothing to do with him. … Told the mentor that he no longer had any business being a mentor at all, and in fact, really took it so personally so as to call into question the mentor's own personal relationships. … Later, [I] learned that [there had been a family crisis] and the mentor had been under a great deal of strain at the time. And that caused a prompting for [me] to reconsider."
Self-enhancement	P-11: "[We] didn't talk a whole lot. And then [OP's spouse] ended up leaving from [the] job. And [I], it was during a time that [I] had a lot going on in [my] life. And so, [I] didn't message or reach out right away. And then [OP] ended up just completely ending the relationship, and blocked [me] on Facebook, and just didn't say anything. … [OP] just needed a scapegoat." (In the initial narrative, P-11 portrayed clear-cut personal innocence, in contrast to OP's inexplicably harsh behavior. Subsequent follow-up questions indicated that salient details had been minimized or omitted: "[OP's spouse] left, essentially, under the terms of: you can resign, or you will be let go. It was a crazy week for me, and I just didn't, 'cause I didn't know what to say, and, by the time I was gonna send a message, [OP] had already blocked me. … I was kind of the scapegoat. … As far as I know, I mean, I haven't reached out. … I guess, [OP] didn't feel like, maybe, I had [OP's] back or whatever, when it came down to it, with everything with [OP's spouse].")
Coherence	P-5: "[I] just thought, well, they don't really understand what this real faith means because they're, I don't even know if they are Christian. Like, they might have the label as Christian, but I don't know if they really are, with a real relationship with Jesus, and what that means for their life. … [They] weren't questioning [me] but questioning what it meant to be a real Christian, what it meant to follow God. … The way that I view following Jesus, that's not what [OP] thinks about, when [OP] thinks about being a Christian. It's not about following Jesus. I'm not entirely sure what it's about. So, still a love of security, still a lot of safety, I think, in trying to control your environment, rather than being open to risks." (P-5 espoused a belief that true faith dictates life choices without concern for other matters: "What that faith meant to [me] … seeing examples of faithful Christians living out their faith in a way that affected the rest of their life plans and attitudes and decisions." When P-5 expressed plans to move overseas for religious work and was met with [OP's] practical concerns about safety and a desire for P-5 to live in close proximity, P-5 interpreted those questions as an absence of faith.)
Halo effect	P-16: "Grew up in a wonderful, wholesome, positive, disciplined, conservative, Christian family. … It's very important to honor your parents. … They have these strong convictions for good reason. … They are coming from a good place, in terms of following their convictions here. … They basically raised me to be like them. And so, they have convictions that they stand up for … and I have convictions that I will also stand up for."

Mode/Label of cognitive filter	Representative excerpt (with contextualized explanation as needed)
Fading affect	P-8: "They were able to resolve the tension. Not by fixing the situation. They didn't necessarily bring it up. But over time, the memory of the argument faded, and things returned back to normal."
Asymmetrical	P-14: "[I] was really putting [myself] out on the line and really hoped to meet [OP] where he was. [I] had wrestled in [my] own story of: what does it look like to love this person well? … Hoping that [OP] would get to where [I] wanted him to be. That [he] would get to a place of working on himself or get to a place of acknowledging, kind of, the hardness that he was bringing into the relationship and into the family. … [I] was sharing … this is how it made it made me feel. This is unacceptable. I can't live in a relationship like this. … He was kind of saying, you know what, that's crazy. I don't want any part of this. You're asking too much. … It was kind of the end of trying to meet him where he was, and the end of shelving myself, and my needs, and my hurts, to kind of wait on him."
Confirmation	P-4: "[OP] has also taken [my] needs and wants into consideration, and [we] have decided … and [we] both feel good about it. [OP] is very concerned about his responsibility for the well-being of his family, which makes [me] feel protected in the marriage and willing to move with [him], and to be unified in that. … We're always going to come back to our vows. We're always going to come back to that, and I can do that and know that it will be done on the other side."
Cognitive Distortion	
Emotional reasoning	P-1: "That little root of resentment. It's that little root of bitterness. And then, when you began to feed that thing, it gets really ugly. It turns into pain, it turns into anger, it turns into a lot of selfishness, and we can't let that stuff go. It just builds and builds and builds and builds, the point where people are like, I'm just not going to be around you anymore. I can't deal with you. Because I, all this stuff that I'm holding onto, I can't let it go."
Dichotomous thinking	P-10: "Although [OP] never is the one to speak up. … It never went well. … They will always, one hundred percent of the time … will take his side. … They always just brushed me off. … Literally everybody else that was probably at our wedding."
Labeling (also depicts attitude generalization)	P-23: "A very strong eighties conservative Christian culture aspect of it that was like, 'moms should be at home with their kids.' I mean, a lot of it's just generational: moms are best to raise their kids. … There was a very religious aspect to it, for her. God told her to tell me that I was wrong. I honestly, in some ways, that was easier for me to dismiss. … Just way over-spiritualizes everything, in general. But this was even crazier than normal."
Blaming	P-21: "One day, because [OP] had asked to help clean her kitchen, one day while [OP] was at work, [we] set about it in some rigorous fashion and got rid of a lot of expired food. And when [OP] came home, she was very, very upset because she felt like it was an invasion of her privacy. … She set a boundary and said, 'I don't want you guys going through my things.' And [I] said, 'I completely understand, but you asked me to do this."
Mind reading	P-19: "I think they could see me changing. They could see me growing, and they didn't like that. Because they were essentially losing, at least, [OP] was losing a form of control over me that I never realized she had. But I guess she knew it all along."

Note. Named or detailed references to the other party in the conflict are replaced with OP. Descriptions of the cognitive filters referenced in this table are provided in Appendices A—D.

Statements Indicative of Moral Judgments

Moral judgments are the final mode of PCFs that were clearly indicated by participant statements throughout the interviews. Table 4 includes a conceptual category of judgmental attributions that housed a class of themes defined by the specific targets of moral judgments.

Exemplars for those six themes of moral judgments are presented in Table 8 as a representation of the numerous examples found throughout the data.

Table 8

Examples of Participant Statements Indicative of Moral Judgment

Theme	Representative Excerpt
Selfish-control	P-12: "[OP] would make comments about how it was expensive and froofy. … The destination was criticized. … Because that's what [OP] wanted … us to get married in the church they got married in. … When [OP] saw that independence, it was, it became that I was more of a threat than a fun thing to be around. Because [OP] realized I wasn't going anywhere. And so, I think it became a, almost an attention thing, like I was taking the attention away from [OP]. And I was taking [OP's] baby boy away from [OP], is the ding, ding, ding winner. … [OP] still doesn't agree with half of the decisions that we even make as a couple, let alone that I make."
Right-and-wrong	P-7: "[We all] came together. … And began to ask a little bit more questions about what truly was happening, in getting to the heart of the issue. And as those questions began to surface, [OP] began to run away, and [OP] became quieter and quieter. And [the rest of us] kept talking, and, to the point where [OP] refused to come back to the conversations. … We have engrained patterns, and when those patterns are unhealthy, it's really hard to change … it's really hard to enter in those conflicts if you don't feel like it's necessary, and if you're not willing to enter into something uncomfortable and move past it and do the hard work. … I have done my part."
	P-19: "[They] welcomed him into their home when they knew that he had [assaulted her] with her [children] watching. And they ignored and excused that behavior. … Marriage is abuse, apparently. … [OP] seemed to only care about having money and keeping things at peace. … He's a weak man, and when I reached out to him for help, he just ignored me. … This was not a difference of opinion. … It's like, No. It's right and wrong. And you chose wrong. And you're still making excuses for choosing your wrong."
Communication	P-17: "[He] didn't take the time to corroborate with [me]. … His decision to meet with [OP] before meeting with me, … by speaking only with [OP], having no direct meeting with me beforehand, … having the two of them bring me in, as though [OP] had some authority over me. … So honestly, the fault for that all goes on his shoulders, really. I mean, it was, that was very poor management for him."
Excuse	P-20: "The relationship between [me] and dad became more estranged. … There was a, obviously a lot on the father, but the mom and the family, estranging himself. Not really taking care of the [children]. … And the mom was working a lot by herself, and the dad wasn't really like helping out, and he would say all these things about the mom. … Probably not say some nice things about the mom, when the mom was doing so much. … The father would try to defend himself, and not really like face like what was happening in the relationship. … He didn't really try in the relationship. … He kind of pretended nothing had happened. … That would make [me] more bitter that the father doesn't take any initiative in this conflict and in this relationship. … Expectations of the father to kind of step up. To own the things that he'd done. To be the one to initiate trying to bring some reconciliation, and not be so passive in the relationship."
Insecurity	P-25: "One day, [OP] confronted [me] that [I] was becoming too close of a friend with the loving person. … Saying that the loving person was [OP's] friend and not [my] friend. … [OP] always thought: you're going behind my back and you're talking to the loving person. You shouldn't be talking to the loving person. That individual is my friend. … So, [I] was really hurt by it, and so was the loving person, because [we] were friends."
	P-24: "[I] had found other people to pour into [my] life … and as [we] grew closer, [OP] seemed to feel that [our] relationship was being even further strained and pulled apart, and this led to a lot of uncertainty and suspicion, on the part of [OP], towards the motivations and the heart behind some of [my] actions. … [OP had] been very deeply offended by [my] actions. He believed that it was not [my] place to ask to step out in that way, and it was undermining of his authority. And he believed that [my] motivation was to pull people away from his small group

Theme	Representative Excerpt
	and get them to also turn their back on him. … He said things like, 'you need to ask my permission, and this group is mine, and it's my authority, and you can't step out and challenge that."
Slander	P-10: "Based on what [OP] was saying, there were all sorts of stories flying around. … It became harder and harder to kind of really tiptoe around the prior issue and the rumors. … I guess we have a major issue because now there's all these rumors flying. … [OP] started telling literally the whole family, aunts, uncles. Anyone who called to congratulate me would say, oh but we heard. … Did [OP] make it up? Was it a rumor? [OP] threatened that, it was like, yeah like, vengeful, like very vengeful. … Just one-on-one … just like tell me. Don't tell the whole family."

Note. Named or detailed references to the other party in a conflict are replaced with OP. Underlined words indicate moral valence. Descriptions of each theme are presented in Table 4.

Discussion on Research Question One

RQ1 was structured upon a presumption that the participant narratives would indicate the presence of specific modes of PCFs and subjective perceptions. The data included key words and phrases indicative of these filters and were also saturated with direct and indirect examples of PCFs guiding the overall experiences and interpretations of SIRCs. Some PCFs were identified through greater degrees of contextualization and abductive reasoning, while other modes of PCFs were more definite, such as the words each participant used to identify specific emotions they remembered experiencing during the SIRC (presented in Table 6).

Only two categories of PCFs were not distinctly depicted by the linguistic data: the neurocognitive mechanisms of confabulation and selective–attention. The events in each participants' SIRC experience were initially recognized, perceived, and remembered because attention mechanisms identified them as salient, but data demonstrating participants' awareness of their own experiences did not add meaningful value to the results of this study. All other modes of PCFs were represented within the data. The themes depicting the essence of SIRCs (Table 4), functioned through either direct or indirect roles within the structure of conflict narratives. The dual-purposes of these themes to create indirect, background frameworks or to

directly express the salient points of the conflict created a novel expression of the theoretical framework of dual-processing theory.

Results: Research Question Two

The second research question sought to identify morally valenced terminology within participants' conflict narratives. The literature review provided the theoretical basis for an expectation that morally valenced content would be present in conversations about conflicts, due to the correlation between conflicts and emotional arousal, perceptions of threat, and attributions of unfavorable intentions (Brett, 2018; Keser et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2018). The literature depicted morally valenced judgments as the result of either System 1 processes of moral intuition, driven by instinct and emotion, or System 2 processes of moral reasoning, constructed through contemplative rationalization (Egorov et al., 2019; Lindström et al., 2018; Markovits et al., 2019). Bases of morality upon which moral judgments can be informed include Consequentialism, which determines morality based on the consequences or effects of an action (Conway et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2018; Reiheld, 2018); spiritual absolutes, which bases morality on fixed codes tied to one's personal system of religious beliefs (Bassett et al., 2018; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2019); and culturally influenced schemas, which create the subjective, personalized, moral rulebooks for self, life, and social actions. These rulebooks moralize issues of responsibility, deserved consequences, requirements for forgiveness and restoration, communications, and attitudes (Mroz & Allen, 2020; Raj et al., 2020).

In order to elicit morally valenced terminology without biasing results through priming effects, a strategic approach was used to create an opportunity for participants to express moral judgments related to their conflict. During the live interview, participants were given instructions to narrate a story about a previously experienced SIRC, and they were told not to use any names

or pseudonyms for the characters in their stories, including themselves. Instead, they were instructed to tell the story from a third-person perspective and create a descriptive label for each character in their story. Participants were encouraged to choose a descriptive label that was somehow related to the role each character played in the conflict story. No further guidance was given to participants beyond these instructions. The results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Moral Valence and Symbolism of Descriptive Character Labels

Type of label	Character labels (self – other party)	Valence – target	Other's literal role	Definitive Theme
Relational	the boy – the bride	neutral	spouse	relational-rulebook
	lovely wife – hunky husband	positive – both	spouse	vulnerability
	little girl – overprotective-best-friends-mother	negative – other	mother	right-and-wrong
	busy-burnt-out-mom – grandma	negative – self	mother-in-law	caught-off-guard
	new mother – grandma	neutral	mother	communication
	the daughter – the mom	neutral	mother	permanence
	the child – the mother	neutral	mother	vulnerability
	son – dad	neutral	father	spirituality
	the boy/the son/the guy – the parents	neutral	both parents	moral-self
	first/younger – second/older	neutral	sibling	selfish-control
Circumstantial	student – mentor	neutral	mentor	feeling-understood
	new – seasoned	neutral	friends and colleagues	insecurity
Abstract	purple – pink	neutral	mother-in-law	selfish-control
	bull – preacher	neutral	family member	vulnerability
Symbolic	red wagon – freight train	negative – other	sibling	vulnerability
	the glue – the genius	neutral	sibling	moral-self
	ghost – feral	negative – both	spouse	feeling-understood
	little muddy horse/unicorn – indian man	negative – self positive – self	spouse	growth
	singer – fisherman	neutral	leader	insecurity
	little sister – big sister	neutral	friends and colleagues	trust-violation
	otter – mouse	neutral	friends and colleagues	moral-self
Moral	needy person – selfish person	negative – other	sibling	feeling-understood
	trying – running	positive – self negative – other	spouse	relational-rulebook
	diligent/servant – lazy/beloved	positive – self negative – other positive – other	spouse	relational-rulebook
	strength – anger and insecure	positive – self negative – other	both in-law parents	vulnerability

Note. A slash within one character's label indicates more than one label used for that character. The definitive theme column represents the most salient, representative theme from each participants' conflict narrative.

The emphasis of RQ2 was on concrete terms used to convey valence, in contrast to the more inductive and abductive processes of analysis necessitated by the investigation of PCFs in RQ1. Data presented in Table 6 identified words and phrases indicative of negative affect and Table 8 structured participant quotes into thematic categories of moral judgment. The terms in those tables with clear moral valence were underlined, and the context of longer quotes in Table 8 increased clarity about the intended target of the valence in participants' statements. Table 9 presented participants' descriptive character labels along with identification of the party targeted by the positively or negatively valenced labels. These labels covered a spectrum of neutrally valenced to morally valenced statements with clear implications of judgment and attribution.

Discussion on Research Question Two

Four participants chose to use morally valenced labels to describe the characters in their conflict, and in each of these cases, the other party was targeted with a negatively valenced label, while they assigned themselves positive or neutral labels. Negative labels indicating moral judgment were "selfish," "running," "lazy," and "anger and insecure." Labels indicating positive moral judgment were "trying," "diligent," and "strength." Additional character labels carried valenced tones of affect, judgment, or salient themes of the conflict, but required the context of the full narrative to interpret the intended nuance of those labels. Five participants presented the ambiguously valenced labels of "overprotective-best-friends-mother," "busy-burnt-out-mom," "freight train," "the glue and the genius," and "ghost and feral." In each of these five stories, the labels were used to convey meaningful character traits and central issues involved in the conflict.

Eleven of the stories used symbolic character labels, and eleven labels were based on the literal relational roles of the parties in conflict. However, some labels that did not convey obvious valence or symbolism became more meaningful within the context of the story. For example, labels emphasizing childlike roles such as "the boy," "the little girl," and "the child" were used in stories addressing issues of deep vulnerability, fragility, and naivety.

Results: Research Question Three

The third research question sought to compare the themes identified within participants' spoken narratives with the multidimensional elements of perception that constitute the conflict continuum model (CCM). The higher-level categories and thematic concepts that emerged from participant narratives were presented in Table 4 next to their distinct, definitive properties. In RQ3, the narrative categories and themes were compared with the CCM's five structural components of SIRCs, which were developed as a synthesis of the literature on conflict psychology. The perceptions on the conflict continuum are rated along spectra of significance (relational and threatened values), valence (emotions and attributions), and gravity (durability). The results of RQ3 were organized under headings for each of the dimensions of the CCM, and the 28 thematic concepts from the linguistic data were evaluated based on their correspondence with each of the dimensions of the CCM.

Perceptions of Relational Relevance

The CCM dimension of perceived relational relevance suggests that relationships with greater degrees of value and personal importance have parallel degrees of potential harm and life disruption if a SIRC occurs. This was explained in the Chapter 2 review of literature addressing the power with which valued relationships are entrusted to bolster well-being and contribute to personal understandings of self, relationships, and life. These valued relationships comprise

elements of interdependence and vulnerability that necessitate an expectation of positive intent (Berndsen et al., 2018; Kuster et al., 2017). When a party fails to protect and provide the meaningful purpose endowed upon them and upon their relational role, this violation can affect, damage, or destroy any matters over which that party was given power (Baker et al., 2020; Grover et al., 2019; Petersen & Le, 2017; Semerci, 2019).

Relational relevance is based upon emotional attachment to the other party, value associated with the symbolism of a relational role, or the party's ability to threaten a matter of personal value. Studies referenced in the literature review indicated that SIRCs occur primarily with family members and romantic partners, particularly after people enter post-education stages of adulthood (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; da Silva et al., 2017). These patterns were supported by the data from this study (presented in Table 2), wherein 44% of participants described a SIRC with their family-of-origin, 24% with a spouse, 20% with colleagues or mentors, and 12% with their spouse's parents.

The following quotes demonstrate the implicit, symbolic value of familial roles, as expressed by participants: "[Siblings] who all loved each other very much. … I wanted my [sibling] to be in my wedding because [it's my sibling], and I've known [the sibling] my whole life, and I wanted [the sibling] to be up there with me" (P-6; vulnerability and feeling-understood themes). "Even though they were really close together, started to grow apart. … The relationship with my [sibling], you know, was really poor. Thinking back about it now, I'm more concerned about that [sibling] relationship than the other one" (P-25; feeling-understood, change, and repercussion themes). "Talk on the phone, like, countless times a day. … [We] were always best friends. The guilt [I] would experience upon not talking to [my] mother … if [I] missed one phone call, it all seemed normal" (P-19; relational-rulebook and moral-self themes).

Participants describing conflicts with spouses expressed their value of the marital relationship more explicitly, and the following quotes demonstrate participants' expressions of deeply held beliefs about marriage and the relational significance of a spouse. "Redeemer reminds [me] who [she] truly is. … Her name was changed to Beloved. … [Am I] going to serve her under her new name: Beloved? … [I] remember who [I am], and that's: Servant" (P-2; empathy, spirituality, and relational-rulebook themes). "The person that loves you the most. … An unconditional thing that will be here forever. … Things that could happen that could actually end the marriage. It took it from 'that'll never happen' to then 'it's just unlikely" (P-22; permanence and vulnerability themes). "[I] promised to love forever and ever. … Dying to [myself] … and only think of [her]. … Besides my relationship with God … my covenant with my wife … is the closest relationship that I will ever have" (P-13; permanence, relational-rulebook, and spirituality themes).

Among the 25 transcripts comprising 28 relevant and salient themes, there were 13 themes that corresponded with participants' clearest expressions of relational value. These themes are presented here, with ratios indicating the number of narratives that used the theme to express relational relevance next to each theme's prevalence in the sample: relational-rulebook (16/23), resolution (15/19), seeking-to-understand (13/17), moral-self (13/18), vulnerability (12/12), change (12/17), repercussion (12/18), feeling-understood (12/21), identity (10/18), empathy (9/13), permanence (8/8), caught-off-guard (8/16), and trust-violation (7/13).

The themes of relational-rulebook and permanence both demonstrated relational value through the life-defining nature and priority associated with a particular relationship, the expectations for that person to play a meaningful role in life, along with perceptions of severe threat associated with any risk of losing the relationship. As an example, P-5's narrative included

these statements: “Fear of what it would do to the relationship … once [I] left, that [I] would never come back. And the ultimate fear that was … [I] was going to abandon [her].” Another example is from P-16’s narrative: “Wonderful, wholesome … Christian family. … Very important to honor your parents. … ‘That's not how we raised you. … We may not come to the wedding based on this.’ … They basically raised me to be like them.”

The resolution, seeking-to-understand, and change themes conveyed relational value through efforts and personal sacrifices participants willingly made in order to resolve the conflict or accommodate the needs of the other party. One example with both resolution and change themes is: “A job that [I] loved. … Felt successful where [I] was. [His] job has gotten worse, his mental health. … [I] decided to support [him], … help [him] be happy, and to move somewhere [we] can both be excited about” (P-4). Another example that demonstrates overlapping themes of change, seeking-to-understand, and resolution is: “If you want me to come visit, why don't we try to work on. … After another two days of discussing and arguing … explaining why [I] felt that it was necessary … [she] consented” (P-21). The resolution and seeking-to-understand themes were also indicative of relational value in P-24’s transcript: “[He asked] different leadership individuals … what he should do. … [He] went to the people who were leadership in [OP]'s life. … Apparent that it was going to be a one-on-one conversation. That was the only real way.”

The moral-self theme demonstrated relational significance through expressions of moral obligations to honor, protect, and make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship. One quote demonstrating this thematic context is: “What does it look like to fight for a marriage? What is my role as [spouse], as a Christian, as [parent]? … Ultimately decided to stay in [the] marriage and kind of shelve parts of [myself] that were hurt” (P-14). Another example came from P-12’s

transcript, stating: “[We] had asked [them] to go with [us]. We'll take you up there. There's nothing that you have to pay for. We’ll come back the same day. Trying to make it as easy on them as possible.” P-10 said, “[OP] was actually in the wedding party even though [we] didn't feel one hundred percent about it. [We] still felt that was the right thing to do: to include [OP].” In contrast to moral-self, the empathy theme conveyed honor and care for the other party without a valence of obligation or duty, demonstrated by P-20:

> Starting to see the humanity of his father. … Burdened in his heart for the dad. … Still loves the father, and wants him to change his ways, and will continue to just be loving, and minister to him, and really praying for him and for God's grace to work in his life.

Vulnerability, feeling-understood, and identity themes expressed relational relevance as deep desires for the other party to provide unconditional acceptance, acknowledgement, approval, and understanding of personal motives and perspectives. Examples include: “[They] were already determined to break the marriage up. … [I’m] a very hard worker. [I] … budget well. [I] can do these things … [I’m] a man. [I’m] very qualified as a man. … [They] were disregarding that” (P-18). “She did not appreciate [my] … authority as the man. … [Is that] the legacy that [I] wanted to leave? … [My] only goal in life should be to serve [her] because [she’s] the bride and [I’m] the boy” (P-13).

Repercussion, trust-violation, and caught-off-guard themes demonstrated the value and relevance of a relationship by its power to generate life-altering consequences, shock, suffering, loss, grief, sadness. Examples of quotes conveying relational value through the theme of repercussion include: “Due to the hurt, reacting as if, ‘well if this is what people think, then I might as well do it.’ … That really had years of consequence. … Decisions would have been made differently with his input” (P-15). “[I] was left having to grieve the loss of [my] entire

family and [my] entire existence. … Everything is gone. I can't even look at old photos now" (P-19). "Hurtful to be left out. … I currently just don't have relationship with one of my [siblings], which is really sad. … [Their child], who we love very much … they're pretty well estranged from our entire family" (P-6).

Perceptions of Vulnerability

The CCM dimension of perceived vulnerability was explained in the literature review to represent conjoined concepts; the first is a matter of deep personal significance and the second is the perception of threat or harm against that matter (caused by the direct actions or indirect implications of the SIRC). The structure of the vulnerability continuum suggests that conflicts with greater degrees of perceived threat against a matter of personal value have corresponding degrees of experienced offense and reactive impulses to defend, protect, or avenge the treasured matter. This dimension is influenced by individual schemas about the fragility or imperviousness of a treasured matter, demonstrated by examples of unwavering confidence in a belief, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, or certainty in the unconditional permanence of a relationship.

This CCM dimension of vulnerability was a synthesis of studies presented in the literature review that emphasized matters of sufficient consequence to trigger negative emotional reactions such as anxiety, frustration, tension, resentment, mistrust, or fear (Benitez et al., 2018; Crenshaw et al., 2020). Threats and violations against sensitive areas of personal identity or against fundamental human needs for social esteem, love, fairness, and fidelity induce emotions of hostility and distress, and give rise to strained and frictional interactions (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Benitez et al., 2018; Mauersberger et al., 2018). The vulnerabilities threatened by SIRCs are often intangible, and can include goals, opportunities, reputation, control,

preference, autonomy, self-esteem, security, stability, confidence, acceptance, and pride (Kozusznik et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2017).

In order to determine which themes represented perceptions of vulnerability, each participants' transcript was analyzed under the guidance of the following reflective question: What was most clearly expressed as the deepest value, desire, need, or fear, and how was it threatened by the other party in this SIRC? Key quotes from the transcripts were selected to best demonstrate the prominent vulnerability of each conflict. The definitive properties of thematic concepts, presented in Table 4, were used to evaluate and categorize these salient quotes, and upon this basis, the two strongest themes depicting vulnerability were identified. Results were presented in Table 10, and additional data were provided to reveal relationships between themes of vulnerability, gender, and the circumstantial contexts of each SIRC.

The presentation of the CCM in Chapter 2 included a theoretical formula for conflict etiology, which required a minimum threshold of significance in dimensions of relational value and threatened matters of value. All participants in this study made statements that conveyed varying degrees of both relational relevance and perceived vulnerability, with the exception of P-11. The SIRC that P-11 presented in this study was depicted with a low degree of relational value and no area of perceived personal vulnerability. This story emphasized the other party's nonverbal expressions of offense alongside P-11's statements of indifference, epitomized in these excerpts: "[I] decided that [I'm] just too old to beg people for friendship. … I just feel like, if someone is going to block me then they just don't want anything to do with me, and that's fine." Data from this participant added support to the CCM by demonstrating the limited significance of conflicts comprising low levels of these two essential dimensions of perception.

Table 10

Themes Depicting Core Matters of Value Threatened by Conflict

Categories and Themes	No. of conflicts represented by each theme ($N = 25$)			
	Strongest Theme	Secondary Theme	Combined Prevalence	Women/Men
Identity protection				
Trust-violation	4	0	4	3/1
Vulnerability	**7**	**4**	**11**	4/7*
Identity	**5**	**5**	**10**	6*/4
Judgmental attributions				
Insecurity	1	0	1	1/0
Right-and-wrong	0	1	1	1/0
Aftereffects				
Resolution	0	1	1	1/0
Self/Life schemas				
Rules-of-life	3	2	5	3/2
Interpersonal relational schemas				
Relational-rulebook	**3**	**6**	**9**	4/5
Permanence	0	2	2	1/1
Change	0	1	1	0/1
Transcendence				
Spirituality	0	2	2	0/2
Understanding				
Feeling-understood	0	1	1	0/1
Seeking-to-understand	2	0	2	2/0

Etiological circumstance/context	Themes representing the perceived vulnerability	No. Women/Men
Imposing a personal decision or preference on the other party (5)	Relational-rulebook (4), Rules-of-life (2), Identity, Vulnerability, Spirituality	1/4*
Wedding planning (5)	Identity (3), Vulnerability (2), Relational-rulebook (2), Spirituality, Resolution, Seeking-to-understand	2/3*
Revealing a moral violation (3)	Vulnerability (2), Rules-of-life, Feeling-understood, Identity, Permanence	1/2
Criticizing a personal choice (2)	Trust-violation (2), Vulnerability, Identity	1/1
Disagreement about moving (2)	Vulnerability (2), Trust-violation, Performance	2/0
Discussing work concerns (2)	Seeking-to-understand, Trust-violation, Identity, Relational-rulebook	2/0
Drifting apart (2)	Relational-rulebook (2), Insecurity, Vulnerability	1/1
Marital separation (2)	Identity (2), Vulnerability (2)	2/0
Fighting for possession (2)	Identity, Rules-of-life, Change, Right-and-wrong	1/1

Note. Bold rows enclosed in borders represent the most salient themes of vulnerability.

* Indicates the most salient themes/contexts based on gender.

Negative Attributions

The CCM dimension of unfavorable motives and morals suggests that greater degrees of negative interpersonal attributions correspond with escalations of conflict severity and negative

outcomes. Studies discussed in the literature review reported that the attribution of negative interpersonal motivations instinctively triggers a cycle of self-motivated reactions that escalate the conflict, violate the foundational presumption of benevolence and integrity, and diminish interests in apologies and forgiveness (Frawley & Harrison, 2016; Kong et al., 2020; Rungduin et al., 2019). Negative attributions may perceive in the other party motivations to benefit at the expense of oneself, indicating enmity or malevolence, or to seek gain without regard for the expense to oneself, indicating indifference or selfishness. A crucial determinant of conflict outcomes is whether the parties felt understood by one another, but a mistrust of underlying motives and intentions can prevent all efforts toward resolution (Berzins et al., 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Raimundo, 2020).

In this study, many participant statements portraying the motive and character attributions of the other party had moral implications, and these results were presented in Tables 8 and 9 to demonstrate PCFs of moral judgments and terminology with moral valence. The category of judgmental attributions (see Table 4) comprised six themes, and each depicted a critical allegation against the other party's selfish motivations, moral guilt, harmful tactics, lack of integrity, weak character, and inappropriate expressions. Table 8 provided examples of all of these themes through participant quotes about the other parties in their SIRCs. Not all attributions include moral judgment, however, and participant narratives were saturated with statements attributing negative, neutral, or positive thoughts, capabilities, motives, intentions, desires, and emotions to the other party. The salient attributions that did not fall within the category of judgmental attributions were represented by themes of: trust-violation, vulnerability, resolution, repercussion, moral-self, relational-rulebook, permanence, zero-sum-choice, change, empathy, feeling-understood, seeking-to-understand, and looking-back.

The attributions expressed by this sample represented a full range of valence, and this was reflected correspondingly by the range of outcomes at the conclusion of these SIRCs. Results demonstrating the relationship between the degree of negatively valenced attributions and eventual conflict resolution outcomes were presented in response to RQ4 (see Figure 5). Attributions were represented within all the higher-level categories listed in Table 4. Outside of the category of judgmental attributions, the presence of overt attributional statements was most frequently observed in themes of relational-rulebook (9), empathy (8), vulnerability (6), looking-back (5), change (4), and resolution (4). A representative excerpt of an attribution within each of these themes is provided in order of prevalence.

Relational-rulebook: “They just didn't feel like they could say, ‘no.’ The longer they take to get back to me, or the more I have to follow up, probably the more reticent they are” (P-23).

Empathy: “[She] became very frustrated, feeling as though she was really nothing more than an object, an item to be owned and had and used. … [She] only wanted his love and affection, only wanted his complete commitment” (P-13).

Vulnerability: “The manner in which he did it didn't allow for me to feel the way I did. … When I reacted like that, he completely wrote me off. … I know he doesn't want my forgiveness” (P-3).

Looking-back: “Her history of seeing [pornography use] be the thing that kicked off what destroyed her family. … That was why she had that reaction. … [Her reaction] was being driven by something that had nothing to do with me” (P-22).

Change: “Growing up … [he] felt superior to me … in charge and likes having his way. … He is so used to being able to boss me around. … I don’t have to necessarily do what he wants” (P-8).

Resolution: “If he had taken that role seriously, of a man of the house, and his word is binding, I think he would have played a much better peacemaker. … I don't see him walking with the Lord daily” (P-18).

Perceptions of Emotional Impact

The CCM dimension of unpleasant emotions was explained in the literature review to represent a powerful, interactive component of neurocognitive mechanisms that can sometimes occur simultaneously with the immediate perception of an offense, but also can intensify gradually over the course of a SIRC and during subsequent ruminations and retrospective reconstructions (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Crum, 2019; Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Javanbakht, 2019; Stackhouse et al., 2018). The structure of the unpleasant emotions continuum suggests that conflicts with greater degrees of perceived emotional suffering have corresponding degrees of negative life and relational effects, more significant and lasting personal consequences, and more robust barriers against positive conflict outcomes. Conversely, conflicts that lack sufficient emotional impact are less likely to escalate to a SIRC, and may not undergo the damaging intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational effects indicated by this degree of conflict (da Silva et al., 2017; Karremans et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2019).

The literature presented specific emotions associated with SIRCs, and these can be used to highlight the themes in Table 4 that were prominent representations of this dimension of perceptions on the CCM. Baker et al. (2017) established betrayal, rejection, resentment, sadness, and anger as common unpleasant emotions associated with unresolved SIRCs. Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, and Tsang (2020) recorded physiological effects and negative feelings associated with unforgiveness, such as sadness, anger, and fear. Additional SIRC emotions presented in the literature were often indistinct assemblages of physiological measures of

emotional response systems, valence-laden cognitive interpretations, grudges, verbalized emotional terminology, and hidden, inner experiences (Barrett, 2020; Kunzmann et al., 2017). Examples of these include not feeling understood, undermined self-worth, feeling demeaned, anger, depression, guilt, moral outrage, violated autonomy, resentment, shame, troubled conscience, self-punishment, and desires for either retribution or forgiveness (Adams, 2016; Brett, 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Petersen & Le, 2017). Given this wide range of embodied and cognitive conditions characterized as emotions in the literature, each of the themes in Table 4 represent statements that depicted perceived emotional impact. Even themes focused on purely cognitive and behavior efforts to seek understanding or acknowledge the influence of personal histories included expressions of emotions from some participants. Emotions were present in 100% of the themes depicting the essence of SIRCs.

Table 6 identified the two most salient themes related to the primary concerns of each participant, alongside collections of emotional terminology expressed by the participants in their interview, but the themes in Table 6 were not indicative of themes primarily representative of emotional content. Because emotions are defined and identified through a wide range of measures in the literature, there was no clear SIRC theme that distinctly correlated with the emotions of participants. Instead, all SIRC themes contain emotion-infused statements used to emphasize the personalized essence of each conflict. The levels of emotional intensity expressed by participants reflected varying temperaments and schemas about emotional expression, rather than the absence or presence of emotional impact involved in each experience of a SIRC. This outcome was supported by studies in the literature review that interpreted both emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff as indications of personal disposition and of trait intolerance of

differences, influenced by family-of-origin systems and early childhood schemas that classify disagreements as threats (Alkozei et al., 2018; Choi & Murdock, 2017).

Perceptions of Gravity

The structure of the offense durability continuum suggests that conflicts with greater degrees of perceived gravity, unavailability of mutually agreeable pathways forward, unforgivability, harmful consequences, or demanding requirements for resolution have corresponding degrees of relational damage or termination. The basis for this dimension of conflict-related perceptions was established in the literature review, as a synthesis of numerous studies addressing concepts such as forgiveness, moral judgments, interpersonal expectations, personalized ramifications, and rumination effects (Baker et al., 2017; Halilova et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2020; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Vranić & Tonkovic, 2017; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020; Wu et al., 2019). When individuals perceive a possibility that the offending circumstance may be interpreted in different ways, from equally valid perspectives, then the perceived gravity is far less significant. However, individuals who are certain there is only one accurate way to interpret and evaluate the offensive events, based on absolute moral, societal, and relational standards, are likely to perceive the offense as objectively grave, up to the point of being unforgivable and unresolvable, and they may perceive themselves obligated to respond in proportion to the gravity of the offense.

The themes that best presented perceptions about the gravity of an offense were in the aftereffects category, which depicted participants' statements about their methods of resolving the conflict and restoring the relationship, or about unavoidable effects and reactions associated with unresolved and unforgiven conflicts. When participants were asked a follow-up question about the reasons their conflict concluded as it did, their responses often emphasized the other

party's willingness or lack of willingness to perform the steps that would be required for resolution. In conflicts with desirable outcomes, participants often emphasized their own behaviors that helped achieve the desired conclusion. Together, these types of statements produced the themes of resolution and repercussion, presented in Table 4. Additional themes that frequently reflected perceptions about the gravity of the offense were motivated-summary, rules-of-life, permanence, zero-sum-choice, and moral-self. The following statements provide representative examples demonstrating perceived gravity within each of these themes:

Resolution: "It's okay to be truthful, even when it's hurtful, but have some kind of grace. … To have forgiveness instead of bitterness. … be more forgiving, more gracious, more loving, even when people are unlovable" (P-20). Another statement reflecting the gravity of an offense in the context of the theme of resolution was expressed clearly by P-22:

> If things get a little bit on the heated side, take a couple minutes to break, come back ,and then it's [us] against the problem, as opposed to one of [us] being the problem. … Over the course of several weeks, discussing what this was … and what needed to be fixed. … As long as I was honest about it … as long as I was trying to grow … it would not feel dangerous. It would just be like, this is a thing that we have to push through.

Repercussion: "[I] decided that [I] didn't care what they thought. … There's always, I think, going to be things that were said, and stuff that probably can never really be taken back. Even if they can be forgiven, they're not forgotten" (P-12). "Super tumultuous, to the point of literally hating each other. … I'm just not going to be around you anymore. I can't deal with you. … I tried to commit suicide … I was like, if this is my life, I quit" (P-1). "It really did … widen the gap between me and [OP] … I didn't really want to trust [OP] after that point … it just made me that much more not want to … have much contact with [OP]" (P-8). "This foundational

conflict … had not been resolved. [OP] said … [I] was going to hell. … Depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, anorexia … a fake relationship for many years, and then no relationship for a couple of years" (P-9).

Motivated-summary: "He was the person that the Lord used to teach me that it's important to submit to authority, and it's not my ability to decide, or it's not my job to decide whether or not someone is qualified to lead me" (P-24). "A big impact on whether or not you really understand where the other person is coming from. [We] are now able to be friends … despite the fact that would, that seemed impossible just a few years previously" (P-15). Another example of a motivated-summary depicting the gravity of the offense is from P-19:

> [We] were always best friends. … I see now that that was just narcissism. … Capable of letting this abuse happen. … I don't see it ever getting resolved. … It would have been easier if a bomb had gone off, because it's like, great, your dead. … They're dead to me.

Rules-of-life: "I need to … recognize, it's not changing, it's not getting any better. It's actually not a healthy place to live and it's not a place where I could be a good [parent] to my kids anymore" (P-14). "I don't love her for what she does. If my love was contingent on what she does, towards anybody, if my love was contingent on what they do, then that love would be kind of fickle" (P-2).

Permanence: "Things were very turbulent for [us] that year. [I] did not trust the relationship was strong enough to move. … [I] was not ready to move anywhere due to some broken trust" (P-4). P-5 demonstrated gravity within the theme of permanence by stating:

> [OP] said to [me], like, I don't know if our marriage is going to make it through this. … When my decision to move … became a source of marriage conflict for them, when

> those two things were tied together … it really turned into a different beast. It wasn't just a disagreement. It was very personal.

Zero-sum-choice: "There was a basically an ultimatum issued … it's this or nothing. … Instead of working together to solve a problem … it's either my way or nothing. … Not even responding to a letter that says I forgive you" (P-6). "This was problematic for [them] … that's not how we roll. That's not our thing. … It's wrong … we can't contribute or participate in something that is knowingly wrong. … We may not come to the wedding based on this" (P-16).

Moral-self themes that indicate the perceived gravity are demonstrated by P-10:

> [We] stopped going as much 'cause [OP] was there a lot, and that was stressful. … [OP] wasn't in the picture at all, in [my] kids' lives, because of the abrasive words and continued behaviors. … At first was really sad for me, like I was so torn … but to save my marriage and our sanity, I feel like we had to create the hard-core boundaries.

Discussion on Research Question Three

The themes addressed by RQ3, presented in Table 4, were generated through the CGT methods of continuous comparison, reflexive cycles of inductive and abductive analysis, coding, construction, and reconstruction. These emergent themes of conflict narratives were compared to each of the dimensions of perception that constructed the CCM, which depicts a literature-based, endogenous framework for conflict etiology. As the RQ3 results revealed, the SIRC themes did not directly match the perceptions of the CCM. Instead, these themes filled the structural framework of the CCM with the quintessence of SIRC perceptions. Distinct combinations of themes depicted each of the five themes of perception.

When instructed about how to tell their conflict stories, participants were encouraged to describe their experience of a SIRC from their personal perspectives, addressing what they

believed happened and explaining why. As a result, their narratives provided details about the context, content, values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, emotions, interpretations, attributions, judgments, reactions, effects, and consequences that were all part of their remembered experience. From these detailed stories, all five dimensions of the CCM were represented by all participants, and each of the narrative themes were associated with at least one dimension of perception. Themes of bad-reaction, agreement, growth, and lack-of-understanding were only associated with the perception of emotional impact, which was represented by 100% of the themes. Other themes, such as change, permanence, relational-rulebook, and vulnerability were associated with four of the five dimensions of perception in the CCM, and the theme of resolution contained all five dimensions.

Results: Research Question Four

The fourth research question sought to explore participants' written descriptions of their SIRCs when guided by the CCM-based questions on the CCRI (Appendices F and I). This research instrument was a reformatted version of the preliminary design of the CCM (Figure 1), and the questions were structured to elicit clear and unbiased responses from participants reflecting their perceptions about each dimensional element. The literature review on conflict psychology was synthesized in the construction of the CCM and corresponding CCRI. The basis of each dimension of perception was established throughout the sections of Chapter 2, and then reiterated within each dimensional theme of the RQ3 results.

The five dimensions of perception used to frame the CCM and CCRI were the focus of RQ4. Unlike the questions addressed in research questions 1 and 3, the data related to RQ4 were not interpreted through CGT methods of abductive and inductive reasoning and analysis. Written answers in the CCRI were limited to 150 characters, which produced concise responses from

participants demonstrating their beliefs about each dimension of the SIRC. These answers were condensed down to the key words and phrases and presented as a collection of sociolinguistic data depicting perceptions about each dimension of the CCM. The key words from each participant were presented in Figures 3—7 alongside their response on the coinciding continuum slider, which indicates their perceived degree of significance about that dimension of the SIRC.

Integrated into the results from the CCRIs was a ranked depiction of the conflict outcomes, based on participant statements transcribed from their interviews. After participants completed their conflict narratives, they were asked follow-up questions, including a request to describe the final relational status at the end of their conflict. The conflict outcomes described by participants were organized into a scale with five distinct levels of postconflict relational quality. Participants' descriptions of their relational outcomes were then matched with the equivalent rank on the scale. Table 11 presented the definitive properties for each level of conflict outcomes, along with the prevalence of each outcome at the conclusion of the SIRCs in this sample.

Table 11

Relational Quality at the End of the Conflict

Quality	Definitive properties	No. of conflicts	%	Rank
Improved	Personal growth, mutual understanding, stronger relationship than before the conflict	6	24	5
Resolved	Fully resolved, positive relationship, returned to normal	2	8	4
Moving on	Ongoing relationship, small lingering effects, awkwardness, uncertainty	3	12	3
Damaged	Boundaries around interactions, limited/regulated communication, superficiality, tension, low trust	5	20	2
Destroyed	Destroyed relationship, rare to zero contact, estrangement	9	36	1

Note. $N = 25$. Shading gradients reflect the graduated qualities of conflict outcomes, and mirror the shading used for the same purpose in Figures 3—7. Shading depicts a range between positive

(improved and resolved), neutral (moving on), and negative (damaged and destroyed) outcomes. Rank was used to calculate outcome prevalence within subgroups such as gender. Female participants in this study reported a mean quality rank of 2.08 at the end of their conflicts, indicating an average outcome of damaged relationships. Male participants reported a mean quality rank of 3.25, indicating conflict outcomes slightly above the moving on properties.

The CCM associates higher levels of significance on each dimension with correspondingly significant internal and relational outcomes. Participant responses to the CCRI were presented in a ranked order matching Table 11, based on levels of relational quality at the conclusion of their conflict. In this way, continuum levels of perceived significance were observed in association with the ultimate outcome of their SIRC.

Value of the Relationship

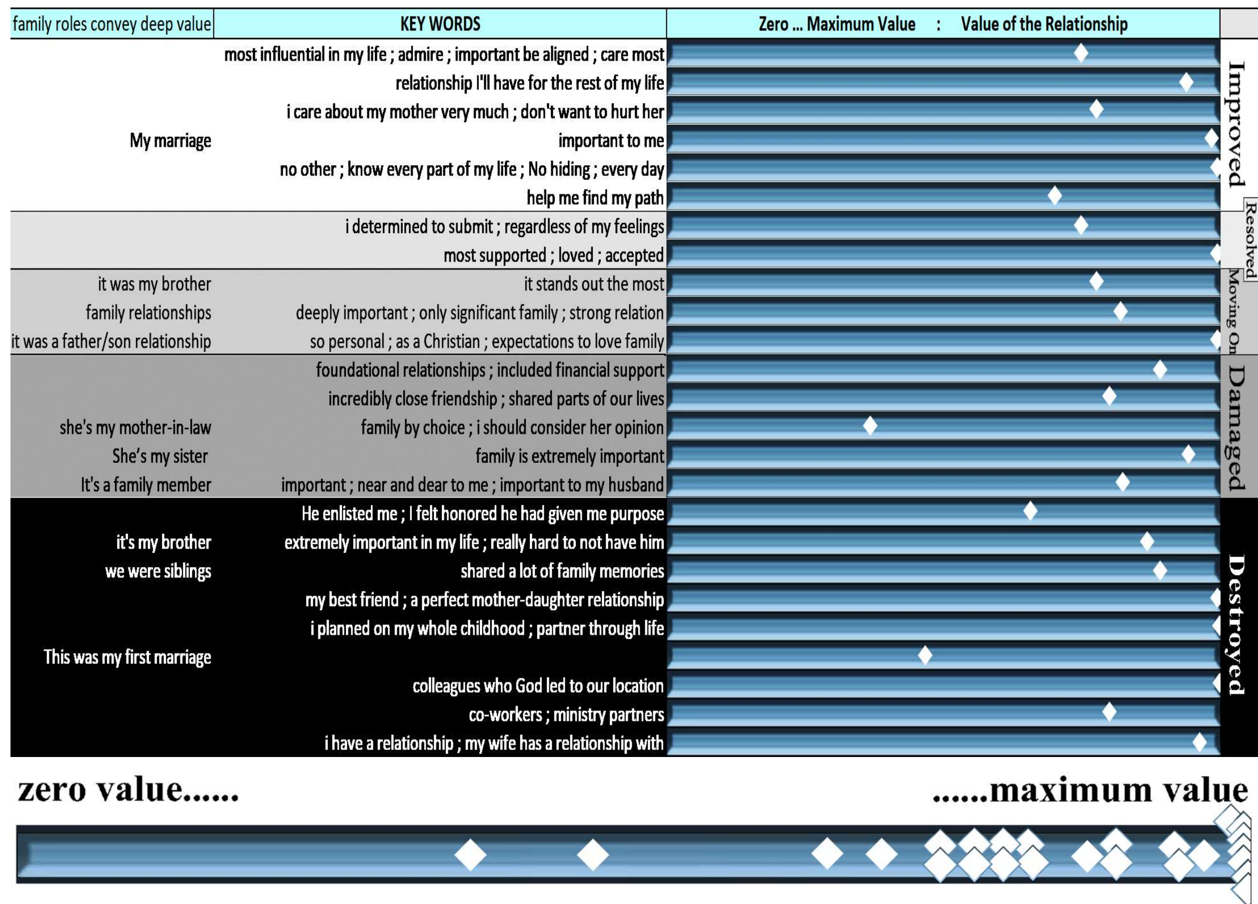
The first question on the CCRI (Appendix I) asked: "What exactly was it about this relationship that made it important in your life? (beyond the obvious)" Participants' answers demonstrated the same pattern that was observed in the transcripts, addressed in the RQ3 results. Family and spousal relational roles can have such implicit, symbolic value, that expressions of this value were often simply statements of the relational role. When participants explained the relational importance by identifying the role (implying that the role title had a self-explanatory measure of value), those words were placed in a column labeled "family roles convey deep value." Ten of the participants used family roles to implicitly express the importance of the relationship (presented in Figure 3).

In Figure 3, the continuum sliders revealed participants' individual and combined responses to the question: "How valuable was this relationship to you prior to the conflict?" Participant ratings of relational significance generally fell within the top third of the continuum

across all levels of conflict outcomes, and the most prominent placement of responses was at the *maximum* end of the continuum. The participant who placed the lowest rating on the relationship continuum also provided a written response containing the key word "should," which indicated that this lower degree of relational value was associated with a perception of obligation, rather than a relationship of significant personal importance.

Figure 3

Responses Depicting Relational Importance



Harmfulness of the Implications

The second question on the CCRI (Appendix I) asked: "If the other person had been in the right, and morally correct, in what they said and did during this conflict, what would that imply about you as a person, or about your beliefs?" Based on observed patterns in participant reactions and significantly increased time required to write answers to this question, this was the

most challenging and unpleasant question on the CCRI. Almost all participants asked for clarification, but not to address confusion about the wording of the question. Instead, participants consistently expressed scornful incredulity or indicated endogenous resistance against this request to consider a hypothetical scenario wherein the other party was in the morally correct position during the SIRC. However, the few participants who had already positioned themselves as the guilty party during their SIRC stories, or who had openly addressed mistakes they had made, did not convey the same difficulty or resistance when answering this question.

Figure 4

Responses Depicting the Harmful Implications of the Other Party's Position

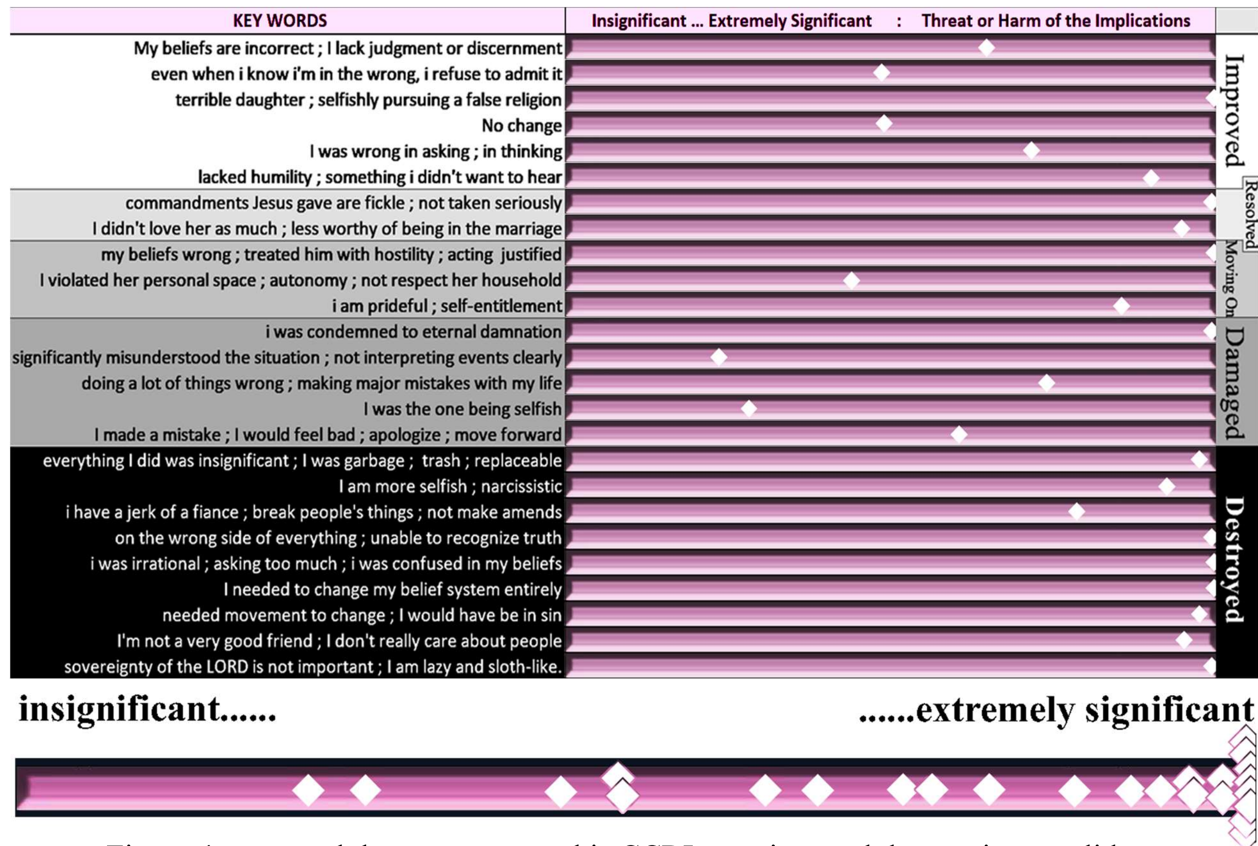


Figure 4 presented the responses to this CCRI question, and the continuum sliders contained participants' individual and combined responses to the question: "If these implications were true, how significant/harmful would that be about you or your beliefs?" All but five participants rated the harmful significance of the other party's perspective within top half of the

continuum, and the most prominent placement of responses was at the *extremely significant* end of the continuum. In conflicts with neutral or positive outcomes, the key words contained themes of personal moral guilt, immoral character, and denigration of spiritual beliefs. These responses aligned with the narrative themes of judgmental attributions when such accusations are directed at the other party. When directed at oneself, they reflect themes of identity, feeling-understood, and relational-rulebook. Continuum ratings of conflicts with *damaged* outcomes had the greatest variance of significance across the continuum, whereas all but one of the ratings from participants with destroyed relationships were placed on the extreme end of the continuum. Key words from conflicts with negative outcomes described low personal worth, flawed judgment, immoral characteristics, and incorrect choices and beliefs.

Dislike of Attributed Character and Motives

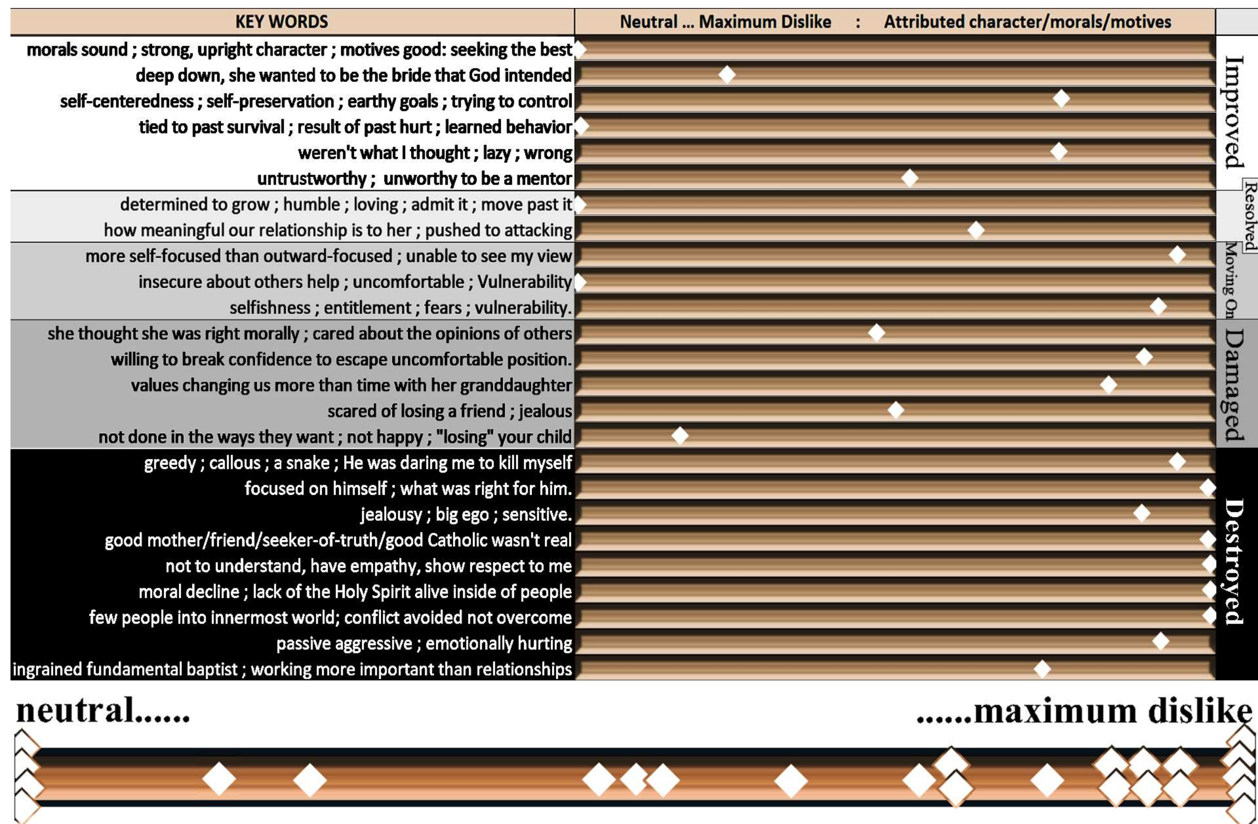
The third question on the CCRI (Appendix I) asked: "What did this conflict reveal about that person's morals, their character, intentions, and motives?" This question invited participants to express their attributions about the other party in the conflict. The continuum sliders presented participants' responses to the question: "How much did you dislike their revealed character/ motives/morals?"

Results (presented in Figure 5) demonstrated a correlation between positive relational outcomes, positive and empathetic key words, and *neutral* significance on the continuum depicting degrees of dislike. None of the conflicts with positive outcomes rated their attributions with *maximum dislike*, and none of the conflicts with negative outcomes rated their attributions at the *neutral* level of significance. Continuum ratings and key words from conflicts with *moving on* and *damaged* outcomes were varied in valence and placement across the continuum. The attributions made about the other party in conflicts with *destroyed* outcomes were strongly

valenced with negative moral judgments about character, intentions, and value systems, and this was proportionately reflected by *maximum* ratings of dislike on the continuum. In contrast to the results from all other questions on the CCRI, this was the only dimension with participant ratings on the far-left pole of the continuum, representing an insignificant degree of dislike. On this scale, *neutral* ratings were often associated with key words stating positive attributions about the other party's motives and morals.

Figure 5

Responses Depicting Attributions About Motives and Morals



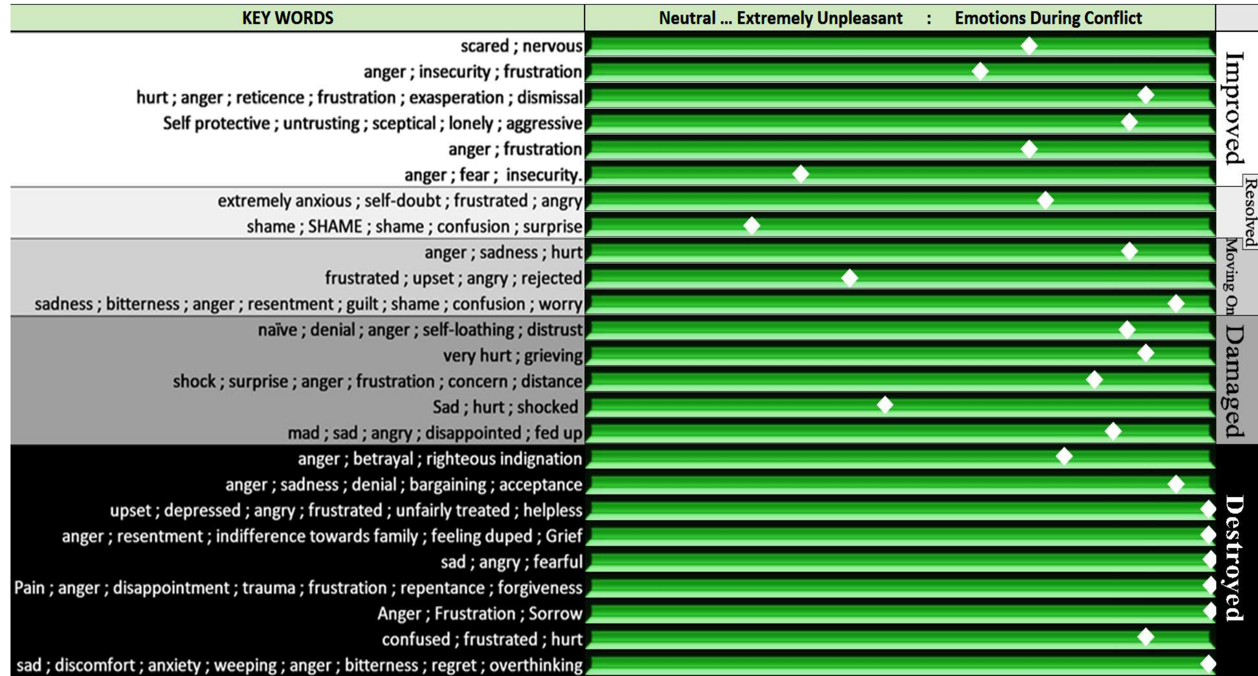
Unpleasantness of the Emotions

The fourth question on the CCRI (Appendix I) asked: "What were your emotions during this conflict?" Responses depicted the emotions participants remembered experiencing during their SIRC, but this did not necessarily equate to the actual range of emotions from their lived experiences. In light of the literature review on neurocognitive mechanisms of emotion and

memory, emotions reported on the CCRI may have been influenced by retrospective reconstructions, rumination, self-motivated narratives, or ongoing consequences of the SIRC.

Figure 6

Responses Depicting Emotions Experienced During the Conflict



Emotions of anger and frustration were reported within all the levels of relational outcomes (presented in Figure 6). Participants with *improved* relationships were the only ones to report insecurity and self-protection, while self-directed emotions of guilt, shame, and self-doubt were associated only with conflicts that resulted in *moving on* or *resolved* outcomes. Sadness was absent in conflicts with positive outcomes but was prominent in conflicts with neutral and negative outcomes. Shock was only associated with *damaged* relationships, and feelings of grief and denial were associated with negative outcomes. Participants with *destroyed* relationships were the only ones to report emotions associated with resolution or closure, namely repentance, forgiveness, acceptance, and regret.

The continuum sliders presented participants' responses to the question: "How unpleasant were those emotions?" With five exceptions, participant ratings of emotional unpleasantness fell within the top third of the continuum. Only conflicts with *destroyed* outcomes indicated emotions of maximum unpleasantness, and all but one of the ratings from conflicts with negative outcomes were placed in the highest quarter of the continuum. Six of the eight most insignificant ratings were from participants with positive conflict outcomes.

Durability of the Offense

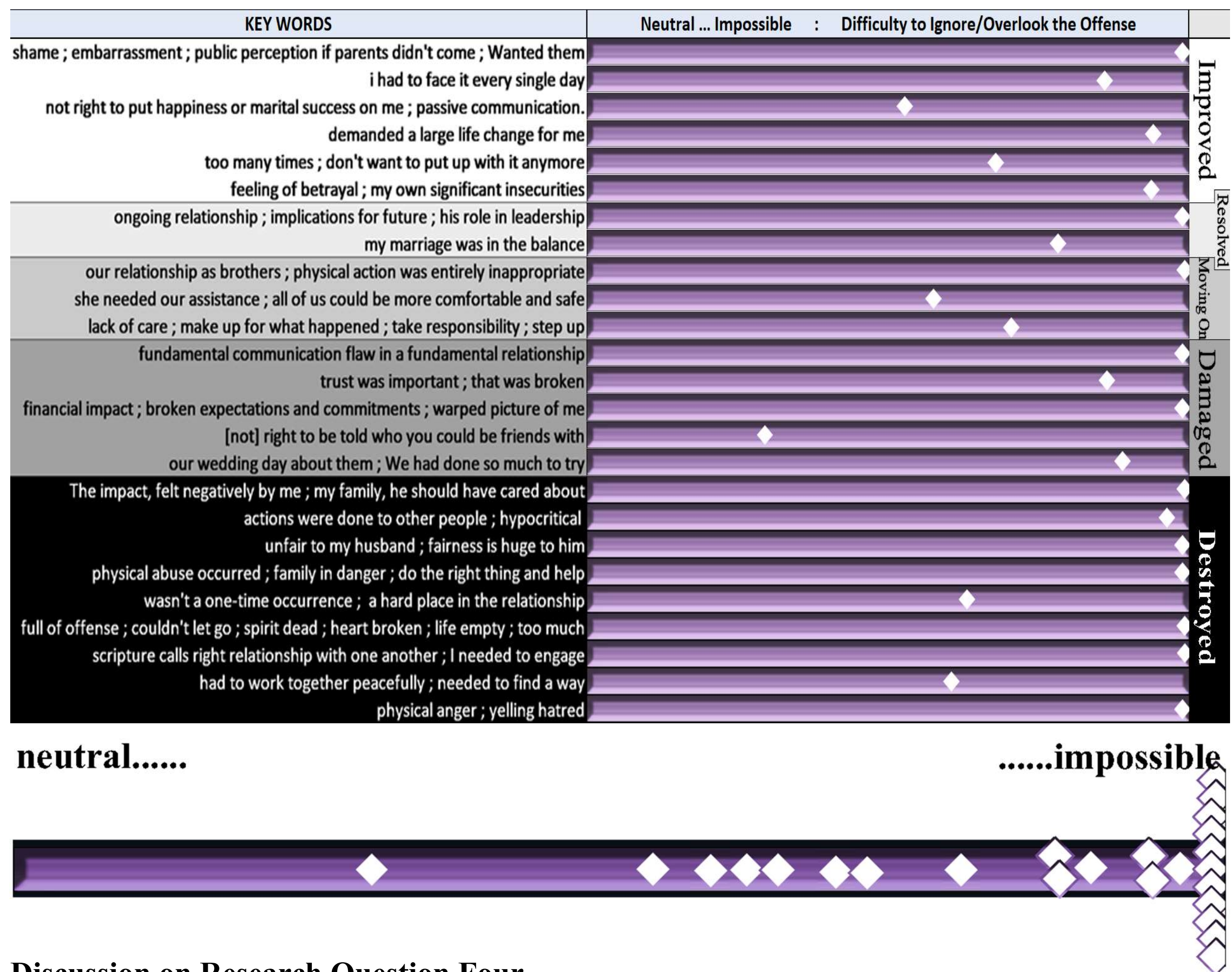
The fifth and final question on the CCRI (Appendix I) asked: "What made the offending actions in this conflict something you couldn't overlook and just let it slide?" Results are presented in Figure 7. Participants' answers addressed a variety of matters related to the conflict circumstances. In conflicts with neutral and positive outcomes, the key words emphasized an impulse to respond, with themes of an ongoing life impact forcing the participant to address the conflict rather than avoid it, emotions (shame, embarrassment, insecurity, betrayal) or moral violations motivating a response, preventing an unacceptable consequence, or an obligation to solve a problem (reflecting the moral-self theme; Table 4). In conflicts with negative outcomes, key words were oriented less around responses and more around expressions of core life, identity, and relationship schemas, such as "fundamental relationship," "trust," "broken expectations," "not right," "hypocritical," "unfair," "do the right thing," "spirit dead," "scripture calls," "needed to find a way," "hatred," and accusations of harm done to others (Figure 7).

The continuum sliders displayed participants' individual and combined responses to the question: "How difficult/inappropriate would it have been to ignore/overlook these actions?" Compared to the other questions on the CCRI, participant ratings on the durability continuum contained the most marks placed on the *impossible* end of significance, which depicted a

perceived impossibility of overlooking the offense. The only participant who rated their perception of gravity in the lower half of the continuum had also provided similarly placed ratings to all questions on the CCRI, with the except of a maximum rating of relational value. Of the 14 conflicts with negative outcomes, 11 placed their mark within the highest range (top eighth) of the continuum. Participants with *damaged* relational outcomes reported less variance and higher average levels of significance on this dimension over any others.

Figure 7

Responses Depicting the Durability of the Offense



Discussion on Research Question Four

The five concepts addressed by the CCRI revealed distinctly different aspects of perceptions about SIRCs, and participants reported varying degrees of perceived significant and

key word content. On each dimension, there were patterns in the key words and continuum ratings within and between the five qualitative levels of postconflict outcomes. The CCRI questions about interpersonal attributions produced the greatest range of valenced linguistic responses and continuum ratings, and these corresponded with conflict outcomes. The durability continuum contained the greatest number of ratings at the highest end of the continuum, while the relational value continuum contained the highest averaged ratings from all participants.

Participants in this study were instructed to discuss a previous SIRC, and the CCM presented the five dimensions of perceptions as essential elements that construct SIRCs when each is perceived with sufficient significance by one or both parties. These results corroborated the framework of the CCM through ratings that were strongly skewed toward the most significant end of the continuum on all dimensions. Participants were invited to describe any previous SIRC of their choosing, but no definition or standard was given to them to clarify the meaning of a SIRC. Accordingly, the results produced a degree of variability in linguistic content and continuum ratings for the five dimensions, and this indicates that participants may perceive a SIRC without reaching the highest levels of significance on all five dimensions. Twenty-four of the 25 participants rated at least one of the dimensions within the highest range of the continuum on their CCRI. Participants with *improved* outcomes rated an average of 1.5 of the 5 dimensions within the highest range of the continuum, while participants with *destroyed* outcomes rated an average of 4 of the 5 dimensions in this highest range.

Results: Research Question Five

The fifth research question was dedicated to the key factors that participants identified as determinants for the cause, durability, and consequences of their SIRC. The literature review explored a wide range of theories used to analyze and explain the sources and structures of

conflicts, the strategies for resolution, and range of potential consequences for individuals, relationships, families, and organizations. The review emphasized literature supporting an endogenous framework for the essence and etiology of conflict, built upon the CCM dimensions of perception, which are generated and determined by PCFs. The literature review identified causal themes of established norms, goal dissonance, topical triggers, role–based expectations, communication behaviors, traits and temperament, and motive attributions. Durability was explained in the literature review as measure of forgivability (Stackhouse et al., 2018), but forgivability is a very personalized standard, influenced by all the modes of PCFs and the other dimensions on the conflict continuum. Conflict consequences were categorized by internal effects on thoughts, emotions, and physiological health, external effects on behaviors and relationships, and organizational effects, and constructive conflict outcomes were also addressed.

The thematic categories of conflict etiology, durability, and consequences from literature were all represented in the data of this study, and thematic results were addressed by previous research questions. The conflict narratives were saturated with direct and indirect indications of participants' ideas about these determining factors, but narrative data required CGT processes of analysis and interpretation in order to distinguish the most salient aspects of each story that represented conflict-related beliefs. Themes were generated primarily from the narrative data, and they represented a synthesis of patterns that emerged from this sample, the influence of the theoretical framework, and interpretations grounded in CGT analysis. Central to the structure of results from this study was the theoretical presumption that participants may reveal their deeper perceptions and PCFs without directly or consciously intending to.

The contrasting emphasis of RQ5 was on the factors participants directly identified to explain the cause, durability, and effects of their own conflicts. During their interviews,

participants were asked to share their perspectives about the deeper factors that caused their conflict to occur, the reasons it was not easily or quickly resolved, what needed to happen in order to resolve the conflict, and the main consequences or effects of the conflict. On the CCRI, they also answered a question about the factors that determined their response to the conflict. Participant responses to those questions provided unfiltered demonstrations of participants' conscious and willfully expressed explanations for their personal SIRC experiences.

RQ5 sought to identify what participants designated as the key factors that determined each of these three conflict elements, but results revealed that the determinant factors for consequences were the same ones that determined durability. In other words, the factors that determined the gravity of the offense, the requirements for resolution, or the necessary repercussions also determined the consequences. As a result, the thematic summaries of participant perspectives about the determining factors of etiology, durability, and consequences were presented under the two headings of etiology and durability.

Participant Perspectives on Etiological Determinants

The key factors participants identified to have caused their conflicts were isolated by participant responses to the follow-up question about the deeper reasons the conflict occurred and their responses to the CCRI durability question. Although the CCRI question was intended to address durability rather than causality, participant responses to this question were evenly divided between these two subject matters, and so relevant CCRI answers were included in this section on etiology. Participants identified key causal factors that fell into five general categories: the other party's behaviors or actions that caused the conflict; the response to an initial offense that caused a more significant conflict; the other party's motives, morals, or character; personal behaviors, motives, or character; and an element of gravity that added

significance to the offense (presented in Table 12). Participants were not limited to one causal factor, so some identified multiple factors within one category while others identified factors in multiple categories. The key factors mentioned by the greatest number of participants were all focused on the other party, and were summarized as bad communication, motives of control, and an enduring character of self-centeredness. Participants most frequently endorsed casual factors depicting the actions or motives of the other party. Personal motives were described with a positive moral valence in factors of opposing a wrong, helping others, and fairness.

Table 12

Participant Designations of Key Factors that Cause Conflict

Category (no. of factors)	Causal Factor (no. of endorsements)	Representative quotes from participants
Other party's:		
Actions (14)	**Bad communication** (7)	"Unhelpful passive communication"; "Ineffective"; "Yelling hatred"
	Breaking trust (3)	"Both of us had affairs"; "Broken commitments"; "That was broken"
	Additional action factors: Harmful engrained patterns (2), Slander (2), Undermining (2), Distance, Criticism, Manipulation, Intimacy, Taking the attention, Differences, Aggression, Making demands, Lack of responsibility	
Motives (8)	**Control** (4)	"They want control of the situation"; "I was taking her [son]"
	Additional motives: Avoidance (2), Jealousy (2), Blame shifting, To justify aggression, Fear, Protection of others, Self-protection	
Character (6)	**Self-centered** (4)	"Only child syndrome"; "Loves having the spotlight"; "Narcissism"
	Childhood wounds (3)	"Having the childhood that she did"; "Her dad, who left her"
	Additional character factors: Strong-willed, Strong convictions, Insecure, Broken	
Morals (2)	Judging others (2), Lack of faith	
Personal:		
Actions (6)	Concealing (2), Pressuring (2), Not trying (2), Communicating poorly, Taking a stand, Infidelity	
Motives (7)	**Opposing a wrong** (3)	"Don't want to put up with it"; "I didn't feel like it was right"
	Additional motives: Self-protection (2), Lack of understanding (2), Helping others (2), Fairness, Anxiety, Feeling betrayed	
Character (5)	Strong-willed (2), Too sensitive (2), Insecure, Broken, Lacking self-acceptance	
Escalating gravity (6)	**Threat to a marriage** (3)	"Valuing the marriage as she did"; "To save her marriage"
	Personal cost (3)	"Demanded a large life change for me"; "The financial impact"
	Additional gravity factors: Physical harm (2), Public perception (2), Harm to others (2), Symbolic event	
Reactions (3)	Withdrawing (2), Verbal attack (2), Bitterness	

Note. Key factors with three or more endorsements are illustrated with representative quotes.

Participant Perspectives on Durability Determinants

The concept of conflict durability is an accumulation of interactive conflict perceptions, including the gravity of the offense, gravity of the consequences, requirements for resolution, interpersonal attributions, and an overall assessment of forgivability and resolvability. Durability is also influenced by the other party's response to the conflict, so when other parties refuse to engage in reconciliation or refuse to submit to an individual's requirements for resolution, the overall durability of the conflict may be quite robust. During the interviews in this study, participants were asked why their conflict was not easily or quickly resolved, what needed to happen in order to resolve the conflict, and the main consequences or effects of the conflict. They also provided written responses to the CCRI durability question asking why they could not just overlook or let go of the offense. Answers to these questions produced data demonstrating the key factors that participants identify as determinants for their conflict durability.

Through their responses, participants identified key factors that fell into four categories, which reflected the multiple components that construct overall perception of durability. These categories addressed the essential components of conflict resolution, factors that obstructed resolution, factors that overcame obstacles to reach positive outcomes, and factors that gave weight to the importance or urgency of resolution. The factor of relational value was a frequently endorsed durability determinant ($n = 5$), and although four of these participants had described a high level of relational value within this theme, one participant described insignificant relational value as an explanation for not pursuing resolution. From both perspectives, the importance of the relationship was a key factor identified by participants. The other most prevalent durability factor was reaching a point where one or both parties made a decision to stop any further efforts

toward resolution. Other salient key factors were having a conversation about the conflict, receiving acknowledgement of the wrong, and changing perspectives.

Table 13

Participant Designations of Key Factors that Determine Durability

Durability Category (no. of factors)	**Durability Factor** (no. of endorsements)	**Representative quotes from participants**
Resolution necessities		
Actions (7)	**Have the conversation** (4)	"Responding to a letter"; "Have the conversation"; "A lot of [it]"
	Additional actions:	Work on personal growth (2), Acquiesce (2), Make amends (2), Proactively initiate (2), Promote health, Promote peace
Conversation essentials (11)	**Explain** (3)	"Explaining the whole story"; "Further explain"; "To explain"
	Listen/Hear (3)	"Really listen to what I was saying"; "Hear what I'm telling"
	Talk about the issue (3)	"Trying to talk about it"; "Should have called it out"
	Additional conversation essentials:	One-on-one (2), Sitting down, Hear both sides, Admit, Consider my perspectives, Provide information, Express intentions clearly, Give and receive
Expressed intentions (11)	Pursue mutual understanding (2), Give and receive forgiveness (2), Permit individuality (2), Recognize intentions, Take responsibility, Apologize, Be vulnerable, Be genuine, Offer empathy, Mutual care, Unconditional love	
Understanding (4)	Identify the core of the offense (2), The impact, The covenant of marriage, What the Bible says	
Obstructions (11)	**Stopped trying** (5)	"Not gonna keep chasing"; "Didn't reach out"; "Not willing to"; "Call that what it is"; "Not gonna let you push me around"
	Lack of acknowledgement (4)	"Apologize"; "Didn't see it as being hurtful"; "Realize it"
	Blocked communication (3)	"Screaming match"; "Not allowed to talk about that"
	Lack of understanding (3)	"Two very distinctive belief patterns"; "Lack of understanding"
	Irreparable damage (3)	"Can never really be taken back"; "Couldn't let it go"
	Adverse emotions (3)	"Anger and resentment"; "Full of offense"; "Needs time"
	Additional obstructions:	Too difficult to change (2), Unreasonable demands (2), Ongoing harm, Terminated all communication, Terminated the relationship
Overcoming (6)	**Changed perspectives** (4)	"Forgiveness instead of bitterness"; "Love her for who she is"
	Feeling understood (3)	"Feel like I can talk about"; "How his actions made me feel"
	Additional overcoming factors:	Open communication (2), Apologize, Internal growth, Rebuilding trust
Gravity of significance (6)	**Relational value** (5)	"Our relationship as brothers"; "The closest relationship I will ever have"; "Wasn't as big of a deal and I wasn't as close"
	Additional gravity factors:	Ongoing interactions (2), Victim narrative, Marriage at stake, Spiritual mandates, Public perceptions

Note. Key factors with three or more endorsements are illustrated with representative quotes.

Discussion on Research Question Five

RQ5 explored the content of participants' direct statements identifying factors that caused their conflict and factors that obstructed or promoted resolution. Participant statements that identified key factors determinant of the consequences of their conflict were incorporated into the data on durability. The concept of conflict durability was developed during the literature review and encompassed several elements of SIRCs that influence the course of conflicts and their ultimate outcomes. Participant explanations for the causes of their conflicts had clear connections to the factors they identified to determine durability. The most salient key factor determining the cause of conflict was labeled bad communication (on the part of the other party), and many other factors in the action category depicted additional valenced elements of communication. Accordingly, communication was directly and indirectly the primary theme of the factors on durability. One of the salient factors of durability was to be in active communication with the other party about the conflict. The conversation essentials category provided a detailed list of the tone, structure, setting, and style for effective conversations, while the expressed intentions category demonstrated the attitudes, motives, values that must be conveyed through verbal and nonverbal means. Although many factors were identified that could cause a conflict, the greatest obstruction to resolution was simply to stop trying.

Summary

Literature on neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms of perception, emotion, memory, interpretation, and judgment indicates that endogenous processes may impede accurate perceptions about the underlying cause and essence of an offense. The literature review in this study generated a conflict continuum that framed interpersonal relational conflicts as the product of multidimensional perceptions, which are determined by the PCFs through which conflicts are

experienced and understood. The research methods of this study were designed to elicit evidence and examples of perceptions and PCFs that might be exposed during recollections of SIRCs. Data collected from participants were not presumed to be precise or objective recapitulations of conflict events. Instead, conflict narratives were approached as representations of SIRC perceptions, overtly influenced and guided by the unique PCFs of each participant. Thus, research data represented a taxonomy of verbal expressions and thematic concepts associated with perceptions about SIRCs, theoretically generated by PCFs.

Participants in this study provided a general representation of the mean demographics of American Millennials, with an even ratio of women and men originating from 17 different states (Figure 2). This sample was slightly older (M = 31.5 years) and more highly educated (84% with at least a bachelor's degree) than the overall Millennial population (Table 1). They each described a personal SIRC from their past, which originated an average of 6.4 years ago, and lasted an average of 3.4 years (Table 3). Family members (including in-laws) represented the other party in the conflict 56% of the time, while 24% of conflicts were with a spouse and 20% with a colleague or leader (Table 2). The circumstances from which these conflicts emerged were most frequently the planning stages of a wedding or the strong imposition of a personal preference upon another party (Table 10). Upon conclusion of the SIRCs, 32% of participants reported positive relational quality with the other party, while 56% of relationships were described as having ongoing negative effects or were completely destroyed (Table 11).

One of the products generated by this research was the taxonomy of thematic concepts depicting the essence of SIRCs (Table 4), which was frequently used as a reference point to organize and interpret results and enrich discussions of the findings from each research question. The division of indirect and direct themes reflected the theoretical framework of dual-processing

theory and provided insight about the types of themes most often functioning in an indirect role, compared with those intentionally used to define and explain the prominent part of the SIRC. The identity protection category represented the themes most often given a central and definitive role in participants' retrospective accounts, while the themes representing presumptions about conflict resolution, forgiveness, repercussions, and autobiographical summaries almost always provided the subtle framework through which the stories were told (Table 5). The most prevalent themes overall were those of relational-rulebook and feeling-understood.

All of these themes constructed into the taxonomy in Table 4 had strong relationships with the five dimensions of perception and the specific modes of PCFs that generate them. RQ1 provided clear support of the influential role of PCFs and subjective perceptions throughout the course of SIRCs. Although RQ1 only inquired about the words and phrases indicative of PCFs, the narratives were so saturated with these exact data, each mode of PCFs generated its own series of quotes or tables demonstrating the variety of ways each was depicted through the sociolinguistic data. RQ3 demonstrated equally clear connections between the taxonomy themes and the dimensions of perception depicted through the CCM. Though RQ3 sought only to confirm whether or not the taxonomy themes corresponded with the conflict continuum dimensions, data was rich with distinct thematic patterns related to each dimension.

The research strategy of eliciting conflict narratives told from a third-person perspective, with descriptive labels used in place of names, was a creative challenge for some of the participants. It was also an effective means of answering RQ2 and produced a collection of characterizations that displayed moral valence, relational significance, judgment, and even transformation when characters' negative labels were replaced with hopeful and loving labels (Table 9).

RQ4 brought a valuable balance to the thematic and valenced interpretations of data with the CCRI, which generated concrete responses from participants about their perceived degrees of significance along the dimensions of the CCM, along with concise lists of key words to add meaning and context to each placement upon the continuum. The CCRI provided data comprising actual pictures of participants' perceptions of significance, which could be utilized for additional purposes of complex comparative analysis beyond the scope of this study. Results from the CCRI could be used to verify narrative interpretations or could be beneficial in weighting the different dimensions of the CCM based on their influence during conflict etiology, or their predictive association with conflict outcomes. In RQ4, the focus on inquiry was on the qualities of participant descriptions of their own SIRCs based on key words and continuum ratings from the CCRI, and distinct patterns were identified in relation to participant responses on each of the dimensions.

When participant responses to open-ended questions and the CCRI were isolated from their narrative transcripts, their direct statements about the causes and durability of their conflicts fell into a far narrower collection of themes than those addressed by the taxonomy in Table 4. The focus on participants' statements in RQ5, removed from the deeper CGT processes of analysis, created another collection of perceptions that could be portrayed as another category of PCFs. The way participants answered direct questions about why conflicts occurred, what made them so offensive, and what was needed to bring resolution revealed a clear pattern of beliefs within the sample. Many other salient facets of their SIRC experiences were not expressed in this set of data, but a clear emphasis was placed on the importance of communication, the mutual pursuit of understanding, and negative attributions toward the other party (Tables 12 and 13).

This research produced significant results in response to all five qualitative questions, and the various strategies incorporated into data collection during participant interviews resulted in consistent support toward an endogenous etiology of SIRCs. Additionally, the data were supportive of the broad goal of this research: to demonstrate the qualitative and thematic manifestations of perception that generate and dictate individual experiences of SIRCs.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

During conflicts, the issues people believe they are fighting about may not be the issues actually causing their offense. Although unresolved conflicts are unequivocally correlated with undesirable outcomes, individuals are recurrently unable or unwilling to facilitate positive resolutions in their own conflicts (Clark et al., 2020). Endogenous processes may impede accurate perceptions about the underlying cause and nature of an offense (Hackel et al., 2020; Javanbakht, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020). Although researchers of conflict consistently mention perception throughout their theories of etiology and analysis, none have overtly constructed a conflict theory or diagnostic analysis upon a foundation of personalized perceptions (Benitez et al., 2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Grover & Hasel, 2018; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Raimundo, 2020; Rockett et al., 2017; Semerci, 2019). The purposes of this qualitative, grounded theory study were to place perception in the central and determinative positive of a comprehensive theory of conflict etiology and bring clarity to the definitive essence of significant interpersonal relational conflicts (SIRCs).

In order to accomplish these purposes, the following research questions were constructed and addressed via research involving volunteers who participated in live interviews during the first two weeks of March 2021:

RQ1. What words and phrases do participants include within their conflict narratives that are indicative of subjective perceptions and/or specific modes of PCFs?

RQ2. Do participants incorporate morally valenced terminology into their conflict narratives?

RQ3. Do thematic components of SIRCs identified within participants' conflict narratives correspond with the thematic dimensions of the conflict continuum model?

RQ4. How do participants describe their SIRCs when guided by multidimensional questions in the conflict continuum research instrument?

RQ5. What do participants identify as the key factors that determined the cause, durability, and consequences of their SIRC?

This doctoral study was framed by dual-processing theory, which provided theoretical support for the proposal that personalized cognitive filters (PCFs) influence perception and memory in conscious and subconscious ways, through a variety of paradigms and mechanisms (e.g., affective, rational, neurological, cognitive, cultural, and moral). Dual-processing theory is established on the idea that working memory is a limited resource, which is budgeted and coordinated to maximize efficiency through two systems of cognitive processes: automatic and deliberative (Kahneman, 2003, 2011; Markovits et al., 2019). Constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Bryant & Charmaz, 2019) was the methodological approach to this study because it allowed existing theories in literature related to PCFs to be integrated with results from thematic and categorical analysis of new research data about SIRCs in order to generate a novel theoretical model of conflict oriented around perception.

Discussion of Findings

The research questions in this study represented overarching goals to elucidate the essence of SIRCs, construct an endogenous theory of conflict etiology, and promote growth in academic and applied fields of conflict psychology. Towards those ends, RQ1—2 elicited sociolinguistic data to verify and clarify the presence and influence of PCFs within retrospective recollections about lived conflicts. RQ3—4 explored the relationship between the conceptual themes found in unstructured conflict narratives and the dimensions of the conflict continuum model (CCM), which represented a synthesis of the literature review. RQ5 was structured to

demonstrate the prominent ways conflicts are consciously explained by individuals, in possible contrast to the themes inadvertently revealed by their narratives.

The data from this research represented three theoretical versions of each conflict: the temporal events that literally unfolded during the initial conflict, the events as they were explained by participants' intentionally constructed direct quotes, and events positioned as circumstantial backdrops behind meaningful, conceptual themes generated by the overall narratives, valenced terminology, and subjective dimensional ratings. Findings from this research were approached through a theoretical framework suggesting that people do not experience the world as a literal reality, but as a place they create, imbibed with meaning, coherence, and consistency (Javanbakht, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Vanderveren et al., 2019). These effects were observed within this research sample in numerous, clear, and uniquely individualized ways, such as autobiographical statements about ongoing, life-altering consequences of conflicts in the distant past, morally valenced attributions about other parties, exemplary statements demonstrating specific cognitive distortions and biases, and expressions of deep grief over the loss of valued relationships that were terminated due to an internal sense of unforgivability. The data collected from each participant aligned with the comprehensive conclusions from the literature review, which contended that relational threats are determined by the perceptions, desires, strengths, and vulnerabilities of each party and that conflict does not necessarily stem from rational evaluations, but from affect–driven oversimplifications of what opposing parties represent in the pursuit of personal goals (Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; O'Doherty et al., 2017; Rinker & Lawler, 2018; Tappin et al., 2020).

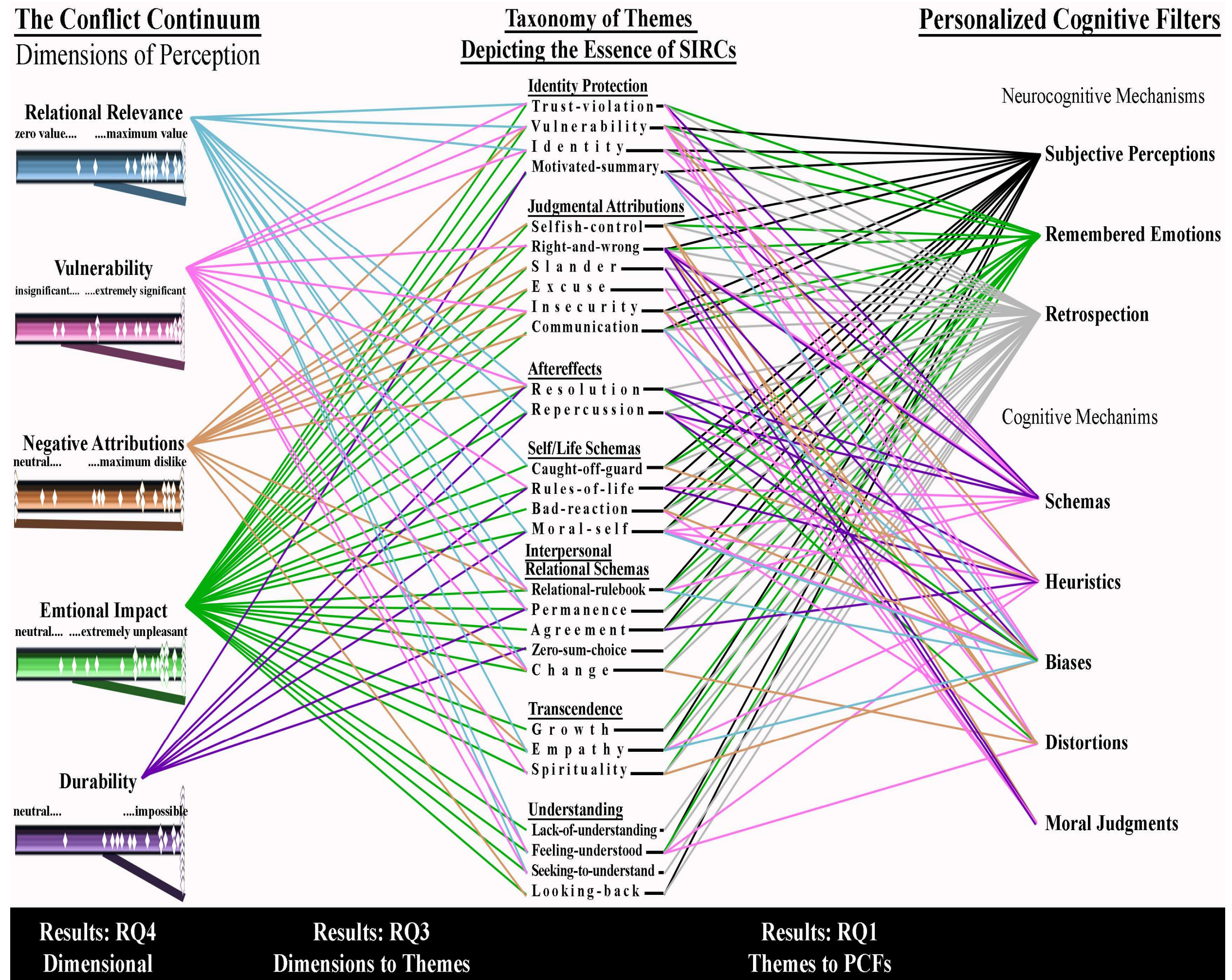
RQ1 results were presented under headings representing the modes of PCFs identified in the literature review, and participant quotes used to demonstrate each PCF were also labeled with

the relevant themes from the taxonomy generated during data analysis (presented in Table 4). PCFs such as selective—attention, perception, reconstructive memory, and System 1 heuristics are such indirect, intangible components of lived experiences and narrative recollections that I was not initially confident how these concepts could be identified objectively. However, participants consistently and willingly expressed emotion, valence, presumptuous beliefs and expectations, and did not withhold strong statements with subjective judgments and interpretations of their SIRC experiences. Attributional statements about other parties, self-reflecting summaries, practical philosophies about how to resolve conflict, and the customized rules that guide social interactions were standard structural components of the narratives. The data from narratives and follow-up questions ultimately produced excellent linguistic expressions of PCFs specifically related to the topic of SIRCs.

The literature on PCFs contained strong evidence supporting the physiological processes and powerful influence of neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms, which generate the perceptions that are consciously expressed as opinions and explanations about salient, lived experiences (Garcés & Finkel, 2019; Haj & Miller, 2018; Imbir, 2017; Karaszewska et al., 2019; Spaulding, 2020). Conflict literature contained extensive indirect references to effects associated with PCFs, but extant theoretical frameworks supporting conflict research were built around external, circumstantial factors, postconflict consequences, resolution techniques, or measurable physiological reactions (Kozusznik et al., 2020; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Prager et al., 2019; Scharp & Curran, 2018; Semerci, 2019; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020), and so an etiological bridge connecting PCFs with SIRCs was glaringly absent. The results of this study built that bridge (depicted in Figure 8).

Figure 8

Research Results Connecting the CCM, Taxonomy of Themes, and PCFs



Note. CCM = conflict continuum model; PCFs = personalized cognitive filters; SIRCs = significant interpersonal relational conflicts.

Each of the five continuums above Results: RQ4 depict the combined ratings from the sample (*N* = 25; also included in Figures 3—7). A line was drawn connecting the lowest and highest ratings (omitting the outermost outlier), and because multiple responses placed on the same point of the continuum were stacked, this produced lines with a distinct angle and length under each continuum, which demonstrated the range of responses and the prevalence of significant ratings at top end of the continuum.

Results from RQ1, RQ3, and RQ4 were integrated into a single image (Figure 8) to demonstrate the relationships between the modes of PCFs and the dimensions of the CCM. The taxonomy of SIRC themes (presented in Table 4) created a center point of intersection and association between the two theoretical constructs of PCFs and the CCM, which were each syntheses of existing literature. Connection lines indicate the themes through which participants expressed significance for a dimension of the CCM or a mode of PCF, based on RQ results identified at the bottom of Figure 8. Although not directly addressed by results to a specific research question, additional, meaningful implications from this data could be drawn out by following the lines of connection between all three columns. For example, the CCM dimension of relational relevance was connected to all thematic categories except judgmental attributions. An expression of relational relevance expressed with the theme of trust-violation (RQ3 results) could have been produced by PCFs of remembered emotions, retrospection, schemas, and cognitive biases, which were each associated with the trust-violation theme (RQ1 results).

Details gleaned about participants' conflicts provided additional data about the categories of content which are often given primary attention in conflict literature. The prominent practice in conflict research is to explain, diagnostically analyze, categorize, and develop treatments for conflicts based upon exogenous orientations to conflict essence and etiology (Clark et al., 2020; Kozusznik et al., 2020), and this approach was criticized in the literature review and throughout this study. Though it is understandably appealing to frame and address conflicts through factors that are concrete, definitively measurable, and treatable with behavioral models (e.g., effective communication strategies, emotional regulation, methods of negotiation), theories of SIRC built upon a descriptive foundation have resulted in ongoing lack of clarity about the comprehensive definition, structural essence, and theoretical explanation of etiology (Khatib et al., 2018).

Prominent researchers like Witvliet (2020) have studied physiological and neurological indications of offense and forgiveness, and her teams' resulting treatment strategies have been effective in promoting increased rates of forgiveness, empathy, and healing, even while the theoretical foundations of SIRC etiology have not been clearly established for the general field.

Many researchers have sought to identify which specific conflict components have the greatest significance on effects and outcomes (Overall & McNulty, 2017), and the literature review acknowledged abundant reports emphasizing the topics of arguments, circumstantial catalysts, relational roles of parties in conflict, power dynamics, control over limited resources, individual ideas about causal and resolution determinants, postconflict relational quality, and average duration of the conflicts. All of these conflict components were present in the data from this research sample as well, and some of the RQ results in Chapter 4 incorporated this information (Tables 2, 3, 10—13). Though the possible patterns and interconnections hidden within all of these descriptive details might offer superficial insights, a comprehensive and generalizable theory addressing the deeper elements and motivations of conflict has remained an expressed need in the field (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017).

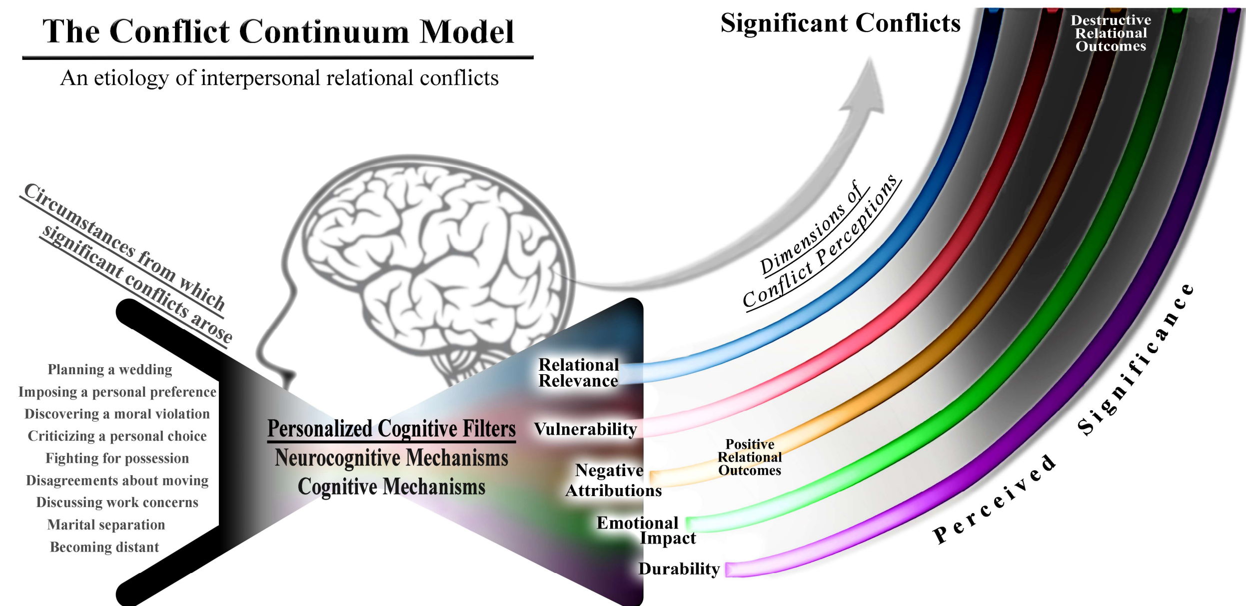
The data from this study provided meaningful support for a comprehensive conflict theory that places dimensions of perceptions as the elements driving and defining the entire course of conflict experiences, from beginning to end, covering the full range of possible conclusions and consequential outcomes. For example, wedding planning was a prevalent circumstance of conflicts from this sample (20%; Table 10), and yet participants demonstrated a variety of beliefs, behaviors, and relational outcomes in response to the same circumstantial category. The course of their conflicts and outcomes were not determined by the context of wedding planning, nor by their common efforts to clearly express their points of view to the

other party. These SIRCs were analyzed through the CCM by identifying the personalized levels of perceived significance on each dimension, the underlying themes representing their PCFs, core beliefs, expectations, relational obligations, and self-defending and emotional reactions. This theoretical framework allowed each conflict to be explained and understood in terms of what generated the conflict, why it escalated, and what core issues determined the relational outcomes. This model also explains the effectiveness of the key durability factors identified by participants (presented in RQ5 results), such as conversations where both parties sought to understand one another, one-on-one, with expressed openness, empathy, and mutual respect. Those external enactments were theoretically effective because they met underlying needs and concerns described by themes in the taxonomy categories of identity protection and understanding (Gordon & Chen, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2019).

The concepts, content, structure, and terminology of participant data were direct reflections of one or multiple dimensions of the CCM, and PCFs were readily identifiable throughout the data, despite their definitively subjective quality. The taxonomy of themes within SIRCs filled in the framework of the CCM with a depiction of the essence of conflicts, without limitations on applications based on relational roles, topical content, or contexts. Throughout the course of the literature review, qualitative research, and CGT analysis, consistently rich support was found for the theoretical structure of the CCM and the active and influential roles of PCFs as an endogenous etiology of SIRC (Bassett et al., 2018; Gabriels & Strelan, 2018; Lindström et al., 2018). A revised and expanded design of the CCM (Figure 9) was created to demonstrate the relationships between these different elements of the theory, each shaping responses to lived experiences by identifying, interpreting, generating, escalating, sustaining, and eventually concluding interpersonal relational conflicts.

Figure 9

Revised and Expanded Design of the Conflict Continuum Model (CCM)



Note. The model depicts the course of a conflict, moving from left to right, as lived experiences are processed through personalized cognitive filters, which generate perceptions about each of the five dimensions. The list of circumstances from which significant conflicts arose are those described by participants in this study as the context for their SIRCs (presented in Table 10). The progressively dark shading along the upper end of the continuum is related to the range of postconflict relational outcomes (presented in Table 11). The center point of light at the bottom of the continuum and center point of dark at the top are both oriented on the dimension of negative attributions. This reflects the RQ4 results from the CCRI, which demonstrated the strongest correlation for relational outcomes with the placement of ratings on the negative attributions continuum. The starting positions of the dimensions of conflict perceptions are intended to depict the theoretical formula for conflict etiology housed within the CCM. The two dimensions that must initially surpass a minimum threshold of perceived significance for conflict to occur are relational relevance and vulnerability. Once a conflict is recognized as sufficiently

significant on those dimensions, the negative attribution dimension can fuel rapid escalation toward severe conflicts if intentions are believed to be hostile, which also influences significance on the emotional and durability dimensions. Conversely, offenses attributed to innocent mistakes may not develop into a SIRC because this dimension is not actively fueling escalations.

When conducting the CGT processes of data analysis, a limitation of the independent research model for this study became apparent. Many institutions conducting CGT research utilize the differing perspectives and backgrounds of independent coders to ensure inter-rater reliability of the descriptive codes, themes, and categories identified in the data (Bach et al., 2017; Hankin et al., 2018; Kunzmann et al., 2017). I followed CGT practices of memo-writing, reflexivity, and constant comparison, but without an unbiased research partner to validate my interpretations of the data, the results are limited to a degree.

Implications for Professional Practice

The field of psychology espouses a high value for theoretical foundations that establish and explain the strategies, techniques, treatments, and general practices of clinical application (Chahar Mahali et al., 2020). The CCM offers a theoretical foundation for conflict psychology that can validate extant efficacious techniques (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Schumann, 2018; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, & Griffin, 2020) and enrich the development of new approaches to conflict analysis and treatment. The recommendation for a paradigm shift within the field of conflict research was expressed throughout this study (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017), and the source of the new paradigm was found in the developing fields of neurocognitive science and cognitive psychology, which have revealed the existence and functions of PCFs that guide human experiences (Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Noreen & MacLeod, 2020; Rungduin et al., 2019; Stackhouse et al., 2018; Yao & Hsieh, 2019). An endogenous

theory of conflict etiology that interprets conflict behaviors as the products of PCFs provides new and clearer insights about the issues that generate and escalate interpersonal conflicts. Only with an accurate and comprehensive theoretical foundation can fields of conflict research become unified, coherent, consistent, and progressive in future developments. The CCM generated several alternatives for conflict diagnostic analysis, any of which would reorient categorical labels and thematic descriptions away from circumstantial factors that offer no consistent predictive or explanatory significance (e.g., task conflicts can be productive as long as they do not become destructive; Kozusznik et al., 2020; Semerci, 2019; You et al., 2019).

The CCM is a theoretical model of conflict etiology, and implications for clinical practice are directly tied to the products and instruments generated by this study. The taxonomy of themes depicting the essence of SIRCs (presented in Table 4) can be used as a resource to help clients gain insight as they evaluate relevant factors in past or present conflicts. In the way that descriptive taxonomies of cognitive distortions or maladaptive schemas are often used in cognitive-behavioral or schema therapy to help clients identify their propensities toward certain irrational or unhealthy beliefs (Brazão et al., 2017; Kaplan et al., 2017), the SIRC taxonomy could guide and elucidate therapeutic discussions about unresolved SIRCs, self-awareness, or general struggles with social relationships.

This may be of particular benefit for psychologists who treat clients with severe relational problems, or who suffer from a range of mood and behavioral disorders directly and indirectly associated with SIRC, such as depression, anxiety, anger, suicidality, problematic alcohol and substance use, and eating disorders (Ambwani et al., 2015; Choi & Murdock, 2017; da Silva et al., 2017; Halilova et al., 2020; Roberson et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2019). By guiding clients to identify thematic patterns in their perceptions of social interactions, their embodied and

externalized reactions can be better understood. An endogenous conflict etiology promotes endogenous solutions to circumstantial challenges. The SIRC taxonomy and introspective questions on the CCRI can be used by clinical psychologists to help clients gain a greater internal locus of control, which is associated with improvements to overall well-being, positivity, relationship quality, and hope (Alkozei et al., 2018; Galvin et al., 2018; Keser et al., 2020; Soni et al., 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Worthington, & Tsang, 2020; Wu et al., 2017).

Some aspects of the CCM require further development before implementation in clinical practice is possible, with great potential benefits for psychological assessment and treatment. Participant ratings on the CCRI continuums generated concrete representations of subjective levels of perceived significance for each dimension of the CCM. The integrated research results depicted by Figure 8 suggest that PCFs could become additional measurable components of CCM assessment tools. Psychologists may find these resources particularly useful when analyzing clients' depictions of their treatment needs, developing diagnostic impressions, case conceptualization, and treatment planning for clients lacking in self-insight, who feel helplessly subject to negative external events, exposed to complex or intractable family conflicts, or who present with symptoms triggered by damaging relational schisms, betrayals, or confrontations.

With further research and development, these theoretical components of the CCM can be used to identify the most salient, endogenous factors impacting individuals' experiences of SIRCs, and can also provide psychologists with useful indications about the PCFs influencing clients' broader struggles to maintain healthy, stable, satisfying relationships and receive the close social support that is critical to overall well-being (Alkozei et al., 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Ilies et al., 2020; Petersen & Le, 2017; Scharp & Curran, 2018; Sul et al., 2016). If various PCFs and CCM dimensions are weighted according to their predictive or determinative value,

assessments based upon these CCM instruments can not only offer clients therapeutic insights and personal growth but can guide psychologists' treatment strategies toward the most salient issues for each client (Kaplan et al., 2017; Lieder et al., 2018).

Organizations have been prominent stakeholders in conflict research, given the significant impact that conflict has on employee wellness, departmental productivity, and overall organizational success (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Gunkel et al., 2016; Ilies et al., 2020). Applications of the CCM in organizational settings would require modification to accommodate the boundaries of professional relationships (You et al., 2019). The balance between treating the deeply personal core issues that drive SIRCs and the need to limit exposures of private vulnerabilities in professional settings demonstrates the challenges that currently make interpersonal conflicts an issue of great concern and ongoing impact for organizations of all sizes (Mroz & Allen, 2020). If the CCM is initially developed and validated for clinical applications, subsequent treatment strategies might be appropriately modified for use in organizational settings, particularly if assessment instruments are eventually redesigned for self-guided testing on personal technology devices.

Recommendations for Research

This study generated an endogenous theory of conflict etiology by integrating extant literature with qualitative research and CGT analysis. Because the field of conflict psychology has lacked a clear expression of this theoretical paradigm (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017), there is implicit value and benefit simply in offering a foundational framework to undergird general understandings and treatments of SIRC. However, with further research, ongoing development, and validation of the model introduced in this study, the potential opportunities to apply the CCM in clinical and organizational settings are great.

Studies replicating the structure from this doctoral project with different population samples might produce results that reveal differences in the taxonomies of SIRC themes associated with distinct populations. Results might also establish whether SIRC differences between populations exist primarily in distinct sociolinguistic qualities of expression, or if participants from different generational, cultural, or spiritual backgrounds have significant differences in their overall experience and understanding of SIRC (Hawkins et al., 2019; Lindström et al., 2018). Repeating this research with new populations is essential for strengthening the theory of the CCM (Flinkenflogel et al., 2019). It is currently unknown which components of the CCM reflect characteristics unique to the Millennials represented by this sample and which have generalized relevance to the human experience of SIRC.

If the CCRI were the sole focus of future studies (removing the components of conflict narratives and follow-up questions), researchers could collect more precise data from a greater number of participants. Larger samples of data gathered through the CCRI could be evaluated based on qualitative or predictive elements of SIRCs. The CCRI would be an appropriate placement for a standardized measurement of postconflict relational quality. This additional scale could be easily integrated into the CCRI and would require participants to rate their postconflict relational quality based on the scale of definitive properties introduced in Table 11. With this modification, the CCRI would produce three points of data: the key words typed into text boxes in response to qualitative questions (corresponding to the five dimensions of the CCM), ratings of significance on each of five continuums, and an overall rating of the postconflict relationship. Explorative analysis of the relationships and correlations between these three data points could potentially add great value to the CCRI and CCM, based on initial indications of significance observed in the CCRI results from this study (addressed by RQ4). If connections between

conflict outcomes, continuum ratings, and specific key words were established in a larger sample, results could be used to add predictive weight to each dimension of the CCM. Further research and analysis along these lines have the potential to establish the CCRI as a validated method of diagnostic analysis (Kaplan et al., 2017; Lieder et al., 2018).

The taxonomy of conceptual themes depicting the essence of SIRCs (presented in Table 4) could be developed as a resource for clinical analysis and treatment. Various creative strategies could be explored to operationalize the taxonomy into a diagnostic instrument. Qualitative questions might be constructed that link participant responses with specific themes, and results could be used to build an overall profile of direct and indirect themes that summarize the perceptions and PCFs influencing an individual's experience of SIRC. Given the powerful and self-protecting role of PCFs, self-guided selection of themes presented directly to the client would likely not foster accurate or helpful results (Leder, 2017). To avoid activating PCFs that resist voluntary identification and acknowledgements of vulnerability, a questionnaire or similarly indirect intake method would be most appropriate if conducted by psychologists who have received in-depth training with CCM instruments, and this approach would align with current established practices (Bach et al., 2017; Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017).

Validation of a taxonomy-oriented diagnostic tool could involve a return to the methods of narrative analysis and CCRI completion that were used in this study. Themes identified through linguistic analysis could be used to affirm or contest the themes identified by the diagnostic tool (Bach et al., 2017; Hankin et al., 2018; Kunzmann et al., 2017; Levitt et al., 2017; Zaidi, 2019). Further research and development in this area could connect the most salient SIRC themes with efficacious treatment strategies used by psychologists in clinical settings (Allemand & Flückiger, 2020; Schumann, 2018). If the CCM were to become established as an effective

theory and tool for clinical treatment, eventual possibilities might include self-guided applications, in which salient themes identified by the diagnostic instrument could prompt customized collections of reflective questions directly related to those salient themes, designed to promote perspective change, increase empathy, improve perceptions of forgivability, and other strategies associated with positive conflict resolution outcomes (Gutenbrunner & Wagner, 2016; Kaleta & Mróz, 2020; Witvliet, Root Luna, Vlisides-Henry, et al., 2020).

Long before self-guided applications can be considered, the core instruments and theory of the CCM need to be evaluated and applied by psychologists in clinical settings with appropriate clients. Psychologists who specialize in issues associated with SIRC will be critical contributors to the ongoing development and refinement of instruments and theories generated through this doctoral project. The next stages of research need to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of CCM tools in the hands of clinical psychologists. An initial criticism of extant conflict theory expressed at the beginning of this study addressed the gap between academic theories and the reality of lived and remembered SIRCs. Efficacy in clinical application is an essential priority for any future research and development. Accordingly, there are three areas that warrant a balanced presence within future research. Comparative and controlled evaluations are needed from psychologists to address the usefulness of CCM theories and tools in clinical treatment. Ongoing research is needed to evaluate the transferability of SIRC themes and perceptions across different populations. The initial CCM tools and resources developed during this study need to be enriched with predictive weights, meaningful and reliable diagnostic formulas, and responsive treatment strategies. With these research recommendations, the CCM has excellent potential to develop as both a theory and method that makes a positive difference in the field, study, and practice of clinical psychology.

Conclusion

The ongoing pursuit of knowledge and better solutions in the field of conflict psychology is fueled by rampant prevalence of conflicts in settings where interpersonal interactions occur alongside significant costs associated with personalized, disruptive, destructive SIRCs (Clark et al., 2020; Gilin Oore et al., 2015; Ilies et al., 2020; Mauersberger et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2017). Relational conflicts impact the mental health and behavioral needs addressed in clinical treatment, the stability of family systems, the social development and schemas of children and adolescents, the prominent concerns of human resources departments and organizational teams, and the global well-being of many individuals (Alkozei et al., 2018; Choi & Murdock, 2017; Roberson et al., 2018; Rockett et al., 2017; Scharp & Curran, 2018). Although fields of conflict research are in constant exploration of novel, efficacious methods that can reliably facilitate positive conflict resolution, forgiveness, internal peace, interpersonal connectedness, and mutual understanding, there has remained undeniable inconsistencies in the use of terminology, conceptual categories, and exogenous, etiological explanations (Khatib et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2017). What was not inconsistent, however, was the preeminent acknowledgement that individual perceptions have supreme power to determine the success or failure of relationships and conflict resolution in any domain (Farmer & Maister, 2017; Hackel et al., 2020; Javanbakht, 2019; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Leder, 2017).

As the exploratory course of this study unfolded, the role of perception throughout conflict literature crystalized the disjointed pieces of this conflict puzzle. Studies on endogenous and biased processes of perception represent great potential relevance to the problem of SIRC, but the organizational, political, and behavioral paradigms of traditional conflict theories have not intersected or implemented insights from these budding fields of research (Benitez et al.,

2018; Berzins et al., 2018; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Grover & Hasel, 2018; Luginbuehl & Schoebi, 2020; Raimundo, 2020; Semerci, 2019). This doctoral project represented the construction of a literature-based and research-supported bridge between neurocognitive and cognitive science and the study of interpersonal relational conflicts. The experiential stages of salient events inspired the eventual structure and theory of the CCM, beginning with sensory processes and selective—attention during lived experiences, progressing rapidly through internal mechanisms of perceiving, interpreting, valencing, meaning-making, personalizing, judging, and prioritizing, and then reflexively launching outward displays of behavioral reactions, affective expressions, and other modes of interpersonal communication (Bowen et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Raimundo, 2020; van Helvoort et al., 2020; Wante et al., 2018).

The flexible approach of CGT was an excellent methodology for this doctoral project because it allowed for unexpected discoveries and emergent ideas, and ultimately supported the construction of an endogenous theory of the essence and etiology of conflict. The synthesizing concepts of the CCM and PCFs have room for ongoing development and validation, but the insights represented by these ideas and by the research that generated the taxonomy of themes have exciting potential to encourage ongoing research and beneficial clarifications.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Taxonomy of Schemas

The following list comprises examples of schemas that have been demonstrated to negatively influence interpersonal relationships (Bach et al., 2017; Brazão et al., 2017; Rankin et al., 2019; Thimm & Holland, 2017).

- **abandonment:** important relationships are unstable, unreliable and will ultimately fail, and that others will not provide lasting support or connection.
- **entitlement:** believes oneself to be of greater value, skill, worthiness, and rank than others, and therefore should have access to additional privileges and freed from common obligations.
- **insufficient self-control:** immediate gratification and emotional expression are controlling urges that cannot be restrained, and that self-discipline, perseverance, and tolerance of unpleasantness are too difficult for oneself.
- **mistrust:** other people often take advantage, harm, cheat, and attack, and perceives that they intend to humiliate, provoke, and disrespect.
- **pessimism:** focuses on negative aspects of life while ignoring positive experiences and generally expects bad outcomes.
- **punitiveness:** other people and oneself should face severe punishment and consequence for mistakes and imperfections.
- **self-sacrificing:** the needs and feelings of others must be cared for, and excessive attention should be placed on helping others without attending to personal needs.
- **vulnerability:** catastrophes and harm are imminent, and there is no way to prevent or cope with the pain about to unfold.

APPENDIX B

Sample Taxonomy of Heuristics

The following list comprises examples of heuristic rules that influence intuitive social judgments.

- **attractiveness:** the greater the physical attractiveness of an offender, the more sincere the apology (according to males). The less attractive the offender, the more sincere the apology (according to females). Women are more forgivable than men (according to males and females; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2020).
- **availability:** the more prevalent a topic is in one's own thoughts, the more prevalent it is in everyone else's minds (Devers & Runyan, 2018).
- **gender:** female leaders are more sensitive, empathetic, and more concerned with the needs of others than male leaders (Cowen & Montgomery, 2020).
- **morality:** the more common a behavior, the more moral it must be (Lindström et al., 2018).
- **prestige:** the higher someone's prestige, the more credible is everything they say (Esnard & Dumas, 2019).
- **priming:** exposure to negatively valenced content means that forthcoming content will also be negatively valenced (Leder, 2017).
- **reductionism:** things and people are simple and are basically either good or bad (Seshia et al., 2016).
- **repetition:** the more times something is repeated, the truer it is (Pluviano et al., 2017).

- **salience:** the more intense a memory, the more representative it is of life, and the more weight it should be given to direct future decisions (Doss et al., 2020; Kensinger & Ford, 2020).
- **similarity:** the more someone is similar to oneself in one salient way, the more likely they are to share one's thoughts and feelings generally (Hughes et al., 2020; Spaulding, 2018, 2020).
- **stereotypes:** all people in a particular group are the same, and all possess the particular traits associated with that group (Jussim et al., 2018; Rungduin et al., 2019).
- **trusted source:** once personal beliefs and convictions are known to align with a specific individual or political party, future endorsements or criticisms espoused by that source are automatically embraced as one's own (Tappin et al., 2020).

APPENDIX C

Sample Taxonomy of Cognitive Biases

The following list comprises examples of common cognitive biases that negatively influence interpersonal relationships.

- **asymmetrical:** the universal tendency to use asymmetrical standards for evaluating oneself versus standards for evaluating others. Most commonly, personal behaviors are evaluated with foundational assumptions of being honest, moral, and correct. Others are seen as generally more dishonest and unwilling to modify beliefs, so their behaviors can be perceived as obstinate or deceitful (Cusimano & Goodwin, 2020; Scharp & Curran, 2018; Toma et al., 2016).
- **attitude generalization:** the tendency to extend attitudes and social judgments about one member of an outgroup onto all members of that group or transfer the reputation of one individual onto another person based on their social connection (Carpenter & Schacter, 2018; Gutenbrunner & Wagner, 2016).
- **better-than-average:** a comparative tendency wherein the majority of people rate themselves as superior to the majority of other people regarding specific abilities and attributes, such as driving cars, making decisions, attractiveness, honesty, kindness, intelligence, loyalty, fairness, sincerity, memory and attention to detail, math ability, teaching abilities compared to other professors, or clinical skills compared to other mental health providers (Bowes et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017; Toma et al., 2016; Zell et al., 2020).
- **bias blind spot:** also called naïve realism. The tendency to believe oneself immune to biases and trust one's own thoughts and memories as rational, objective, and accurate,

even in situations when peers' or colleagues' judgments were proven to be distorted by biases, emotions, and faulty reasoning (Hagá et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Jussim et al., 2018; Klein & O'Brien, 2018; Spaulding, 2018, 2020).

- **coherence:** the strong attachment people have to preexisting beliefs and emotions creates a tendency to incorporate new information and make meaning of experiences in a way that is congruent with previous ideas and attitudes, forming an overarching network of beliefs that are consistent and mutually supportive (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Korteling et al., 2018; Nam, 2020; Pluviano et al., 2017).
- **confirmation:** also called myside bias and supports self-fulfilling prophesies. The tendency to expose oneself only to information likely to confirm existing expectations, attitudes, and beliefs. Universal motivations to seek out and interpret data strategically leads to exaggerated perceptions about the quantity of evidence supporting prior opinions. Confirmation-seeking interpersonal behaviors can generate outcomes and reactions in other people that self-fulfill initial expectations (Adams et al., 2018; Bowes et al., 2020; Clark & Winegard, 2020; Devers & Runyan, 2018; Esnard & Dumas, 2019; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Heltzel & Laurin, 2020; Jussim et al., 2018; Kearney, 2019; Spaulding, 2018; Zell et al., 2020).
- **endowment:** the tendency to ascribe greater value and salience to things associated with oneself, and accordingly, to perceive personal possessions and matters of personal value as having greater worth than those same objects or matters when possessed by others (Pachur & Scheibehenne, 2017; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017).
- **fading affect:** remembering the past as generally more positive due to the tendency for negative affect and negatively valenced memories to fade more quickly in arousal,

salience, and memory (Hitchcock et al., 2020; Kensinger & Ford, 2020; Mata et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2019).

- **false consensus effect:** also called projection. Common assumptions that one's personal experience of the world is normative, assumptions that the majority of other people share one's personal attitudes, preferences, and opinions, and perceptions of others' thoughts and feelings based on internal states (Gollwitzer & Bargh, 2018; Gordon & Chen, 2016; Welborn & Lieberman, 2018).
- **fundamental attribution error:** also called correspondence bias. Driven by a universal assumption that personality characteristics are stable and observable through behavior, this is the dominant tendency to evaluate others' character and intentions based on their behaviors, without consideration of circumstances, while conversely evaluating one's own behaviors based on self-assumed honorable and moral intentions and excusing one's mistakes based on circumstantial pretexts (Bowes et al., 2020; Devers & Runyan, 2018; Mata et al., 2019; Mroz & Allen, 2020; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017; Scopelliti et al., 2018).
- **group identification:** also called tribalism, ingroup-outgroup bias, and us versus them bias. The tendency to think favorably about ones' own group and conform to their beliefs, while having opposite, polarized, adversarial, dehumanizing perceptions and attitudes toward members and beliefs of outgroups, motivated by universal social needs for group identification to enhance security, identity, self-esteem, and connection (Clark & Winegard, 2020; Clark et al., 2020; Farmer & Maister, 2017; Moore-Berg, Ankori-Karlinsky, et al., 2020; Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020; Park & Young, 2020; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2019; Spaulding, 2018).

- **halo effect:** also called authority bias. The tendency to broadly attribute positive qualities and heightened abilities to individuals in authority roles, or to individuals held in high regard (Bowes et al., 2020; Seshia et al., 2016; Cleary et al., 2020).
- **hindsight:** also called erroneous information bias, outcome bias, or anchoring. The tendency to judge actions and events based on subsequent outcomes, consequences, realizations, or information, along with the erroneous belief of having known and anticipated the outcomes prior to the initial event, even though the outcomes could not have been anticipated with the information available at that time (Bowes et al., 2020; Korteling et al., 2018).
- **illusion of transparency:** the perception that others are sensitive to, and accurately perceive one's motives, thoughts, and emotions (Renshon & Kahneman, 2017).
- **magnitude gap:** a tendency for offenders to minimize or deny any consequences or harm caused by their behaviors, and the tendency for victims to perceive offenders' actions as intentional and blameworthy (Adams, 2016).
- **mindreading:** inferring others' personality traits, disposition, moral emotions, intentions, motives, and character, based on subjective assessments of the situational context and interpretations of their behavior, including judgments about the genuineness of an apology (Berndsen et al., 2018; Spaulding, 2018).
- **overconfidence:** also called positive illusion, prognosis illusion, illusion of control, or planning fallacy. A tendency to be overconfident about personal abilities, memory, skills, beyond their actual capabilities, along with overestimations about personal autonomy and control over one's decisions, beliefs, and experiential outcomes (Ellis, 2018; Korteling et al., 2018; Renshon & Kahneman, 2017).

- **self-enhancement:** also called self-serving attribution bias or motivation bias. The powerful and prominent tendency that harnesses all neurocognitive and cognitive mechanisms to construct overwhelmingly favorable perceptions of oneself through self-serving interpretations of life experiences, by taking credit for positive life outcomes, blaming negative outcomes on external circumstances, dismissing immoral behaviors as uncharacteristic, isolated events, highlighting positive traits and experiences during memory construction, self-assessments, and formation of autobiographical narratives (Cusimano & Goodwin, 2020; da Silva et al., 2017; Dunaetz & Greenham, 2018; Egorov et al., 2019; Hagá et al., 2018; Mata et al., 2019; Quevedo et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2019; Spaulding, 2018, 2020; Toma et al., 2016; Zell et al., 2020).
- **shared features:** the tendency to assume individuals or groups with one salient trait in common will also share many other similarities in traits, skills, attitudes, and attributes, whether positive or negative (Hughes et al., 2020).

APPENDIX D

Sample Taxonomy of Cognitive Distortions

The following list comprises examples of automatic, distorted cognitions that influence interpersonal relationships.

- **assuming the worst:** interpreting situations or others' thoughts in a way that leads to the worst possible conclusions, often far beyond what is warranted or rational based on available evidence or the content of the interaction. In SIRCs, knowledge that the other party in a conflict is having lunch with mutual friends might be interpreted as evidence that the social group has all discussed the conflict and sided with the other party (Gibbs, 2014; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Oostermeijer et al., 2017).
- **blaming:** distancing oneself from responsibility by placing responsibility onto other people and external circumstances. Conversely, an individual might unrealistically claim personal responsibility and culpability for the actions and feelings of others. In SIRCs, cruel words spoken during an argument might be blamed on the other party for initiating the conflict and forcing the harsh truth to be spoken (Gibbs, 2014; Ilies et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; Oostermeijer et al., 2017).
- **catastrophizing fortune-telling:** predicts future situations that will entail extremely negative outcomes for oneself, often involving irrecoverable failures and harsh social judgments. In SIRCs, an apologetic party might conclude that the relationship will never be repaired, and the other party will never trust them again (Brazão et al., 2017; Crum, 2019; Gautam et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Leder, 2017).
- **dichotomous thinking:** also called polarization, black-and-white, and all-or-nothing thinking. Evaluating complex situations using simplistic categories that push interpretations toward valenced absolutes. In SIRCs, one might decide that the other party was entirely to blame, and if they do not admit full responsibility and humbly ask for forgiveness, the relationship must be

terminated (da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; Leder, 2017).

- **discounting the positive:** dismissing, disregarding, and disqualifying any evidence that does not support one's negative conclusions and interpretations. In SIRCs, behaviors by the offending party that convey positive intent and value for the relationship might be ignored while behaviors judged as harmful are amplified (Brazão et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018).
- **emotional reasoning:** entrusting active emotions to determine objective reality or predict future outcomes. Equating feelings and facts, while also discounting evidence that contradicts emotion-driven assessments or predictions. During the generation of a SIRC, interpersonal teasing might prompt internal feelings of embarrassment, leading one to believe that the interaction was objectively humiliating in the eyes of all witnesses (Egorov et al., 2019; Gautam et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018).
- **labeling:** defining oneself or others as one-dimensional caricatures, through valenced labels or nicknames, while ignoring the complexity of emotions, motivations, identity, and circumstances. In SIRCs, one party's failure to RSVP to a special event might prompt the other to label them as rude and selfish (Brazão et al., 2017; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Kramer et al., 2018).
- **magnification/minimization:** evaluating an internal desire, emotion, overall self-worth, interpersonal dynamics, circumstances, or consequences in such a way that the degree of valence, power, or impact is extremely and unrealistically exaggerated or disregarded. In SIRCs, the harmful effects of an offender's actions might be magnified, while negative personal behaviors or the innate worth of the other party might be minimized (Brazão et al., 2017; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Gibbs, 2014; Ilies et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; Oostermeijer et al., 2017).

- **mind reading:** a baseless but confident certainty about the inner thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others, often entailing an assumption that others are thinking about and judging oneself, without consideration of more likely, alternate possibilities. In SIRCs, confident attributions about the hostile and belittling intentions of an offender might elevate emotional arousal and offense durability (Brazão et al., 2017; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Kaplan et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017; Spaulding, 2020).
- **overgeneralization:** negative conclusions and evaluations that extend far beyond the evidence. In SIRCs, a betrayal by one trusted friend might lead to beliefs that all other friends are also untrustworthy (Buschmann et al., 2018; Chahar Mahali et al., 2020; Crum, 2019; da Luz et al., 2017; Gautam et al., 2020; Kramer et al., 2018; Önal & Yalçın, 2017).

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

STEP ONE: INTRODUCTIONS AND TECHNOLOGY CHECKS

"Hello, it's very nice to meet you. My name is _Janeen Davis_, and I appreciate you taking time today to participate in this study. How are you doing today? Are you able to hear me and see me clearly on your screen?" (ensure researcher and participant have clear audio/video signals)

STEP TWO: DESCRIBE THE STUDY AND ANSWER QUESTIONS

"Our call should take about 25 minutes. Do you still have time available today to participate?"

"I know you already signed the form to participate, but I want to just review a few things about this study, and I invite you to jump right in if you have any questions about anything I say. Okay?" (pause for any comments or questions from the participant)

"I am completing a doctorate in clinical psychology from California Southern University, and this interview is part of a study about interpersonal relational conflicts. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how people think about their previous serious conflicts, to learn how people describe and explain what happened, the reasons why their conflict came about, and the effects it had on them personally and on the relationship." (pause for any comments or questions from the participant)

STEP THREE: VERIFY POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS

"This study focused on a certain group of people, defined by some basic descriptive things about them. Can we verify some of that basic information about you?" (if participant agrees, continue)
"What year were you born?"
"Where did you primarily grow up?"
"How would you identify your gender, race, and religion?"
"What type of academic education did you receive after high school?"
"Do you have a significant personal conflict from your past that you are comfortable talking about today?"

STEP FOUR: DESCRIBE INTERVIEW INSTRUCTIONS AND VERIFY PARTICIPATION

"I am going to describe the instructions for this interview now. While I do, I want you to think about if you want to officially participate. After I finish giving you the instructions, I'll just clarify whether or not you feel comfortable participating. If you decide you don't want to proceed, that is no problem and we will just end the call, and that is totally fine. I do not want you to feel any pressure to participate or discuss anything that you do not feel comfortable with. Okay? Do you want to keep going for now?"
(if participant agrees, continue)

"We will begin this interview with you telling a story about a previous, significant, interpersonal relational conflict that you have personally experienced. I want you to just speak naturally, in your own words, and you can express yourself however you want to. You will have up to 10 minutes to tell your story, and then I will ask you a few clarifying questions after you are finished."
"Please jump in if you think of any questions while I'm talking."
"I want you to tell your conflict story with a beginning, middle, and end, including your perspective about what happened and why. Don't tell your story using words like "me and I." Instead, use what is called a third-person perspective, where you tell it like a 'once upon a time' story, and all the characters in your story – including yourself – are not called by their normal names. Instead of any names, give each character a descriptive label that is used instead of their name throughout the story. You can make up any

type of descriptive label you want to describe each character, but don't use any type of normal names. Do you feel like you understand?"
(answer any questions but do not offer specific examples of descriptive labels, to avoid priming/anchoring effects. Ask them to offer examples and then verify if they understand correctly)

"I will use my iPhone Voice Memo App to record your voice during this talking part of the interview. After the interview, I'll turn the recording of your words into a written transcript, and then I will destroy the audio recording of your voice. I will do everything possible to ensure that your participation in this study, your personal information, and your conflict story are totally confidential and nothing identifiable is kept as part of the research data. If you include really specific or unique details in your story that might be identifiable, that is not what I'm focusing on in this research, and I will remove those specific details so that none of the data I keep is too detailed about you personally. After I complete this study, I will save the research data on a personal, offline, encrypted drive for 7 years and then permanently destroy it. Do you have any questions about this?"

"While you are talking about your conflict, if you get emotional or have negative thoughts and feelings, that is okay. If you want to pause, take a break, or stop entirely, that is totally okay. Just let me know what you need. I do not want you to feel like you have to pressure yourself to bring up memories or discuss something that you are not comfortable with."

"Okay, those are the instructions. I want to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don't want to, and you can stop anytime you want. At this, point, would you like to continue?"
(if participant agrees, continue)

STEP FIVE: BEGIN THE INTERVIEW
"I am going to begin the recording when you start telling your story. Please tell the story in under 10 minutes. I will let you know when you hit the 5-minute mark. Before you start, take a few minutes to get it clear in your mind how you want to tell this story, beginning, middle, and end, and be sure to include insights about why the conflict happened and the effects it had. Think of the descriptive label you want to use in the place of names for each character. When you are ready, let me know and then you can begin."
(have audio recorder ready and begin recording as soon as the participant is ready to start. Use a timer and tell the participant when they have reached 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and additional increments if they talk longer)

STEP SIX: FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS
(when the participant finishes, clarify that they are done with their story)
"Is that the end of your conflict story? Thank you so much for telling that story. I now have a few follow-up questions about the conflict you have described."

(ask any of the following questions that were not already made clear during the conflict story)
1. How long ago did this conflict first begin? How long ago was the conclusion of this story?
2. Which character in your story represented you?
3. What was the nature of the relationship between the main characters of your story?
4. Why do you think this conflict turned out the way it did?
5. What was the final relational status at the end of this conflict?
6. What would you say was the main action/event that was reason this situation became a conflict?
7. What would have to been done differently for this conflict to have been resolved more easily and quickly?
8. What were some of the main consequences and effects of this conflict?
9. How serious was this conflict for you, compared to other significant conflicts you have experienced?

STEP SEVEN: WRITTEN PORTION

(stop the audio recording and upload the CCRI into the Zoom text window)
"I am now stopping the audio recording and we will do the final part of this interview. I have uploaded a document into the text window of our Zoom call. Can you click on it and open it on your computer now?"
(if participant can easily open the file, have them click the green "share screen" button on the zoom call. If they cannot open the file, or the fillable forms are blurred by the participants' PDF viewer, then open the document on your personal computer and hit the green "share screen" button so participant can view the file on your screen)

"Please complete these questions on this form. The instructions on the form should be clear. You can ask me if something is not clear to you."
(if the researcher is sharing the form from a personal computer, click on the "annotate" button within Zoom and add a text box for the participant to type their answer into each fillable form area. When the participant is finished, save the shared screen as a PDF within the Zoom app.)

"When you are finished, please click on the "submit button" and it should automatically email your completed form to me."
(if this does not work properly, take a screen shot of the participant's completed form. The screen shot will provide the participant's answers within a saved image, and can be transferred into a PDF after the interview)

"Okay, you are now finished with the interview. Thank you so much for participating, and if you decide later on that you don't want any of this information used in the research, just let me know."

STEP EIGHT: POSITIVE REFRAMING AND GRATITUDE

"Before we finish the call, I want to end with a few reflective questions just for you. This isn't part of the research, but I encourage you to reflect and share whatever you like in the next few minutes."
"When you think back on this conflict, can you think of any specific ways you imagine that you grew as a person as a result of that experience? Or maybe any valuable lessons or insights you gained from this?"

"What did you learn about yourself from this experience, and how do you approach relationships or conflicts differently because of what you learned?"

"Shifting gears to the present, can you identify a few things from the past month that you feel grateful for, and explain why those things are meaningful to you?"
(if participants cannot identify anything to be grateful for from the past month, encourage them to expand the range back to the most recent things in their life that they feel deeply grateful for)

"Thank you again for participating. If you ever have a question or want to discuss something about this study, or if you experience any adverse effects as a result of your participation, please feel free to contact me. If you would like a copy of the study once it is completed, just let me know and I will be happy to send that to you. Goodbye."

APPENDIX F

Conflict Continuum Research Instrument v.1

What exactly was it about this relationship that made it important in your life?

(write here)

How valuable was this relationship to you prior to the conflict? (mark this by clicking on the continuum)

zero value...... ......maximum value

If the other person had been in the right, and morally correct in their actions during this conflict, what would that have meant about you as a person, or about your beliefs?

(write here)

How significant/harmful were those implications about you or your beliefs? (mark this on the continuum)

insignificant...... ......extremely significant

What did this conflict reveal about that person's morals, their character, intentions, or motives?

(write here)

How much did you dislike their revealed character/motives/morals? (mark this on the continuum)

neutral...... ......maximum dislike

What were your emotions during this conflict?

(write here)

How unpleasant were those emotions? (mark this on the continuum)

neutral...... ......extremely unpleasant

What made the offending actions in this conflict something you couldn't overlook and just let it slide?

(write here)

How difficult/inappropriate would it have been to ignore/overlook these actions? (mark this on the continuum)

neutral...... ......impossible

SUBMIT

The Conflict Continuum Research Instrument: Participant #_______

APPENDIX G

Recruitment Flier

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

to Participate in a Psychological Research Study

Have you ever experienced a relational conflict and wondered why events unfolded as they did?

This study seeks to answer questions about the **underlying reasons that conflicts occur.** If you have 25 minutes for a Zoom call, you may be able to participate and contribute valuable data for this research on the essence of interpersonal conflict.

My name is Janeen Davis and I am conducting this study about the core factors that create interpersonal relational conflicts, and the reasons that some conflicts become severe while others seem unimportant or even beneficial. This research contributes to my completion of the degree program for **Doctor of Psychology from California Southern University.**

I only need 25 minutes of your time for ONE individual interview on Zoom.
I will ask you to tell the story of a significant conflict that you have personally experienced in the past, and then answer several thoughtful questions about the story you told. It is possible that you will gain some new perspectives on your experience by the end of the call.

Participants in this study MUST fit the following description:
Born during the years 1981-1997, grew up in the USA, identify as White and Christian, completed at least one year of post-high school education, and able to talk with me for 25 minutes on a Zoom video call during the next two weeks. You must be able to think of a significant conflict that you are comfortable talking about.

PLEASE CALL OR EMAIL RIGHT AWAY!!!

To ask questions, get more information,
and then **possibly** choose to volunteer for this research study.... please contact me at:
Janeen Davis, MAMFT, Doctor of Psychology Candidate

(redacted contact information)

APPENDIX H

Letter of Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER: THE CONFLICT CONTINUUM

TITLE OF STUDY
The Conflict Continuum: Multidimensional Perceptions Reveal the Essence of Interpersonal Conflicts

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER
Janeen Davis, Doctor of Psychology Candidate
School of Behavioral Sciences, California Southern University
(redacted contact information)

PURPOSE OF STUDY
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.
The purpose of this study is to learn what people believe about their experiences of serious interpersonal conflict, how they describe and explain what happened and the reasons for their conflicts, and the effects it had on them personally and on the relationship.

STUDY PROCEDURES
If you choose to participate in this study, you will schedule a time to participate in a one-on-one virtual interview with the researcher using Zoom. This will require use of a computer, tablet, or smartphone. The interview will last approximately 25 minutes. At the beginning of the call, the researcher will review the process of the interview, verify if you are still willing to participate in this study, and then give instructions for the activity. You will be asked to tell a story about a previous, significant interpersonal relational conflict that you have personally experienced. You will be encouraged to speak naturally, in your own words, however you prefer to express yourself. You will have up to 10 minutes to tell this story, and then the researcher may ask a couple clarifying questions once you are finished.
The sound of your voice will be recorded beginning when you tell your story and continuing during any follow-up questions, and then the audio recording will stop. You will then be asked to answer a small number of written questions, asking you to reflect on your conflict experience. The written questions will be on a fillable PDF form, which will be uploaded within the Zoom program during the live interview. If you have any questions or need assistance completing this written portion, the researcher will be happy to help. This will conclude the research portion of the interview. In the final minutes of the call, the researcher will ask you to reflect on a couple questions related to your conflict that you may find encouraging, which may promote positive thoughts and feelings as you complete the interview and end the Zoom call.

RISKS
During the course of this interview, it is possible that you may experience negative thoughts and feelings as you reflect on a previous, significant relational conflict. Feelings of sadness or anger may be associated with memories of past relational conflicts. You are encouraged to choose a previous conflict that you feel comfortable discussing, so that you do not trigger thoughts or emotions that might be overwhelming or harmful for you in any way. If you realize that you want to end the call,

Researcher Initial Here: ________ Participant Initial Here: ________

take a pause, or stop discussing this topic, you can end the interview at any time. If the researcher observes escalated negative emotions, you will be offered opportunities to stop or take a break. You will not be asked to discuss anything that causes you distress. After you tell your conflict story, the follow up questions and written answers may prove beneficial and encouraging in helping you to think about your conflict experience from different perspectives.

If you were to experience significant **emotional distress and need support**, you are encouraged to contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for mental health care referrals and crisis counseling. Their phone number is **800-273-8255**, and live, online chats are also available through their website: https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/

BENEFITS
There is no certain benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, as you briefly reflect on a previous relational conflict, you may have opportunities to gain insight, depending on the context of that specific experience and your feelings about it. The primary goal of this study is to develop a better understanding about the core elements of relational conflicts, in order to improve theories of conflict, methods of analyzing conflicts that occur, and eventually help people approach interpersonal conflicts in less destructive ways.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Your participation in this study will be anonymous. Your name will be replaced with a numeric code and any other identifying information will be removed from the research data. The audio recording of your interview will be deleted once it is transcribed into written text of what you said. Any identifying information or distinct details that you mention during your story will be removed from the written records of your interview. The written records of your interview will be kept within a private, offline, encrypted hard drive **for 7 years** and will then be destroyed.
Your answers will be used by the researcher in the analysis of the data, which will only focus on the specific words and phrases that you use to describe your conflict. Non-identifying specific words and phrases you express might be incorporated into a summary of conflict theory, and into future instruments for conflict analysis and treatment.
Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher, whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the principal researcher, please contact the chairperson of the California Southern University Institutional Review Board:
Dr. Brett Gordon at Brett.Gordon@my.calsouthern.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. After you sign this consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a

Researcher Initial Here: ________ Participant Initial Here: ________

reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature ____________________________________ Date __________

Researcher's signature ____________________________________ Date __________
Janeen K. Davis

PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS

All participants in this study must meet the following criteria:

- I was born during the years 1981-1997.
- I grew up in the continental United States of America.
- My racial identification is: White.
- I identify as a Christian.
- I completed at least one year of academic education after high school.
- I **can** think of a significant conflict from my past that I am comfortable talking about.
- I have access to technology that supports the Zoom Application for virtual video calls.
- I am available to schedule a virtual, 25-minute interview within the next two weeks.

I agree that I DO meet all of these selection criteria.

Participant Initial Here: __________

Researcher Initial Here: ________ Participant Initial Here: ________

APPENDIX I

Conflict Continuum Research Instrument 2.1

What exactly was it about this relationship that made it important in your life? (beyond the obvious)

(write here)

How valuable was this relationship to you prior to the conflict? (mark this by clicking on the continuum below)

zero value...... ......maximum value

If __________ (the other person) had been in the right, and morally correct, in what they said and did during this conflict, what would that imply about you as a person, or about your beliefs?

(write here)

If these implications were true, how significant/harmful would that be about you or your beliefs? (mark below)

insignificant...... ......extremely significant

What did this conflict reveal about that person's morals, their character, intentions, or motives?

(write here)

How much did you dislike their revealed character/motives/morals? (mark below)

neutral...... ......maximum dislike

What were your emotions during this conflict?

(write here)

How unpleasant were those emotions? (mark below)

neutral...... ......extremely unpleasant

What made the offending actions in this conflict something you couldn't overlook and just let it slide?

(write here)

How difficult/inappropriate would it have been to ignore/overlook these actions? (mark below)

neutral...... ......impossible

SUBMIT

The Conflict Continuum Research Instrument: Participant #__________________

APPENDIX J

Interview Guide 2.1

STEP ONE: INTRODUCTIONS AND TECHNOLOGY CHECKS
"Hello, it's very nice to meet you. My name is _Janeen Davis_, and I appreciate you taking time today to participate in this study. How are you doing today? Are you able to hear me and see me clearly on your screen?" (ensure researcher and participant have clear audio/video signals)

STEP TWO: DESCRIBE THE STUDY AND ANSWER QUESTIONS
"Our call should take about 25 minutes. Do you still have time available today to participate?"

"I know you already signed the form to participate, but I want to just review a few things about this study, and I invite you to jump right in if you have any questions about anything I say. Okay?"

"I am completing a doctorate in clinical psychology from California Southern University, and this interview is part of a study about interpersonal relational conflicts. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how people think about their previous serious conflicts, to learn how people describe and explain what happened, the reasons why their conflict came about, and the effects it had on them personally and on the relationship."

STEP THREE: VERIFY POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS
"This study focused on a certain group of people, defined by some basic descriptive things about them. Can we verify some of that basic information about you?" (if participant agrees, continue)
"What year were you born and what is your current age?"
"Where did you primarily grow up?"
"How would you identify your gender, race, and religion?"
"What type of academic education did you receive after high school?"
"Do you have a significant personal conflict from your past that you are comfortable talking about today?"
"Did that conflict come to some type of conclusion in the past, or is it still actively unfolding right now? (please choose a conflict that you can tell as a story with a beginning, middle, and some type of clear end)"

STEP FOUR: DESCRIBE INTERVIEW INSTRUCTIONS AND VERIFY PARTICIPATION
"I am going to describe the instructions for this interview now. While I do, I want you to think about if you want to officially participate. After I finish giving you the instructions, I'll just clarify whether or not you feel comfortable participating. If you decide you don't want to proceed, that is no problem and we will just end the call, and that is totally fine. I do not want you to feel any pressure to participate or discuss anything that you do not feel comfortable with. Okay? Do you want to keep going for now?"
(if participant agrees, continue)

"We will begin this interview with you telling a story about a previous, significant, interpersonal relational conflict that you have personally experienced. I want you to just speak naturally, in your own words, and you can express yourself however you want to. You will have up to 10 minutes to tell your story, and then I will ask you a few clarifying questions after you are finished."
"In this research, I want to understand the internal way we make sense of conflicts and explain them to ourselves. So please share your internal, personal perspectives freely as you tell your story. Describe the conflict in the way you internally thought about it and experienced it personally, and do not feel any need to modify your internal thoughts about it as you tell this story. I'm looking for

the honest way that you experienced and explained this conflict to yourself along the way, and as you look back on it to tell this story."
"I want you to tell your conflict story with a beginning, middle, and end, including your perspective about what happened and **why that conflict really happened.** Don't tell your story using words like "me and I." Instead, use what is called a third-person perspective, where you tell it like a 'once upon a time' story, and all the characters in your story – including yourself – are not called by their normal **real** names. Instead of any names, give each character a descriptive label that is used instead of their name throughout the story. You can make up any type of descriptive label you want, **which describes some aspect or trait about them, or maybe a creative or symbolic description, that is related to their part in this conflict…** but don't use any type of normal names. Do you feel like you understand?"
(answer any questions but do not offer specific examples of descriptive labels, to avoid priming/anchoring effects. Ask them to offer examples and then verify if they understand correctly)

"I will use my iPhone Voice Memo App to record your voice during this talking part of the interview. After the interview, I'll turn the recording of your words into a written transcript, and then I will destroy the audio recording of your voice. I will do everything possible to ensure that your participation in this study, your personal information, and your conflict story are totally confidential and nothing identifiable is kept as part of the research data. If you include really specific or unique details in your story that might be identifiable, that is not what I'm focusing on in this research, and I will remove those specific details so that none of the data I keep is too detailed about you personally. After I complete this study, I will save the research data on a personal, offline, encrypted drive for 7 years and then permanently destroy it. Do you have any questions about this?"

"While you are talking about your conflict, if you get emotional or have negative thoughts and feelings, that is okay. If you want to pause, take a break, or stop entirely, that is totally okay. Just let me know what you need. I do not want you to feel like you have to pressure yourself to bring up memories or discuss something that you are not comfortable with."

"Okay, those are the instructions. I want to remind you that your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don't want to, and you can stop anytime you want. At this, point, would you like to continue?"
(if participant agrees, continue)

STEP FIVE: BEGIN THE INTERVIEW
"I am going to begin the recording when you start telling your story. Please tell the story in under 10 minutes. I will let you know when you hit the 5-minute mark. Before you start, take a few minutes to get it clear in your mind how you want to tell this story, beginning, middle, and end, and be sure to include insights about why the conflict happened and the effects it had. Think of the descriptive label you want to use in the place of names for each character. When you are ready, let me know and then you can begin."
(have audio recorder ready and begin recording as soon as the participant is ready to start. Use a timer and tell the participant when they have reached 5 minutes, 10 minutes, and additional increments if they talk longer)

STEP SIX: FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS
(when the participant finishes, clarify that they are done with their story)
"Is that the end of your conflict story? Thank you so much for telling that story. I now have a few follow-up questions about the conflict you have described."

(ask any of the following questions that were not already made clear during the conflict story)
1. How long ago did this conflict first begin? How long ago was the conclusion of this story?
2. Which character in your story represented you?

3. What was the nature of the relationship between the main characters of your story?
4. **WHY did this conflict happen and what deeper factors drove this conflict? How do you explain this to yourself?**
5. What was the final relational status at the end of this conflict?
6. What would you say was the main **moment or behavior or event,** that turned this **external situation into a personal, relational conflict?**
7. What **would someone have to have done differently (either you, or the other person)** for this conflict to have been **more easily resolved, or turned out more positively**? **What didn't happen, that needed to happen, to resolve this conflict fully and quickly?**
8. What were some of the main consequences and effects of this conflict?
9. **Compared to other significant conflicts you have experienced throughout your life, how serious was this conflict within your experiences?**

STEP SEVEN: WRITTEN PORTION

(stop the audio recording and use the "Share Screen" function to show participant the CCRI 2.1)
"I am now stopping the audio recording and we will do the final part of this interview. I am sharing my screen and ask you to look at each question and then tell me your answer. I will write whatever you say into the text box. You only have 150 characters for each answer, so think through how you want to answer, and then I will type whatever you say. Then look at each slider and tell me exactly where you want to make your mark."
(when participant completes this form, save it to the computer in that participant's research data folder)

"Okay, you are now finished with the interview. Thank you so much for participating, and if you decide later on that you don't want any of this information used in the research, just let me know."

STEP EIGHT: POSITIVE REFRAMING AND GRATITUDE

"Before we finish the call, I want to end with a few reflective questions just for you. This isn't part of the research, but I encourage you to reflect and share whatever you like in the next few minutes."
"When you think back on this conflict, can you think of any specific ways you imagine that you grew as a person as a result of that experience? Or maybe any valuable lessons or insights you gained from this?"

"What did you learn about yourself from this experience?
How do you approach relationships or conflicts differently because of what you learned?"

"Shifting gears to the present, can you identify a few things from the past month that you feel grateful for, and explain why those things are meaningful to you?"
(if participants cannot identify anything to be grateful for from the past month, encourage them to expand the range back to the most recent things in their life that they feel deeply grateful for)

"Thank you again for participating. If you ever have a question or want to discuss something about this study, or if you experience any adverse effects as a result of your participation, please feel free to contact me. If you would like a copy of the study once it is completed, just let me know and I will be happy to send that to you.
Goodbye."